



Friends of Yemen: How has it performed and where is it going?

Key Points

- Friends of Yemen proved a useful mechanism for bringing GCC countries and Western partners together at a critical time, and bringing the crisis in Yemen to international attention. It brought together the political/reform, economy/development, and security/counter terrorism strands of international policy in an attempt to generate a comprehensive approach to Yemen's problems.
- The coordinated international strategy that Friends of Yemen helped to generate was able to bring some pressure to bear on the political situation but as the crisis developed in 2011, the UN Security Council, the Secretary General's Special Adviser Jamal Benomar, and the G10 grouping of ambassadors in Sana'a also became important mechanisms for international coordination.
- Friends of Yemen has had success in providing incentives for political reform but there has been a tendency to focus on headline pledges, diluting the focus on concrete political progress. There needs to be effective lobbying mechanisms on the ground to produce hard results. The Friends of Yemen forum could adapt its format to promote more focused support.
- One of the purposes of Friends of Yemen that emerged over time was to commit donors to honour their pledges. The ball is arguably now in Yemen's court, with focus on developing capacity in Yemen's institutions.
- Given the likely rocky period that Yemen is now entering, arguably the most fraught since former President Salih's departure, the international community needs to give careful consideration to the most effective forms of coordination to support the economic, political and security challenges it faces.

Subject

Realities in Yemen have shifted from those of early 2010 when Friends of Yemen was established: Yemen is in the throes of navigating a political transition following the stepping down of Ali Abdullah Salih in November 2011, and was due to complete a National Dialogue process under the auspices of the UN-backed GCC Initiative by February 2014. The completion of this phase of the GCC Initiative and the holding of elections would signal a review of the role of Friends of Yemen, as stipulated in the May 2012 Friends of Yemen co-chairs' statement. This timetable has slipped and the transition is increasingly threatened by hardening political positions and a deteriorating security environment. Can Friends of Yemen live up to expectations to provide critical support to Yemen's government as it steers the country through a challenging set of reforms attendant to the National Dialogue process?

Detail

Following the foiled Al Qaida in the Arabian Peninsula (AQAP, Yemen-based) attack on an airliner bound for Detroit on Christmas Day 2009, the UK convened a meeting on 27 January 2010 which launched Friends of Yemen¹. The attack catalysed plans which were already being discussed with partners to improve international coordination to tackle a series of problems in Yemen.

President Salih's regime was showing all the signs of a system on its last legs. The economy was collapsing, humanitarian conditions were some of the worst in the world, and Yemenis were increasingly vocal about a virtual absence of basic facilities and a high degree of corruption. The established opposition was stuck in increasingly stalemated negotiations with the ruling General People's Congress (GPC) over elections due in 2011 and grassroots movements such as the Southern Mobility Movement ('Hirak') and Huthis were increasingly turning away from formal politics to direct action and violent conflict.

As well as looking to focus attention on the AQAP threat, the London meeting also sought reforms that would provide conditions for the unlocking of billions of dollars of undisbursed pledges from the 2006 London donor meeting (\$6 billion from GCC states alone).

September 2010 Friends of Yemen

The September 2010 Friends of Yemen meeting focused on areas that would see improvements in conditions on the ground, as well as support to the Yemeni government on a counter-radicalisation strategy. Friends of Yemen supported the government of Yemen's actions to: prepare for an IMF programme for Yemen; make changes to the water industry; enact legislation to create an improved business environment; combat corruption; and produce an action plan on its 2008 decentralisation (of planning and services) strategy. Friends of Yemen supported a development plan for poverty reduction (DPPR), the government of Yemen's Public Investment Program for 2011-15, and called for the opening of a GCC Secretariat mission in Sana'a.

2011: No Friends of Yemen as political crisis deepens

As the political crisis developed in early 2011, the international community, via the Friends of Yemen mechanism, was able to stay engaged with Yemen on its commitments pledged in New York in September 2010. A Friends of Yemen ministerial had been planned in March 2011 in Riyadh at which the government of Yemen was due to present its plans for the DPPR, resolving the political crisis, and economic reforms.

¹The FoY members are: Algeria, Arab League, Australia, European Union, Kingdom of Bahrain, Brazil, People's Republic of China, Czech Republic, Denmark, Egypt, France, Germany, India, Indonesia, Italy, Japan, Jordan, Republic of Korea, Kuwait, Malaysia, Netherlands, Sultanate of Oman, Qatar, Russian Federation, Kingdom of Saudi Arabia (co-chair), Spain, Switzerland, Tunisia, Turkey, United Arab Emirates, United Kingdom (co-chair), United States of America, Republic of Yemen (co-chair), GCC Secretariat, Islamic Development Bank, IMF, Organisation for Islamic Cooperation, World Bank, United Nations.

The Friends of Yemen meeting was cancelled in mid-March following the spread of popular protest against the rule of President Salih and increased violence by government forces against protestors. The GCC Initiative on the transfer of power to the Yemeni Vice President, Abd Rabo Mansour Hadi, was announced on 10 April 2011.

As President Salih sought to hold on to the presidency and political and security conditions deteriorated, there was an increased role for the UN. The UN Secretary General, in April 2011, appointed Jamal Benomar as Special Adviser on Yemen, who began travelling to Sana'a and reporting monthly to the UN Security Council. In 2011, the G10 coordination of ambassadors in Sana'a, which included the P5, EU, and some GCC members, also took more shape.

May 2012: GCC initiative signed, expectations high

When Ali Abdullah Salih eventually stepped down in November 2011, the Friends of Yemen looked like the logical mechanism for the international community to coordinate its response to a demanding transition timetable, an economic and humanitarian crisis, collapse in security and rule of law, and an emboldened Hirak and AQAP. Expectations were high for the 23 May 2012 Friends of Yemen ministerial in Riyadh. The government of Yemen produced strategy papers and a communiqué setting out the milestones ahead, and sought concrete donor commitments.

In the event the May meeting produced government of Yemen commitments to: transition milestones; the enactment of a transitional justice and national reconciliation law, and work towards an IMF extended credit facility framework. Saudi Arabia, the World Bank, and the GCC committed large pledges. The US also announced assistance on a military restructuring plan and Saudi Arabia announced a donor conference to be held in Riyadh in June (eventually held in September).

September 2012: Success in pledging, but a lack of reality on reform

The 4-5 September 2012 donor conference produced pledges of \$6.4 billion and included a breakdown of priority sectors, mechanisms and timeframes for delivery from donors (Transition Program for Stabilisation and Development), as well as agreement by donors and the Government of Yemen to a Mutual Accountability Framework. A further \$1.5 billion was pledged at the 27 September Friends of Yemen, mostly from GCC countries. The opening of the GCC Secretariat and UN Special Political missions in Sana'a was also noted.

The September 2012 Friends of Yemen in the margins of UNGA included a briefing by the government of Yemen on its plans to launch the National Dialogue (planned for November but delayed until March), the establishment of an electoral commission by October 2012, plans to conduct transparent, independent investigations into allegations of human rights violations in 2011, the creation of a committee to help ensure effective delivery of aid (the Executive Bureau was launched in early December 2013) and the restructuring of military forces by the end of 2012 (changes to structure and command took place in December 2012 and April 2013).

In return for government of Yemen commitments, Friends of Yemen ministers gave strong backing for President Hadi and warned those actors seeking to block implementation of the political transition that action would be sought through the UNSC under Article 41 of the UN Charter.

Friends of Yemen March 2013

The March 2013 Friends of Yemen focused on the main points of the GCC Initiative (the beginning of the National Dialogue Conference [NDC], preparations for February 2014 elections, and reforms to the security and justice sectors), and the progress of the disbursement of donor funds. Delays to progress were clear (e.g. the NDC was four months late in starting, and key military and security reforms had not been carried out), and the meeting covered broad ground in development and economic areas, as well as trying to focus on a complex National Dialogue Conference (which sought to address a range of issues fundamental to the future of Yemen).

Friends of Yemen September 2013

By the September 2013 meeting, the scale of political divisions had become apparent, and the National Dialogue Conference was already by then a number of weeks late in concluding. Donor countries still sought progress in capacity development in Yemen to aid the disbursement of pledges (the World Bank in September reported that 88% of pledges had been allocated, 50% approved in signed commitments, but only 28% disbursed). What perhaps was becoming clear was that Yemen is entering a further phase in political transition to which Friends of Yemen would need to adapt.

Conclusion

Friends of Yemen has been effective at bringing Yemen together with those international partners with the most interest in achieving its stability. The focus of Friends of Yemen meetings has shifted as realities in Yemen have changed, and the coordination may need to adapt yet again to new political, economic and security realities. While there have been periods when Friends of Yemen has not been able sufficiently to catalyse progress on transition, it has an established position on the international ministerial calendar, so that at critical points it has provided a focus for international action alongside other international coordination mechanisms, such as the UNSC and World Bank consultation group process.

December 2013