



An Opportunity in Crisis?

Covid-19 and State-community Relations in Taiz

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Auswärtiges Amt



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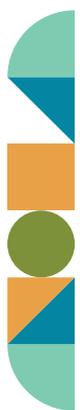
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Introduction

When many parts of the world began to shut down public life to prevent the spread of the coronavirus in March 2020, observers hoped that Yemen was better placed to avoid the impact of the pandemic due to the near-shut down of international travel.⁽¹⁾ Unfortunately, the virus did not spare Yemen, and added more hardship to a country already facing devastating economic, health, and political crises. The Yemen Supreme National Emergency for COVID-19, a body created by the internationally recognized government of Yemen (IRG), as of March 31, 2021, puts the number of infections at 44,357 and 888 deaths.⁽²⁾ In June 2020, the United Nations Office for the Coordination of Humanitarian Affairs (UNOCHA) put the coronavirus known fatality rate in Yemen at 25 percent, four times higher than the global average.⁽³⁾ Despite the IRG's attempts to be transparent about the spread of the coronavirus, it spread virtually undetected as the authorities lacked testing capacities and the necessary resources to control the virus. As a result, authorities throughout the country downplayed the virus. The arrival of the coronavirus presented

a great challenge to state institutions in Yemen, but it also presented an opportunity to improve cooperation between institutions, improve public relations, and to generate popular trust in local councils, as well as in security institutions. As outlined by the World Health Organization Health and Peace Initiative, health interventions carry the potential to improve prospects for local peace by, for instance, improving trust and communication between citizens and the state, making health care more equitable, building collaboration between various sides in a conflict, and improving social cohesion.⁽⁴⁾

The city of Taiz presents a good case study. The governorate is split, with the north being under the control of Ansarallah (Houthis) and the south and the governorate's capital, Taiz city, under the IRG's jurisdiction. The city has a vibrant civil society, and state security institutions have in the last few years shown an interest in responding to community needs to improve security. The pandemic response between March and June 2020 shows that institutions had a genuine interest

01 "Yemen's isolation may have turned into a strange blessing. Even before COVID-19, Yemen was relatively cut off", see Laura Kasinof, "Yemen's Civil War Will Make the Coronavirus Even More Dangerous: Few Places are as Ill-prepared for an Outbreak." *Slate Magazine*. April 01, 2020. <https://slate.com/news-and-politics/2020/04/yemens-civil-war-could-create-a-coronavirus-catastrophe.html>.

02 Yemen Supreme National Emergency Committee for COVID-19. March 31, 2021. <https://twitter.com/YSNECCOVID19/status/1371556251763675139?s=20>.

03 UNOCHA. "Yemen COVID-19 Preparedness and Response Snapshot. June 14, 2020. <https://reliefweb.int/report/yemen/yemen-covid-19-preparedness-and-response-snapshot-13-june-2020-enar>.

04 World Health Organization (WHO). *Health and Peace Initiative*. Geneva: WHO, 2020. <https://www.who.int/publications/item/9789240005792>.



in protecting the community by implementing measures to prevent the spread of the coronavirus.⁽⁵⁾

However, as this research report demonstrates,⁽⁶⁾ factors that inhibited security institutions from taking up a more active public security role in the past represented an obstacle to an effective coronavirus campaign; namely, a lack of resources, a historical lack of trust in these security institutions, and diverging interests among state actors, leading to insufficient coordination and unwanted interference. However, the coronavirus pandemic also came with a set of unique challenges. Given the numerous social and economic factors present in Taiz, such as large parts of the community's dependence on daily wage jobs as well as overcrowding,

implementation of any coronavirus prevention measures was going to be difficult. The increased workload on already strained institutions made the fight against the virus an uphill battle. The gap between state provision and public needs was evident as state-enforced measures were rarely tailored to local living conditions, and institutions were inefficient in communicating with the public. This demonstrates the indispensable role of civil society organizations (CSOs) as a link between state institutions and the community. While police engagement in enforcing coronavirus measures was welcomed by the community, due to the lack of resources, the public's expectations were low, and the police was ultimately unable to significantly boost confidence in its performance.

05 For an overview of the COVID-19 response in Yemen more generally, see Ibrahim Jalal, "Yemen's Botched Pandemic Response and Fragile Conflict Dynamics Allow COVID-19 to Spread Undetected." Middle East Institute. June 30, 2021. <https://www.mei.edu/publications/yemens-botched-pandemic-response-and-fragile-conflict-dynamics-allow-covid-19-spread>.

06 The report is based on 30 interviews (28 male, 2 female) conducted with civil servants, security officers, officials, and leaders of civil society organizations between December 17, 2020 and January 11, 2021. Interviewees were selected according to their interaction with the implementation of the coronavirus community measures, according to the snowball approach. Next to putting in place ethical measures, interviews were conducted with COVID-19 safety and data protection measures. The interview information has been coupled with a desk-based review of local and national pandemic responses. Measures to protect research respondents, including from psychological and physical harm, have been upheld by maintaining the results confidential.



Local authority takes on coronavirus fight

The first confirmed case of COVID-19 reported in Taiz was on May 1, 2020.⁽⁷⁾ Although the announcement came with a series of public health measures, including the closure of the province's borders, the governorate had already begun implementing preventive measures and preparing for a potential outbreak of the virus from March 18, at a time when it had been declared a pandemic and many parts of the world had gone into lockdown. The local authority headed by Governor Nabil Shamsan was primarily responsible for leading the coronavirus response in the governorate of Taiz, and there were few national-level directives relevant for the local level.

Mirroring the Supreme Emergency Committee at the national level, on March 22, 2020, Governor Shamsan formed the Emergency Committee to steer the response to the pandemic in the governorate.⁽⁸⁾ Headed by Dr. Abdul Qawi Al-Mikhlaifi (First Undersecretary) and Dr. Ilan Abdel-Haq (Deputy Governor for Health Affairs), the committee was tasked with: ensuring the implementation of national directives at the governorate and district levels; issuing preventative measures; ensuring the availability of necessary equipment and resources in hospitals, health centers, and the Health

Office; setting up teams at the district level to follow-up with confirmed cases; and safeguarding the availability and distribution of food. From very early on, the committee emphasized the need for various state institutions, including security institutions, alongside society at large to cooperate to effectively tackle the pandemic.

The Emergency Committee had extremely limited resources available for the response, at a time when the city's health system had already been devastated by six years of war and continued violence in the city, including repeated strikes against hospitals, years of unpaid state salaries affecting health personnel, and shortages of medical supplies and medicines. Over the last six years, the health system has faced multiple epidemics, including cholera and dengue fever, and malnutrition. The local authority relied on its regular budget of 200 million riyals (€281,000), while Governor Shamsan claimed that Taiz had only received 20 million riyals (€28,000) provided by the Ministry of Health in order to fund the Emergency Committee. Governor Shamsan announced that nearly all local government resources were used up prior to the pandemic, thus "enabling corona to spread in Taiz."⁽⁹⁾

⁰⁷ Mohamed Ghojari, "Yemen Records First Coronavirus Case in Taiz Province as Virus Spreads." *Reuters*. Thomson Reuters. May 1, 2020. <https://www.reuters.com/article/us-health-coronavirus-yemen-idUSKBN22D674>.

⁰⁸ Salem Al-Sabri, 'Taiz: Tasjeel Iajnat li mwajahat fayros corona' [Taiz: Establishing a committee to combat the coronavirus]. March 23, 2020. *Al-Mushahid*. <https://almushahid.net/58112/>.

⁰⁹ "Muhafidh Taiz: 'adam tazeez al-muhafadha bi'al-mabaligh al-mo'tamada sahim b'intishar corona bi'shakil kabeer" [Governor of Taiz: failure to strengthen the governorate with the approved sums contributed to the spread of Corona significantly]. *Yemen Shabab*. May 20, 2020. <https://yemenshabab.net/news/56620>.



Since mid-March 2020, amongst the security institutions, the governorate and district police as well as the military police were involved in discussions and implementation of the coronavirus prevention measures. Security institutions in Taiz were at this time still recovering from heavy fighting in the city in 2015 and 2016, during the course of which the state security sector had collapsed. The informal armed groups that emerged to defend the city from the Ansarallah-incursion amidst this security vacuum were in 2017 integrated into the IRG security hierarchy, but several militias – although associated with individual state brigades – remained intact. The police were likewise re-established, with the governorate-level Security Department being the highest police authority in the governorate, and representatives in the districts.⁽¹⁰⁾ Many police stations were destroyed, with police forces working from alternative locations while lacking the most basic equipment, such as stationery, phones, or vehicles. In 2019 district-level police did not have an operational budget. Starting in November 2020, police stations received a budget of 90,000 riyals (127.11 EUR).⁽¹¹⁾

While the police did not develop or

issue any measures themselves, they were key to implementation. During implementation, they regularly consulted aqils (the neighborhood authorities) and district police stations, and reported to the Emergency Committee on progress as well as the challenges they faced. The main tasks delegated to the security forces were to enforce the closure of public spaces, monitor city and governorate entrances, and ensure that any infected individuals remained in quarantine. Besides conducting temperature checks at the entrance to the city, deploying patrols to avoid overcrowding, and conducting training sessions, security forces implemented security campaigns targeting public places, such as mosques and qat markets (qat is a widely used, socially acceptable, mildly narcotic drug). Although Chief of Police General Mansour Abdul-Rab al-Akhali visited district police stations in April, it is clear that police work focused primarily on Taiz city, but neglected rural areas. Given that the police were responsible for implementation, and the Emergency Committee was mainly responsible for strategy and planning, police engagement can only be understood in the context of the wider coronavirus response.

¹⁰ Maged Sultan, Mareike Transfeld and Kamal Muqbil 'Formalizing the Informal: State and Non-State Security Providers in Government Controlled Taiz City.' The Yemen Polling Center. July 22, 2020. https://www.yemenpolling.org/formalizing_the_informal/.

¹¹ Transfeld, Mareike, Kamal Muqbil, Shaima bin Othman and Hakim Noman. 'Rule of Law Institutions Assessment. Police, First Responders, Prosecutors, and Courts in Aden, Taiz, Lahj and Shabwa.' Yemen Polling Center. July 2020. Unpublished, available upon request.



Preventive measures implemented

The measures drawn up by the Emergency Committee were very similar to those implemented elsewhere in the world, including lockdowns, quarantine, and social distancing. What is important to underline is that no measures were implemented specifically targeting groups who have historically found it harder to access health services, including women and disabled. Initially, the Emergency Committee strategy was to keep the virus out of Taiz and quarantine any incoming suspected cases. In March and April 2020, the committee relied on the national strategy, which was to close borders and suspend flights, and so it coordinated with national-level ministries. The committee also tasked security forces to carry out temperature checks at the only entrance to the besieged city, at al-Hanjar checkpoint. This measure was not only to prevent the virus from entering the city but also to regulate incoming traffic in order to help avoid large crowds. Next to the introduction of temperature checks at the city entrance and the designation of quarantine centers, other measures included the closures of mosques, schools, universities, parks, public squares, and event halls. Restaurants and cafeterias were instructed to

close, with some operating takeaway services. The Emergency Committee also placed much emphasis on the need to raise awareness about the virus and hygiene measures to prevent its spread. All measures were decided at the local level, with the exception of the closure of educational facilities and mosques. Schools and universities were the first public institutions to be closed per instructions from the Ministry of Education. The directive was forwarded in an announcement made by the Taiz Education Department on March 15. Schools were to close for one week,⁽¹²⁾ but given that Eid and summer holidays were approaching, an indefinite closure of schools was implemented without resistance. Mosques were to be closed per the directive from the national-level Ministry of Guidance and Endowment. Understandably, the closure of mosques faced significant challenges. The local ministry representative met several times with Emergency Committee members, the police, and imams to discuss mechanisms to close mosques.⁽¹³⁾

The Emergency Committee announced that a health and treatment center and a quarantine center were prepared at the Republican Hospital. The Shifak and Khalifa Hospitals were designated

¹² 'Maktab al-tarbiyah b'Taiz yu'lin taghleeq al-ta'lim limudat usboo' [Taiz Education Office announces school closure for a week] *Almawqea*post. March 15, 2020. Available at <https://almawqea.post.net/news/48743>.

¹³ 'Corona: Masajid Taiz tukhalif ta'liq al-salat wa al-hukoma to'qif mudara makatib al-awqaf' [Corona: Mosques in Taiz violent decision to suspend Friday prayers, and Ministry of Endowment reviews staff] *Yemen Shabab*. March 27, 2020. <https://yemenshabab.net/news/55291>.



as secondary quarantine centers. Once the first cases of COVID-19 were detected in Taiz, patients were brought to these centers. Those who had been found to have contracted the virus but did not have symptoms were asked to quarantine at home. Two quarantine centers were opened at the city's outskirts. One, located at al-Haramain Hotel in al-Dhabab, was designated for travelers crossing into Taiz who were found to have high temperatures.⁽¹⁴⁾ Beyond this, the Emergency Committee met with private hospitals in late March and April to ensure their capacity was being used to counter the virus, and that they too were reporting detected cases to the appropriate authorities. In the meantime, the Health Office carried out cleaning campaigns, removing waste, and disinfecting public areas. Being tasked with ensuring the availability of food and preventing the emergence of shortages and price hikes, the Emergency Committee

encouraged traders to ensure members of the community were not hoarding food, and that they were informed about possible shortages. The committee also discussed mechanisms to ensure food trucks could continue to enter the governorates, despite the lockdown. Despite this, most individuals interviewed for this research agreed that there were food shortages because of the pandemic. The Emergency Committee tried to raise awareness of the pandemic and its response measures through official statements published on media pages as well as social media accounts. As well as distributing leaflets, officials handed out educational banners to be hung on city streets. Volunteers conducted field campaigns, and people also heard about the measures through neighbourhood aqils and imams in mosques and announcement vehicles, or through the official Taiz radio station.

Corona measures are difficult to implement due to challenging context

Demographic, economic, and cultural factors created a difficult context for the implementation of public health measures. A high-ranking police officer explained that the reason for these

challenges was that most people “depend on daily wage jobs to secure necessities. In addition to the siege, the city’s situation, the overcrowding. The area of the city of Taiz does

¹⁴ ‘Salem Al-Sabri. “Funduq Al-Harmaine” maqr’an lil hajr al-sihi min Corona fi Taiz’ [Al-Haramaine Hotel: An isolation center in Taiz for Corona] *Al Mushahid*. March 19, 2020. <https://almushahid.net/57983/>.



not exceed a few kilometers, and is inhabited by hundreds of thousands of people. And in such a situation, it is difficult to enforce social distancing between citizens.” With a population of three million, Taiz is the most populous governorate in Yemen. Taiz city is estimated to have a population of around 200,000, down from 600,000 due to armed conflict.⁽¹⁵⁾ For cultural and economic reasons, houses are inhabited by multiple generations, making for a dense population in urban areas and exposing vulnerable people to social contact. Given the humanitarian situation and lack of government services (such as no grid water and deteriorating health services), residents rely on markets, water distribution points, and wells, which are inevitably crowded and where central organization to enforce hygiene and social distancing is lacking.

With most residents depending on small-scale economic activities, and most families already earning too little to feed the whole family, self-isolation has not been an option. For example, the qat trade makes up 30 per cent of the Yemen’s economy, requiring markets to be open.⁽¹⁶⁾ Consumers of the mild narcotic (90 per cent of the

population) would be hard to convince not to consume the drug on a daily basis given its socio-cultural role, thus markets remained largely open.⁽¹⁷⁾ In addition, in a religiously conservative society like Yemen, shaken by violence and personal challenges, prayer holds great importance and is traditionally done in groups. That the first wave of coronavirus coincided with the holy month of Ramadan and the celebration of Eid al-Fitr (May 23) and Eid al-Adha (July 30) made it particularly difficult to prohibit religious, social, and family gatherings.

As with other countries, the pandemic was a new phenomenon that the community knew very little about. However, a lack of information resources and little awareness about the virus, coupled with low levels of education and public health not being a main priority, led to low levels of compliance with public health measures. A police officer noted, “There are even some people that would mock you when you tell them to comply with the measures and would say, ‘We eat chillies’, or ‘We chew Qat, which is toxic, and COVID-19 will not harm us’”. A CSO representative working regularly with security institutions explained that

¹⁵ Nasser Al-Sakkaf. ‘In Taiz, Some Yemenis Choose War – and Home – over Displacement.’ *The New Humanitarian*. July 16, 2019. <https://www.thenewhumanitarian.org/news-feature/2019/07/16/taiz-yemen-war-displacement>

¹⁶ ‘The Drug That Is Starving Yemen.’ *The Economist*. January 04, 2018. <https://www.economist.com/middle-east-and-africa/2018/01/04/the-drug-that-is-starving-yemen>

¹⁷ Leen Al-Mugahed. ‘Khat Chewing in Yemen: Turning over a New Leaf.’ World Health Organization. March 04, 2011. <https://www.who.int/bulletin/volumes/86/10/08-011008/en/>



even police officers did not believe the virus was real. Added to this, cultural stigma surrounding the virus also proved a challenge to implementing measures to prevent the spread of COVID-19. A civil society representative explained: “Unjustified discrimination occurred against those infected with COVID-19; for example, the first case infected with the virus, including their family and friends, faced social stigma and emotional violence. This made many infected or suspected cases

reluctant to go to quarantine centers and hospitals for fear of social stigma and ostracization.” The coronavirus pandemic, following worldwide trends,⁽¹⁸⁾ has also led to increased criminality and domestic violence. A civic figure said in an interview that “COVID-19 has added another burden on citizens in terms of living, which has negatively affected the psychological state of citizens and created family problems, domestic and gender-based violence”.⁽¹⁹⁾

Planners did not consider the interests of the community and communicated policies poorly

Overall, the coronavirus measures implemented by state authorities were assessed by officials and civic figures to be weak. The director of a CSO from al-Mudhaffer district said there were “no real measures, and that merely some statements and reports were shared through social media. The local authority, the Health Office and the Emergency Committee did not have a real plan to deal with this emerging pandemic. The performance of these agencies was chaotic.” A deputy director of a government institution

described the measures as “mere formalities, as if it was just a matter of exempting themselves from blame and responsibility, and nothing more than that”. Another CSO representative stated that institutions needed to be more serious about the measures and “fighting corruption, implementing measures on the ground, and providing treatment for patients”.⁽²⁰⁾ Despite these assessments by civic figures, it is clear that the Emergency Committee met nearly daily, and engaged not only hospitals, laboratories, and police

¹⁸ ‘Uniting Women Peacebuilders in Yemen during COVID-19.’ Saferworld. October 27, 2020. <https://www.saferworld.org.uk/resources/news-and-analysis/post/912-uniting-women-peacebuilders-in-yemen-during-covid-19>.

¹⁹ YPC interview with civic figure, Taiz, January 1, 2020. See also Rania Abdullah, ‘Domestic Violence in Yemen and the COVID-19 Pandemic.’ *Al-Madaniya Magazine*. December 04, 2020. <https://almaidaniyamag.com/2020/09/30/domestic-violence-in-yemen-and-the-covid-19-pandemic/>.

²⁰ YPC interview with civic figure, Taiz, January 4, 2021.



but also civil society. It therefore took responsibility and demonstrated its willingness to act. The police cooperated closely with the Emergency Committee, and its engagement was viewed as popular by the community, but the measures were said not to go far enough. Nevertheless, the approach taken by the institutions was bound to fail. Given the lack of financial and material resources, institutions had limited options in countering the pandemic. These constraints were exacerbated by weaknesses at the planning level: institutions did not at all consider the needs and interests of the communities affected by the measures. Because of the lack of resources, the planners could not include the practicalities required for smooth implementation in the planning.

The plans of the Emergency Committee were communicated through media and social media, with few announcements coming from national-level ministries (such as the closure of educational facilities and mosques). Overall, the committee did not communicate a strategy. It was not clear what the overreaching goal the individual measures were supposed to achieve; for example, the goal could have been to keep the infection rate low (flatten the curve) so that the health system would not be overwhelmed

(a strategy pursued elsewhere), or the goal could have been to prevent infections generally. The initial directive to close qat markets is a clear example of poor communications strategy. On the one hand, the announcements lacked information, such as timeframes, information on how the measures would be enforced, and penalties for violation. On the other hand, qat markets were subsumed under markets more generally. Only after push back from qat traders did the Emergency Committee begin listing qat markets explicitly in their announcements. And each time the announcement was made, it was made slightly differently. Indeed, the individual announcements regarding markets had the character of isolated measures rather than a coherent policy. The interpretations of the events by officials and civic figures showed the lack of clarity around the closure of the markets, with a civic figure interpreting the failure to close markets as the Emergency Committee withdrawing its decision. A high-ranking police officer called the closure of markets “partial and short lived”.⁽²¹⁾

In addition, in none of the announcements did the local authority or security institutions express an understanding of the qat traders’ situation and their dependence on qat markets for their livelihoods. This

²¹ YPC interview with a senior security official, Taiz, January 4, 2021.

²² YPC interview with a civic figure, Taiz, January 10, 2021.



underlines that the committee did not consider the living conditions of the community in the design of coronavirus measures. This criticism was echoed by a civic figure interviewed by YPC who stated, “It is necessary to take appropriate preventive measures that help citizens to comply, without having to deal with financial burdens.”⁽²²⁾ It was only after the May 2020 COVID-19 outbreak in Taiz city, when the Emergency Committee yet again announced the closure of qat markets, that it changed its strategy. This time qat was to be prohibited from entering the city for three days, so that socially distanced qat trade could be organized. A government official acknowledged in an interview with YPC that, “COVID-19 affected low-income people who depend on daily wage jobs to obtain their food, and the state did not provide an alternative to compensate them”.

A similar pattern of a lack of consideration for local realities and negligence of practicalities could be observed at quarantine and isolation centers. The former were meant for travelers who were suspected of being infected, while the latter were designated for infected people with symptoms to be treated. Although

vital for the coronavirus strategy, both proved ineffective. The lack of resources and poor planning led to poor implementation. According to investigative reports, patients and those who were suspected of having the virus who were in quarantine and isolation centers were not provided with food or blankets, while at least in some cases, health workers did not have personal protective equipment. Rooms were overcrowded and lacking in hygiene, and, in some cases, people suspected of having the virus could leave to go shopping at the market and return to the quarantine center. The investigative report also documented cases in which health workers helped suspected cases to escape.⁽²³⁾ This impression was shared by a CSO representative interviewed by YPC, who noted, “Those with a high temperature were detained for hours and then released. They were not quarantined for 14 days according to the instructions of the World Health Organization”.⁽²⁴⁾ Rather than preventing the spread of the virus, the quarantine centers may have become locations where the virus spread, thus the policy, rather than generating trust in authorities, mostly backfired.

²³ Muhamed Husni. ‘Quarantine Stations in Yemen: The Great Escape chaos, pollution and death.’ *ARIJ*. December 12, 2020. <https://arj.net/investigations/corona-yemen-en/>.

²⁴ YPC interview with a civic figure, Taiz, January 4, 2021.



Implementation of poorly planned policies leads to low compliance and inconsistent policing

The police and military police were tasked with implementing the measures decided on by the Emergency Committee. The police is responsible for public security, the military police is nominally responsible for discipline and investigations within the ranks of the military. In reality, the responsibilities of both overlap. Civic figures and officials agreed that the greatest challenge with regard to implementation of coronavirus measures was the lack of community compliance, which civic figures and officials estimated to have been between 10 and 20 per cent. For example, the closure of qat markets led to them relocating and attracting crowds of people elsewhere or traders simply re-opening in their original location hours after they were ordered to close.⁽²⁵⁾ The measure also caused violent clashes in qat markets. Most people did not or could not stay in their homes, and some mosques did not close. A police chief explained that the police “carried out field campaigns to close these mosques by force, but they would re-open as soon as we left”.⁽²⁶⁾ The reasons for low compliance were related not only to the lack of awareness of COVID-19 but also the limited trust in state institutions and the fact that the measures were neither well planned nor communicated to the public effectively. A high-ranking

government official believes the reasons were that “there were no firm measures obliging citizens to comply with the preventive measures and no punitive measures against violators”. Interviewed civic figures and officials explained that some arrests were made in response to violations of the measures; for example, vendors and shop owners who did not close their shops. A high-ranking security official said this was done “to a small extent”. However, most violations of the measures went without disciplinary consequences. In fact, given that coronavirus measures compliance was so low, punishments with arrests and fines did not appear to be an option for the police. In the words of a government official, “around 80 per cent of the people did not comply with the measures. Should all the people be punished? That is impossible”.

The ineffectiveness of the measures caused by inefficient communication, poor planning, and a lack of resources was compounded by the interference of the military and militias. The closure of markets (along with other public spaces) was announced by the governor and the Emergency Committee, respectively, on March 18 and March 25, although qat markets were not specified. On March 28, the

²⁵ Aiman Qai'd. 'Aswaq bai'i al-qat tu'aoud al-'aml ba'd sa'at min ighlaqaha' [Qat markets resume functioning hours after closure]. *Yemen Shabab*. March 29, 2020. <https://yemenshabab.net/program-video/6207#.YDul5i2l10s>; YPC interviews with civil society and civil servants. December 2020 - January 2021.

²⁶ YPC interview with police chief, Taiz, January 11, 2021.



police initiated a security campaign to enforce the measures and announced that by the next day all qat markets must be shut. The following day, the police moved into the markets and physically closed them. The campaign was short-lived. Because the security sector receives insufficient funding from the IRG and the Arab Coalition, it had resorted to informally taxing the qat trade. Therefore, these institutions were not interested in the closure of the markets. The lack of salaries also led to officers taking bribes, as observed by a government official: "I heard about cases of extortion of some merchants by taking bribes in exchange for letting them open their stores." In a similar

vein, parts of the military prevented the closure of mosques for religious reasons. Reports indicate that the 5th Infantry Brigade did not implement the order to shut mosques and sided with those rebelling against the directive.⁽²⁷⁾ This not only demonstrated the divisions within the security sector but also demonstrated that the security sector's lack of financial resources incentivized security institutions to prioritize their own financial interests over the well-being of the community. A civic figure believes that, "Transparency in the measures and methods of distributing assistance for the prevention of COVID-19 and publishing reports about it may restore confidence to people."⁽²⁸⁾

Moving forward: CSOs and private sector closing the gap to strengthen state institutions

The coronavirus response in Taiz was, on the whole, well intentioned, but it had weaknesses both in terms of planning and implementation. On the positive side, the coronavirus response demonstrated that there is regular communication among local state institutions, including health and security. On the negative side, the response did not garner trust in state or security institutions. And while

there were examples of improved inter-institutional communication, communication with the public had not improved. The Emergency Committee seemed to have replicated some of the general coronavirus measures which were implemented elsewhere in the world, including the closure of schools, commercial businesses, social distancing, quarantine, and contact tracing. However, given the

²⁷ 'Al-Liwa al-Khamis Haras Ri'asy yatamarad 'ala tawjihat al-hukuma wa yaftah al-masajid bi-Taiz' [The 5th Brigade Presidential Guards rebel against the governments orders and open mosques in Taiz]. *Mada-Press*. March 27, 2020. <https://www.mda-press.net/news/611>.

²⁸ YPC interview with civic figure in Taiz, January 10, 2020.



demographic, economic, and cultural context, these measures were likely to fail if they were not adapted to the local context and challenges.

The Emergency Committee opted for a strategy which theoretically aimed to reduce the infection rate overall. This strategy was unsuitable for the Yemeni context, as evident by the extremely low levels of compliance. This did not go unnoticed by civic figures interviewed for this research: “The preventive measures that the world has been taking will not work in our society. Because of traditions, the lack of awareness, and poverty.” The police had the impossible task of implementing this strategy, which was not only poorly designed but also poorly communicated, already setting the implementation up for failure. Some CSO initiatives, the private sector, and international non-governmental organisations filled the gaps. Indeed, civic figures interviewed by YPC felt CSOs were more effective because they had the resources to respond quickly and more directly. Al-Thawra Hospital was rehabilitated by the Hayel Saeed Anam group (an international business owned by a large Yemeni family from Taiz), as its facilities had deteriorated due to six years of negligence and conflict. The group increased the hospital’s ICU capacity to 40 beds. A third isolation and treatment center, supported by the Sheikh Hamood

Saeed Foundation, was inaugurated by the Emergency Committee in April. CSOs participated in awareness-raising activities and distributed food and water, sanitary supplies, and protective equipment.

As responsive state institutions, both the Emergency Committee and the police should prioritize the interests of the community. Rather than developing policies that may theoretically be the best but are practically impossible to implement and thus have poor outcomes, the authorities should develop realistic policies which are tailored to the realities of the context. On a theoretical level, these policies may not be as effective as the ideal scenario, but as they are easier to implement, the success rate is higher, increasing the potential to generate more confidence in authorities. The outcome in terms of disease control could at least be relatively acceptable, as compliance levels would be higher. Any policy should be tailored in ways that speaks to the interests of the community and is communicated in ways the community understands; not only the policies themselves but also their goals. For that reason, the socio-economic consequences of both the pandemic and the measures to fight it must at the very least be acknowledged officially by authorities. This includes the impact on vulnerable groups, women, and the elderly, as well as businesses,



primarily vendors at markets. To ensure closer links between the community and governance and security institutions, clearer mechanisms of consultation and cooperation are needed, for example, to debate which measures are likely to be effective, and what accompanying mechanisms can be put in place to deal with any factors that are not realistic given the overriding importance of religious worship, or the need to make a livelihood. Likewise, the local authority must consult with security sector representatives for the process of policy design, to ensure policies are not only designed appropriately for the context but also so that the security sector has an interest in seeing through their successful implementation. Thus, the interests and capacities of all formal and informal security actors should be reviewed in the process of policy planning, to ensure security actors provide constructive support and are not obstructive.

In particular, CSOs could fill gaps on the practical level. When looking at the work CSOs do in general when compared to state institutions, it is clear they hold greater knowledge on individual

segments of the community, have better strategies in approaching the public, and often have more resources available to support more directly. Thus, CSOs could be better placed to run quarantine centers together with health officials, to ensure that basic standards (food and blankets) and citizen rights are upheld. CSOs could ensure that state institutions improve their communication with the public, and ensure that public expectations are managed appropriately. CSOs are well poised not only to be part of policy implementation but also their design. Policy makers and CSOs should work closely at a planning level, to ensure CSOs can advise on how to adapt measures to local contexts, and to ensure CSO resources are effectively used to fill gaps that state institutions cannot fill. Finally, to improve the cooperation between civic and security institutions, the former must also consider the composition and interests of the latter. If the political dynamics, as well as economic interests of the security sector are not considered by policy planners at the local authority, an important element required for successful policy implementation is ignored.

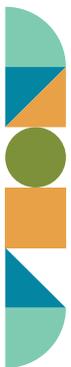


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About the Report

This report is part of the Yemen Policy Center's project al-Siyasa al-Madaniya funded by the Federal German Foreign Office. The project seeks to contribute to discussions on Yemen in and outside of the country, while creating a bridge between Yemeni and non-Yemeni writers and academics. Focusing specifically on peace-building, the projects combines creatives formats, such as storytelling, photography and film, with academic writing putting local and international knowledge into a dialogue. This report was also supported by the Political Settlement Research Programme through the 'Covid Collective Research Platform' at IDS Sussex, with thanks to funding from the Foreign, Commonwealth and Development Office, UK Aid, who have had no influence and bear no responsibility for its contents'.



The Yemen Policy Center is an independent think tank established in 2020 by a group of Yemeni and German researchers associated with the Yemen Polling Center, a Yemeni NGO headquartered in Taiz, Yemen. Yemen Policy aims to impact local and international policymaking with the ultimate goal to improve the living conditions of the Yemeni people. With its research and advocacy activities. Yemen Policy works towards a closer integration of local perspectives into the policy-making process. While upholding the principles of the Human Rights Charter, Yemen Policy's strategy is to advocate for good governance reforms based on sound research and to support the creation of communication channels between citizens and state institutions. By seeking out and sharing positive stories and best-practices, Yemen Policy does not only aspire to put local communities into the position to help themselves but also to put Yemeni civil society activities into the spotlight.



The Political Settlements Research Programme (PSRP) conducts research centrally focused on how peace processes attempt to revise political settlements to make them more inclusive, so as to end violent conflict. The four-year project is being undertaken by a consortium led by the Global Justice Academy at the University of Edinburgh and includes: Conciliation Resources; the Rift Valley Institute in Kenya; the Transitional Justice Institute at Ulster University; and the Institute for Security Studies in South Africa. The research programme receives its core funding from the Foreign, Commonwealth and Development Office (FCDO), UK AID.



Auswärtiges Amt

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