

Creating Positive Experiences with the State: Youth Perceptions of the Local Council in Hajjah Governorate¹

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The escalation of violence in Yemen since mid-2014, the subsequent takeover of the capital Sanaa by the Houthi movement in September 2014, and the military intervention in March 2015 have led to a near-complete collapse of the Yemeni state. This collapse created a complex institutional landscape with both state and non-state actors occupying diverse institutions or acting in their place but has also derailed the political process defined by the Gulf Cooperation Council (GCC) Initiative,² which defined a road map for a political transition. The collapse of the state and the fragmentation of national level politics leaves local and international actors scrambling to find a political solution to Yemen's conflict and a pathway to more stability. Given the absence of institutions that function nation-wide, stabilization of communities and state-building efforts can only be successful if enacted on the local level and from the bottom up. To strengthen state institutions in this context and to facilitate bottom-up state-building initiatives, it is important to enable residents to create positive relationships with state institutions. Using the Local Councils of Hajjah as an example of best practices, this policy brief reiterates those voices that call for a local approach to stabilizing Yemen. It argues that those state institutions that continue to function in the benefit of the people should be supported and strengthened as a foundation of future state-building efforts.

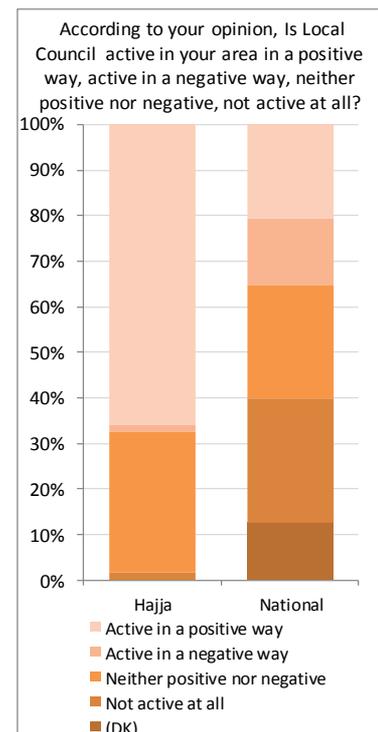
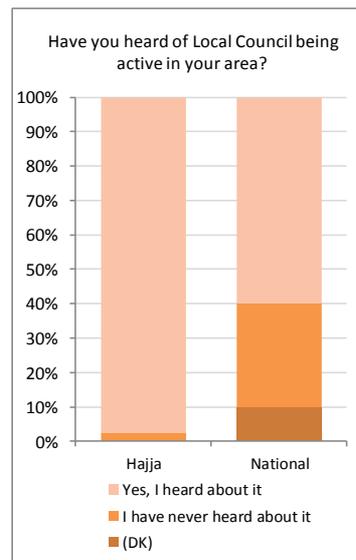
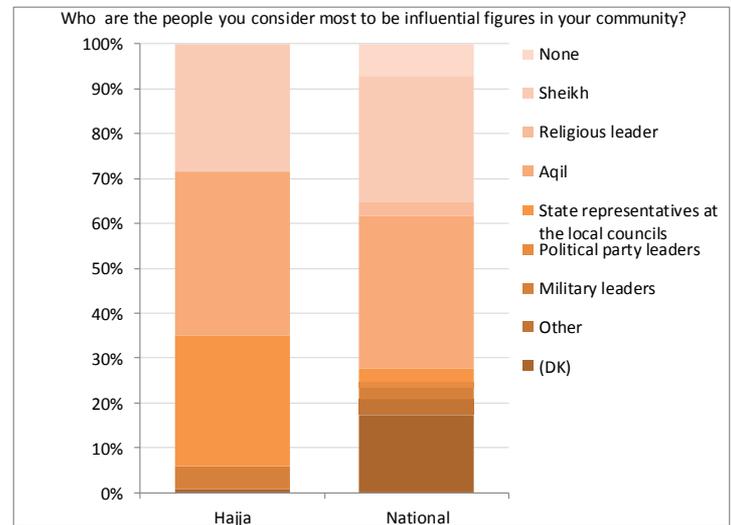
42 % of the youth in Yemen believe that the state is completely absent in their area; 16% stated the state is somewhat absent. This is the result of a nationwide survey among youth between the ages of 15 and 25 conducted in May, 2017. At the same time 81% of the youth want the state to play a larger role in their everyday lives. Understood in terms of its functions and responsibilities, the provision of basic services and the security of the population rank high among the youth's

expectations of the state. On the local level, the Local Councils are responsible for the deliverance of state services. According to the Local Authority Law of 2000, the Local Councils are responsible for proposing social and economic development plans and overseeing the implementation thereof. They are also responsible for directing, supervising, and controlling work of the executive organs. Their roles, as prescribed by law, also

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² An agreement sponsored by the Gulf Cooperation Council for the transfer of power in Yemen in 2012. Under the Agreement, the then President Ali Abdullah Saleh ceded power to the then Vice-President Abdu Rabbo Mansour Hadi, who subsequently became a transitional president through a national vote in which he was the only candidate.

include studying and discussing the situation of basic commodity supply in their respective districts. Against this backdrop, it comes as quite a surprise that youth in Hajjah have an overwhelmingly positive perception of their Local Councils. With 98% of youth in Hajjah stating that they have heard of the Local Councils being active in their area, Hajjah Local Councils are best known by their constituents when compared with the results from other governorates (60% of youth in Yemen have heard of a Local Council being active in their area). 66% of those Hajjah youth who have heard of the Local Council think of the Local Council as being active positively in their area. This is significantly higher than the nationwide average of 20%. When asked who the most influential figures in their communities were, 29% of the youth in Hajjah said, “state representatives at the Local Council.” In contrast, the nationwide result shows that only 3% of Yemeni youth consider state representatives at the Local Councils to be the most influential figures in their community. In fact, Hajjah is one of the governorates where local youth perceive the state to be most present. 18% stated that the state is very present (compared to 5% on the national level); 30% stated that the state is somewhat present (compared to 10% on the national level). Accordingly, it is unsurprising that Hajjah is the governorate where the least number of youth stated that the state should be more present (43%), with 8% saying the state should be less present and 48% responding that the presence of the state should remain the same.

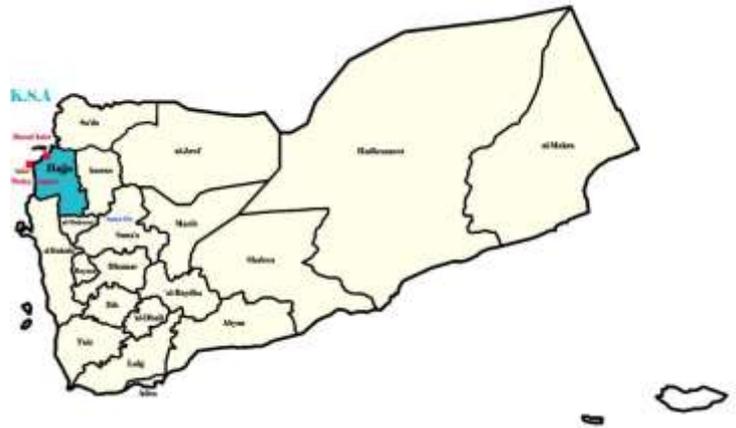


Hajjah: The conflict-ridden governorate in northern Yemen

Given the fragmented nature of Yemen's state, the experiences the Yemeni population has with state institutions depends on geographic location and its specific institutional arrangements. Hajjah is situated north of Yemen's capital Sanaa, bordering Saudi Arabia, and to the east neighboring Saada, the traditional stronghold and home governorate of the Houthi movement. In the west, Hajjah borders the Red Sea, where Maydi city and its small seaport are situated. According to the estimates of 2017, Hajjah has a population of 2,129,000, 91% of whom live in rural areas. The governorate has diverse topography including highlands in the center, east, and north, and flatland in the west. Until the death of Ali Abdullah Saleh on December 4, the governorate was under the control of Saleh and the Houthis.

Since 2011, Hajjah has witnessed increasing violence due to the expansion of the Houthi movement. After the plan for Yemen's division into federal regions was devised in the context of the National Dialogue Conference,³ the Houthi's ambitions to take control of Hajjah became clear. The federal division would have seen the Houthis restricted to a landlocked region, combining Sana'a governorate, Dhamar, Amran, and Sanaa (governorate) in the so-called Azal region. The Houthis rejected this division as they demanded access to a seaport, and argued that Saada and Hajjah should not be divided due to a common culture. Shortly after the Houthis seized control of the capital in September 2014, the group took control of Hajjah and reached the Red Sea

in October 2014. The governorate's tribal structure is strong, with tribal groups descending from the northern Yemeni tribal confederations, Hashid and Bakeel. Thus, the Houthis also draw high numbers of fighters from the Hajjah governorate.



Saudi Arabia, on the other hand, has since the beginning of the military intervention in March 2015, attempted to secure its southern border through the control of Haradh district, where the most important land border crossing between the two countries is located. Further, the two warring factions have waged fierce battles over the control of Maydi port, which the Saudis suspect is used to smuggle weapons from Iran to the Houthis. While Maydi port remains the site of frequent clashes between the two sides, the forces backed by the Saudi-led Arab coalition gained control of large parts of both districts. Hajjah has also been subject to intense airstrikes by the Saudi-led coalition. Nevertheless, Youth in Hajjah generally feel safer than the average Yemeni youth, with 39 % stating that the security situation is very good and 47 % finding the security situation to be somewhat good. 3 % described the situation as very bad and 5 percent

³ The National Dialogue Conference was held between March 2013 and January 2014 as part of the implementation of the GCC Initiative.

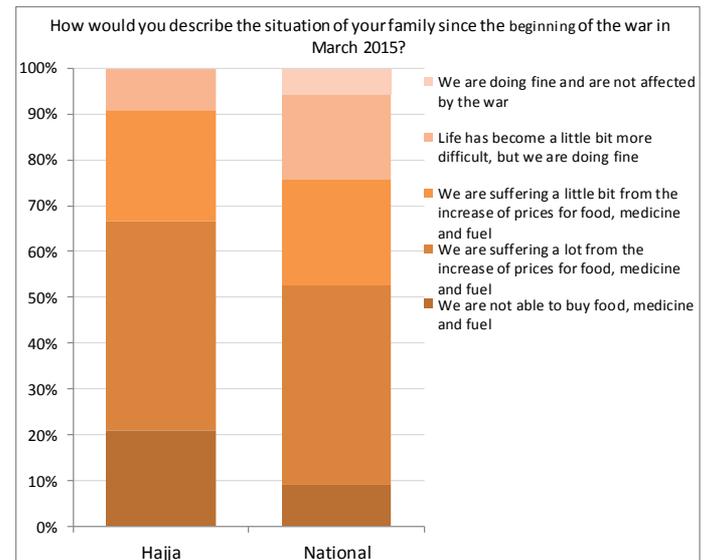
find it somewhat bad. The majority of those who do not feel safe in Hajjah fear the military intervention of the Saudi-led coalition the most: 53 % consider the Arab coalition responsible for the deterioration of the security situation in their area; 80 % consider the airstrikes of the Arab coalition to be the main threat to their personal security.⁴

The fighting has left a grave mark on the area's humanitarian situation. Local estimates show that more than 30,000 people have been displaced from their homes by the ongoing clashes in Haradh and Maydi. The survey results reveal that 46% of the families in Hajjah suffer greatly from rising prices of food, medicine, and fuel; 21% are not able to buy these basic commodities. 57% of the youth remember times in 2016 when their families didn't have enough food. Despite the dire humanitarian situation in the governorate, nearly 50% of the households have so far not received any assistance since the beginning of 2017. Being an important post for commercial trade, the closure of the Haradh border crossing further negatively impacted the economic situation and living conditions within the governorate.

Collapsing State; Shifting loyalties

Four months after their takeover of the capital Sana'a and the subsequent ouster of the internationally recognized government under President Abdu Rabbuh Mansour Hadi, the Houthis issued a constitutional declaration dissolving the parliament and forming a Supreme Revolutionary Committee to rule the country. Mohammed Ali Al-Houthi, the cousin of the movement leader Abdel-Malik Al-Houthi, chairs the committee.

This action represented a radical overthrow of the standing authority in the country. The unelected and informal Supreme Revolutionary Committee was imposed on formal institutions, leaving governmental institutions across the country in a state of uncertainty.



After the resignation of the Hadi government in Sanaa in January, 2015 and Hadi's ouster from the country in March, 2015, the internationally recognized president in April, 2015 reassigned Khalid Bahah to resume his post as Prime Minister, and formed an exile government in Riyadh. In April, 2016, President Hadi replaced Bahah with Ahmad Obaid Bin Daghr, a southerner, following the Houthi's takeover of Sana'a defected from the General People's Congress (GPC), the largest party in Yemen, led by former president Ali Abdullah Saleh.

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This resulted in two authorities claiming to represent the Yemeni state. On the one hand, the internationally recognized government of President Hadi, while largely being restricted to its exile in Saudi-Arabia, has little authoritative reach through state institutions in the southern and eastern governorates. However, already in a weak position in the country, Hadi increasingly loses influence and authoritative reach as the southern independence movement HIRAK gains strength. In May of 2014, the Southern Transitional Council was formed headed by Aidaroos az-Zubaidi, a leader of the southern movement who was removed from the office of governor of Aden by President Hadi in April 2017. The southern council enjoys strong popular support, as well as support from military units stationed in the south. The council also has strong relations with the United Arab Emirates and competes over authority in the south with the Hadi government. However, neither have true authoritative reach in the south.

Until December 2017, the alliance around the Houthis and Ali Abdullah Saleh consolidated the authority in the capital Sana'a and most of the governorates in central, north and west Yemen. In July, 2016 the Houthi movement and former President Ali Abdullah Saleh had agreed to form a Supreme Political Council (SPC), comprised of 10 individuals, to replace the Supreme Revolutionary Committee. Saleh As-Sammad, a leader

of the Houthi movement, was named president of the council. The SPC appointed Abdel-Aziz Bin Habtour, a southerner and loyalist of Saleh, to form a power-sharing government composed of the GPC and the Houthis. Despite this agreement, the Houthis have kept the "supreme revolutionary committee" in place, currently functioning as a shadow government. The agreement also provided for repealing the Houthi's constitutional declaration and reinstating the parliament.⁵ While the majority of parliamentarians are members of the GPC, parliamentarians are split between the two main factions of the conflict. Those who are loyal to the Houthis assemble in parliament in Sana'a, but their meetings are not deemed legal due to incomplete quorum.⁶ On the other hand, President Hadi's authority has not been able to bring loyal parliamentarians together for sessions.

The alliance between the Houthis and Saleh was broken in early December 2017, when Saleh announced his intention to negotiate with Saudi-Arabia toward ending the war. On December 4, Saleh was killed by the Houthis. Since then, Saleh's party, the GPC, has been targeted by Houthi crackdowns. The Houthis exercise power through the SPC and the institutions of the central government, as well as the local authorities in the governorates under their control. In addition, the Houthi movement has the so-called revolutionary sub-committees,⁷ which exert broad influence over public

⁵ The current Parliament was elected in 2003 for a six-year term, but the political powers agreed in 2009 to extend the term for an additional two years. Before the additional two-year mandate ended, Yemen had experienced political upheaval following the start of a nationwide uprising against the rule of then-President Ali Abdullah Saleh in February, 2011. When the political powers signed the GCC Initiative for political settlement, the term of the current parliament was extended to 2014, but the escalation of violence and subsequent eruption of the war has made it impossible to conduct new parliamentary elections.

⁶ The Yemeni House of Representatives is comprised of 301 members and the legal quorum equals half plus one (151 MPs).

⁷ They are governing bodies at the governorate and ministerial levels, and they report to the Supreme Revolutionary Committee.

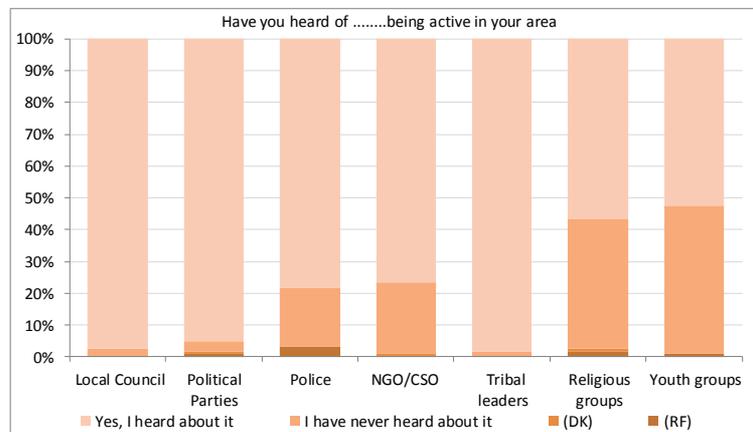
institutions despite their informal status. State representatives at the Local Council are divided, as many shifted their loyalty to the de facto authority in their respective governorate. Since the beginning of the war, each party to the conflict has cultivated loyalty through appointments to public positions in the governorates under their control.

Local Councils in Hajjah

Today, Hajjah governorate is under the control of the Houthis, also affecting the loyalty of the 614 Local Councilors on the district level and 31 Local Councilors on the governorate level. According to the 2006 Local Council election results, the GPC, which was then the ruling party, won 85% of the district seats and more than 93% of the governorate seats. In an interview, a local representative from Hajjah revealed that elected members of the GPC had shifted their loyalty to the Houthis, but no exact figures were given. Others remained loyal to the GPC and were also affected by the Houthi crackdown after Saleh's death and went into hiding, left the governorate, or were imprisoned.⁸

Since the summer of 2015, the central government subsidies for the Local Councils have been suspended; the Sana'a-based authority has been unable to provide funding to the Local Councils. Although the district-level Local Councils continue to collect tax revenue, which is sent to the central authority in Sana'a, the districts have not received any funding since the summer of 2015. The lack of funding has led to the suspension of service projects, including water and road projects. In

fact, the activities of state representatives at the Hajjah Local Council are mostly performed informally, with the authority of the Local Councils emanating from their elected members' social and tribal status rather than their formal positions. Many of the state representatives at the Hajjah Local Councils have influence in the community based on their traditional standings or their tribal affiliation. Hajjah is therefore an example of the conflation of tribal and state structures. When asked about tribal sheikhs in their area, 98 % of youth stated that they are aware of their activities, with 76 % finding their activities to be positive and 22% remaining indifferent. Despite their social standing, they are nevertheless perceived as state representatives at the Local Council. Their individual activities therefore contribute to the positive perception of the Local Council in the area.



As most activities, have been suspended, the Local Councils' main responsibility today is related to the distribution of humanitarian aid. Local Councils provide data about the local population to relief organizations,

⁸ Those members of the Local Council who were interviewed for this policy brief were no longer reachable for a second round of questions in late December 2017.

including information about vulnerable families and those displaced from conflict areas. Through mediation or providing other incentives, Local Councils also work to ensure the continuation of government services, such as education. Representatives at the Local Councils stated that they personally conduct visits to local schools to urge administrative and teaching staff to continue working despite the interruption of public staff salaries and the calls for teachers to strike. Local Council members collect donations from businessmen and families to pay the teachers' salaries. However, the Local Councils are not significantly active in the areas of healthcare or electricity provision. One Local Council representative stated that in October 2017, his Council mediated five individual local disputes, adding that he also attests to the identities of many locals who do not hold ID cards in order to obtain their entitlements from the Social Welfare Fund (SWF). Locals have faced problems collecting their entitlements as their old SWF authorization forms were not accepted by the payment teams for ID verification.

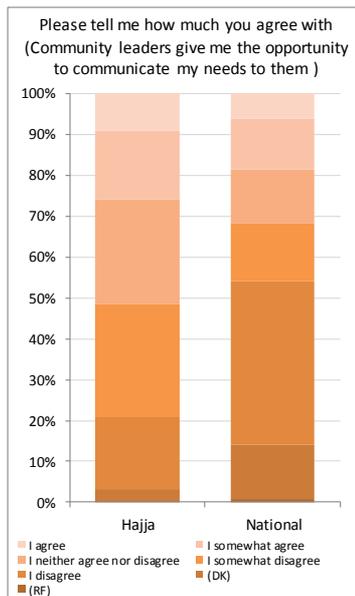
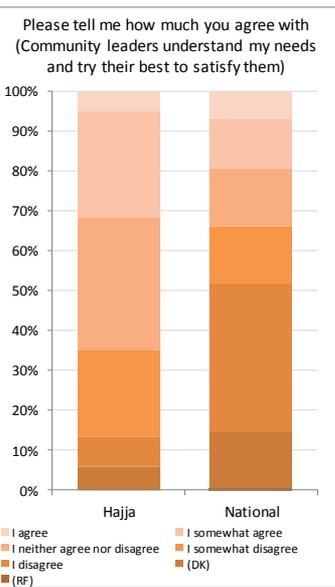
State representatives at the Local Council in Hajjah also play an important role in maintaining social cohesion in their governorate by protecting locals, irrespective of their political affiliation, from acts of political retaliation. According to one of the representatives, they defend local persons irrespective of their political differences, including, for instance, members of Islah, against the Houthis. Representatives have prevented the Houthis from arresting individuals with different political affiliations or those who oppose them. Social figures, such as the ones active within Local Councils, also rank prominently in the survey results with regard to the provision of security. Even though Hajjah youth perceive the state to be relatively present, only 11%

stated that it is the police that bring security to their area. Security provision is perceived to be handled either by no one (24%) or by social figures, such as sheikhs or the Aqil (23%), the citizens themselves (24%) or the Houthis (6%). However, since the crackdown of the Houthis against these state representatives starting in December 2017, the Houthis have gained complete control over the governorate, leaving those with different political affiliations vulnerable to arrest, kidnapping, and murder.

Despite the positive perceptions of the Local Councils among Hajjah youth, only 14% of young people in this governorate are in personal contact with community leaders and only 15% of them have in the past communicated their needs to them. This is just slightly above the national averages of 11%. When asked whether community leaders give them the opportunity to communicate their needs to them, the responses are generally more positive when compared to the national average, but 18% do not believe and 28% somewhat do not believe that community leaders provide such an opportunity. Nevertheless, when comparing with the national average, youth in Hajjah feel significantly more that their community leaders understand their needs and try their best to satisfy them.

The positive perceptions young people in Hajjah have of their representatives at the Local Councils, as well as the activities of these representatives are a good starting point for thinking about state-building initiatives on the local level. Wherever possible and depending on the political situation on the local level, donor organizations should assess the operationality of the Local Councils individually and help bolster their support among the population, through strengthening their involvement in

governance. In order for these Local Councils to become a foundation for bottom-up state-building, they must be encouraged to reactivate their roles as formal bodies, rather than merely being active in an informal role.



can also more effectively contribute to the wellbeing of young people in the governorate by preventing the recruitment of Hajjah’s youth into militias. International organizations could offer capacity-building workshops to Local Councils in the fields of peace-building and the prevention of radicalization. One means to give young people incentives not to join a militia besides the improvement of the quality and availability of education is political inclusion. Local Councils in Hajjah should provide more formalized channels of communication to enable the young people to communicate their needs to their community leaders. This can be done, for instance, in the form of town hall meetings, as well as social media. Local Councils should also be encouraged to include youth in their work, by for instance granting internships to young people. This will not only give the youth a sense of purpose and a role in their community but will also help young people develop leadership skills and gain an insight into local politics.

This can be encouraged through a closer cooperation of international organizations with the Local Councils particularly in regard to relief efforts in the area. Not only can this strengthen the Local Councils as state institutions, but it could also improve the information basis of humanitarian organizations active in this area given the intimate knowledge Local Councils have of their communities. Similarly, initiatives in regard to education or health care should be coordinated more closely with the Local Councils. The oversight of education and healthcare are part of the Local Council’s responsibility, thus their involvement in activities in these fields can further enhance the positive perceptions the community has of the Local Council. Local Councils

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