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“Broken People Can’t Heal a Nation”

The Role of Arts in
Peacebuilding in Yemen

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Table of Contents

List of Acronyms	03
Executive Summary	04
1 Introduction	05
2 “Something Beautiful”: The Intersection of Arts and Peacebuilding	08
3 “Power and Authenticity”: A Tradition of Using Arts in Peace, War, Nation-building and Revolution in Yemen	10
4 “We Have Become Afraid”: The Impact of the War on Creative Arts in Yemen	19
5 “This Is How I Fight in This War”: Yemeni Artists Creating Narratives of Peace	29
6 “We Believe in the Power of Art”: Communities Using Creative Arts as Tools for Peacebuilding	49
7 “Broken People Can’t Heal a Nation”: Conclusion and Recommendations	64
Literature Cited and Further Readings	75
About the Authors	85
About the Project	86
About the Partners	86

List of Acronyms

AoSYM	Assembly of Single Young Men
APF	Artist Protection Fund (Institute of International Education)
AQAP	al-Qa'ida in the Arabian Peninsula
CAP	Civil Alliance of Peace
CSO	civil society organization
GIZ	Deutsche Gesellschaft für Internationale Zusammenarbeit (GIZ) GmbH
IDP	internally displaced people
INGO	international non-governmental organization
IRG	internationally recognized government
NGO	non-governmental organization
UNESCO	United Nation Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organization
YLDF	Youth Leadership Development Foundation
YWBOD	Youth Without Borders Organization for Development

Executive Summary

In Yemen, the creative arts have always played a large and central role in the political, social and cultural life in the country, not only during times of peace but also in times of war. Despite a history of weak state support for the cultural scene, poetry, dance, music, literature, theater and visual art have flourished at different times and in different ways across the country.

However, with the eruption of armed conflict in 2014/15, there have been significant challenges for artists, with an ever-shrinking amount of space to work and share art. The political, social and geographic divisions exacerbated by the war are reflected in artworks, revealing divisions among artists and in the Yemeni arts scene, and conflict actors are also making use of the arts to promote violence and sow further division. But even against this backdrop, new talents, new energies and new spaces have emerged as Yemeni artists contribute to narratives of peace and peacebuilding practices and continue to display extraordinary resilience in the face of war and the coronavirus pandemic.

Drawing on interviews with Yemeni artists both in and outside of Yemen as well as civil society organizations and art specialists, this Report looks at how the arts and peacebuilding have historically intersected in the country, and how traditional arts are alive today and are being used to promote peace and war. The study demonstrates the variety of ways in which the arts promote and educate on the values of peace, equality and cultural diversity while also being a tool for documenting life during war, telling untold stories and preserving collective memory. It also highlights the use of art for advocating against violence and human rights violations, for supporting the psychosocial wellbeing of traumatized people, and for rebuilding relationships in communities torn apart by the war.

The paper concludes that there are a number of different ways in which the arts can make a direct and indirect contribution to peacebuilding in Yemen, and that creative arts can also help broaden out peacebuilding efforts, away from the more traditional focus on institution building, military and political arrangements and top-down negotiation frameworks. Dealing with violent conflict is essentially dealing with brokenness – brokenness of society, community and individuals – and art and cultural activities provide an essential space for society to begin to mend itself.

1 Introduction

“Art is not a panacea for every ailment, but it is not irrelevant in times of conflict either. In fact, it’s extremely important, not only because art can document violations. It can break down taboos, but it can also provide relief and an escape. It can inspire and instill hope by making the ugly beautiful.”

Atiaf al-Wazir (16.10.2019)

For the past six years, Yemen has been experiencing a brutal and devastating conflict. The war has seen unprecedented casualties and human rights abuses, forced over 3.5 million people to flee their homes, and exacerbated the country’s underlying hunger crisis. Essential infrastructure such as schools, hospitals, roads and factories have been destroyed, alongside a vast swathe of Yemen’s architecture and cultural heritage. Social divisions between and within communities are growing and space for civil society, creative arts and freedom of expression has markedly shrunk, particularly in the northern areas under the control of Ansar Allah. International attempts to broker peace between the major conflict actors have failed time and again, and ways out of the conflict seem scarce.

However, despite these seemingly insurmountable challenges, writers, poets, painters, illustrators, photographers, musicians, comedians, filmmakers and theater groups across Yemen continue to find avenues to produce and share their work. For many artists, continuing their work is not just about pursuing their passions, but also their way of responding to the war. “I know that art won’t feed the poor,” says street artist Murad Subay, “but it can at least deliver a message and express the pain that people feel.”¹ Similarly, local civil society organizations (CSOs) continue to pursue grassroots approaches to building peace, often using arts and crafts as a way to engage with communities. “The less we see guns and the more we see brushes, pens and cameras, that is when true change will come,” says filmmaker Maryam al-Dhubhani, speaking at the launch of the 2020 Karama Yemen Human Rights Film Festival (Karama 17.12.2020).

This Report examines the current and potential role of art and culture in laying part of the groundwork for peace in Yemen, through promoting coexistence and hope, advocating for an end to violence and injustices, preserving collective memory, building trust between communities, and creating new narratives for the future of Yemen. It looks at ways in which some Yemeni artists are engaging with issues of peace and conflict in peacebuilding through their

¹ Murad Subay, speaking to filmmaker ‘Abd al-Rahman Husayn in May 2016: <https://www.youtube.com/watch?reload=9&v=Mie34EC25AU> (accessed 01.02.2021).

work, and some of the challenges they are facing. It also explores how peacebuilding and community organizations are using creative arts as practical tools in their work, particularly in their engagement with communities, who are increasingly socially and politically divided, and with vulnerable groups experiencing trauma as a result of the war. Finally, we highlight a number of ways in which arts and peacebuilding could be supported by both national and international stakeholders.

Methodology

The impetus for this paper arose from a previous piece of work by the authors on the role of youth in peacebuilding in Yemen, published by CARPO and the Youth Without Borders Organization for Development (YWBOD) (al-Kholidy, al-Jeddawy & Nevens 2020). During the conversations we had for this earlier project, a large number of young people told us about the growing role of creative arts in building peace and providing peace education in their communities, and their desire for greater support and investment in spaces for arts and cultural activities. This report seeks to explore this further, looking in greater detail at both the relationship between creative arts and peacebuilding in Yemen, and the way that creative arts are being used in communities to lay the groundwork for peace. While the role of art and culture in post-conflict reconstruction, peacebuilding and reconciliation has been well documented globally (Naidu-Silverman 2015), much less exists on this topic for the Yemen conflict (al-Wazir 2019).

For the purposes of this paper, we define ‘creative arts’ broadly to include visual arts (painting, graffiti, illustration, photography, filmmaking etc.), literary arts (poetry, novels, short stories etc.) and performance arts (dance, theater, music, puppetry etc.). We take a similarly broad view of the concept of peacebuilding, which we see as a combination of various efforts toward preventing, reducing and transforming violent conflict at all levels of society, with building relationships between individuals and groups at the heart of these efforts (see also Shank & Schirch 2008).

The Report is based on eight in-depth conversations with Yemeni artists and art collectives, including Ali al-Sonidar², a photographer from Sana’a; Haifa Subay, a graffiti artist and fine artist based in Aden; Khalid Hamdan, an actor based in Aden; Saba Jallas, a visual artist from Sana’a; Firas Mahdi and Khalid Waleed, musicians from Aden; Rayan al-Shaybani, a poet and novelist originally from

² Arabic names and terms are transcribed according to a standardized, simplified version of academic transcription that CARPO uses for all of its publications, except for the names of artists who have requested that the spelling they generally use be retained.

Ta'iz and now based in Sana'a; Stand-Up Comedy, a collective in Ta'iz organized by the Wasl Youth Initiative; and representatives from the visual arts collective Yemen Used To Be, who are spread out across Yemen and globally.

We also interviewed a small number of Yemeni artists outside of Yemen, including writer Atiaf al-Wazir, photographer Thana Faroq, musician Saber Bamatraf and painter Shatha Altowai,³ as well as a number of academic specialists on the creative arts in Yemen, both Yemeni and non-Yemeni. In order to further explore the use of art as a peacebuilding tool, we also spoke with peacebuilders and representatives from Yemeni civil society organizations,⁴ coalitions and movements, who use creative arts in their work. These include representatives from Basement Foundation, Meemz, the Yemeni House of Music and Arts [bayt al-yamani li-l-musiqqa wa-l-funun], the Yemeni Writers Union [ittihad al-kuttab al-yamaniyyin], *Al-Madaniya Magazine*, Comra for Films, Assembly of Single Young Men [majlis al-'uzabi] and Marib Girls [mu'assasa fatayat Marib]. We also held a small focus group discussion with young people engaged with the arts in Ta'iz. The focus group discussion was held in person, while most of the interviews were conducted via phone or video call due to travel restrictions within Yemen. Our paper is also supported by a review of literature including papers on art, culture, transitional justice and peacebuilding in both Yemen and other conflict-affected contexts.⁵

3 Saber and Shatha are both Artist Protection Fund (APF) Fellows in residence at The Institute for Advanced Studies in the Humanities at the University of Edinburgh.

4 It should be noted that we do reference activities and successes of arts-based projects run by YWBOD, where author Maged al-Kholidy is chairperson. A number of external people have reviewed the paper to ensure we are providing a balance of examples.

5 Acknowledgements: The authors would like to thank Marie-Christine Heinze (CARPO) and Mareike Transfeld (YPC) for their editorial support, and Tammam al-Shaybani and Jatinder Padda for their research assistance. We would also like to extend our heartfelt thanks to all the artists, experts and peacebuilders who we interviewed for the paper. We remain incredibly inspired by all that you do. We would also like to dedicate this paper to one of Yemen's greatest actors and artists, Ra'id Taha, whose sudden parting shocked artists and non-artists alike in Aden and all over Yemen. Ra'id always stood by theater for its ability to bring joy and draw smiles on the faces of Yemenis, and he was one of the artists with whom we were planning to speak for this paper. Sadly, he passed before we were able to do so. Ra'id was, and his work will always be, among the finest examples of art and an invaluable contribution to peace in Yemen.

2 “Something Beautiful”: The Intersection of Arts and Peacebuilding

“In a country where there is no art, theater, or cinema, there will be violence. When the new generation can practice their passion and hobbies, it will become impossible for them to carry weapons, because instead there is something beautiful that occupies their time.”

Saba Jallas, visual artist from Sana’a

There are a multitude of ways in which the arts, culture, peace and conflict can be seen to overlap and intersect. Like Saba, many people see the existence of a vibrant cultural sector as one cornerstone of a just and peaceful society. For example, the UNESCO 1980 Recommendation concerning the Status of the Artist calls on Member States to “confirm that artistic activities have a part to play in the nations’ global development effort to build a juster and more humane society and to live together in circumstances of peace and spiritual enrichment.” Muhammad ‘Abd al-Wahhab al-Shaybani, a member of the Yemeni Writer’s Union, agrees: “When [a culture of] arts is developed, a bet can be won for sustainable peace in this torn country.”

Not only are artistic freedoms and access to culture integral to the rights of the individual, but also they can contribute to the psychological wellbeing of these individuals as well as their communities. Creative arts can bring hope, peace and joy to conflict-stricken communities and provide temporary and longer-term outlets from the day-to-day realities of conflict. The arts have long been known to be a suitable vehicle for healing trauma (Tellidis 2020: 4) and are often used to help individuals and communities to understand and process violence.

Creative arts that celebrate joy and social progress are not usually lost during violent conflict, despite the pressures that abound. Seidl-Fox and Sridhar (2014) write about how, even when basic needs have not been met, art has thrived in conflict zones, and is often vibrant, joyous and loud. “Many artists believe that prioritizing art as a form of self-expression amidst conflict is necessary for the survival of society,” writes Atiaf al-Wazir (2019: 3), “art can help people make sense of the world. Artists have a license to explore and ask questions people don’t normally ask.”

Ereshnee Naidu-Silverman, who works as a global justice practitioner in conflict-affected countries such as Sri Lanka, South Africa and Sierra Leone, argues that artists are often the voices of some of the most marginalized groups within societies who both “mirror the social, cultural and political realities of their time and propose new and alternate imaginings for the future”

(Naidu-Silverman 2015). Stories and characters, whether visual or narrative, can create spaces to explore new possibilities, imagine different cultures of peace, justice and equality and ultimately help towards constructing a new reality. Art can create the conditions necessary for inclusive and pluralist narratives to emerge and create space for new and different choices about conflict (Premaratna & Bleiker 2010; Jeffrey 2017). Describing a play called *Wajhan li-'Umla* [Two Sides to a Coin] performed at the Sana'a Cultural Center in December 2011 at the height of Yemen's revolution, Katherine Hennessey (2015: 13) writes about how the play insists that "the ability to envision an alternative reality is the crucial first step towards bringing it to fruition."

A great deal of literature exists evidencing the ways in which culture and the arts can contribute directly to building peace as "tool[s] that can communicate and transform the way people think and act" (Shank & Schirch 2008; see also Seidl-Fox & Sridhar 2014). If peacebuilding is understood to be fundamentally about social change, and the transformation of relationships in order to achieve this change, then there are many ways in which the creative arts emerge as effective and strategic tools and mechanisms to contribute to these changes. As explored further through examples from Yemen in sections 5 and 6, creative arts can be used to educate and raise awareness among communities and decision-makers; mobilize and advocate for change; actively promote values of diversity, inclusion, coexistence and social cohesion; and help reconcile groups in conflict by helping to transform people's perceptions of themselves and others (see Pruitt 2011; UNESCO 2019a; Naidu-Silverman 2015). Even formal peace processes have been shown to benefit from using art as a tool: in the Philippines for example, the Buwaya Kalingga people established peace pacts that were cemented through feasts which included peace pact-specific songs (Bergh & Sloboda 2010: 5). Similarly, in Uganda, the use of song to suggest that former combatants should not be stigmatized was credited with contributing to the end of decades of conflict (Bailey 2019: 9).

On a day-to-day basis, creative arts and crafts can also provide activities and even livelihoods away from the conflict and the war economy. Many projects around the world use theater, music groups and orchestras, as well as street art, as a way of providing positive activities for young people who might otherwise be drawn towards violence and conflict. In Venezuela and Colombia, youth orchestras and choirs are often put together for low-income and vulnerable youth to help build their skills and resilience, as well as provide them with safe spaces away from the conflict (see Bailey 2019 and Shank & Schirch 2008). In Yemen, UNESCO has partnered with the European Union's Cash for Work program to provide youth in Yemen with economic and cultural alternatives to participating in the ongoing conflict.

Art is not, however, inherently 'peaceful'. There are plentiful examples throughout history, in Yemen and globally, where the arts are used as propaganda tools to promote violence and division. Bergh and Sloboda (2010) give examples from around the world where music has been used to mobilize resources for conflict actors, bolster and perpetuate myths of the uniqueness and superiority of particular groups or dehumanize others, disseminate violent ideologies, marshal troops into battle and even as an instrument of torture. They do however note that those who use the arts to promote a violent agenda do not necessarily have fixed positions: "a musician that sings for conflict today may sing for peace tomorrow" (ibid.: 5).

3 "Power and Authenticity": A Tradition of Using Arts in Peace, War, Nation-building and Revolution in Yemen

In Yemen, creative arts such as poetry, music and dance have long played a role in social and political life, acting at some times as catalysts for social change or political violence, and at other times as anchors for social cohesion and coexistence. "Writing and poetry have a very special relationship to politics and to the identity of the people in Yemen, how they identify themselves and understand the world," says 'Abd al-Salam al-Rubaidi, editor at *Al-Madaniya Magazine* and Yemeni literature specialist.

3.1 Poetry, Song and Dance at the Heart of Yemeni Political Life

Poetry, song and dance in particular have played a huge role in the everyday lives of Yemenis, especially in rural and tribal areas of the country. Oral poetry is "at the heart of public life," according to Steven Caton (2012) and is still very much part of village culture, performed at women's get togethers, weddings, poetry competitions, and during mourning. Poetry and dance⁶ are used as forms of self-expression, but also have a role to play in both reflecting and actively constructing community and tribal identities.⁷ Poems "are active agents...in history," says Caton (1990: 250).

⁶ According to Furlow (2017), the three main categories of verse in Yemen are the *qasida*, *zamil*, and *balah*, all of which take different forms and address separate themes. The *qasida* is the only genre that is consistently recorded through writing. *Zamil* and *balah* poetry are most often spontaneous and performed orally in a ritualistic manner.

⁷ See, for example: Adra 1998 and 1993; Caton 2012 and 1990; Lambert 2018; Stohrer 2020.

Traditionally, many tribes have also used poetry to help prevent or resolve conflict, wherein disputing sides will mediate their views through poetic performances (see also section 6.4). *Zawamil* (sg. *zamil*) is the style preferred during rituals of conflict mediation, Flagg Miller argues (Miller 2008), due to its moral status and rhetorical power, though it is notable that for similar reasons, *zawamil* are also commonly used to mobilize for war. Caton (2012) describes a conflict that broke out in the village where he was living, over the abduction of two tribal women. He writes that the dispute was settled “through a lengthy mediation process, from which resulted a treasure trove of poetry.” Before experiencing this event, he argues, he had “not really understood how deeply poetry is implicated in tribal political life.” “At its best, poetry is considered by Yemenis to be curative,” says Flagg Miller (2008: 85). “Many responded to my questions about the value of poetry in daily life by explaining that ‘poetry redresses problems’ and others compared poets to medical doctors who could ‘reveal the truth.’”

In the northern highlands *bar’a*⁸, performed by Yemeni men with a traditional dagger called *janbiya*, can also play a similar function and are not only performed in celebration at weddings and at Eid festivities, but are also a central element of tribal life. Experts think that *bar’a* can enhance teamwork and harmony in the tribe, ease tensions, provide a safe space for the negotiation of social affairs, integrate strangers as guests and bring together men who may have not communicated with each other for a long time (see Stohrer 2020 and al-Ahmadi 28.10.2017). Stohrer (2020: 3) describes *bar’a* as “one of the most important means of non-verbal communication between social groups in Yemen” that “enables tribesmen to deal with unsafe and potentially conflict-bearing situations in a stabilizing manner.” The performance of *bar’a* is, thus, associated with its use for enhancing social ties and harmony, contributing to conflict prevention and peacebuilding within and among tribes and local communities.

Historically, poets have secured the appreciation and respect of Yemeni leaders at all levels, and as a result poetry has played a big role in influencing political decisions and popular political thought beyond the tribes. “It is clear that poetry is a powerful political tool in this society, where power is exercised through persuasion, rather than coercion,” argues Najwa Adra (1998). In the early decades of the last century, Yemeni poets such as Muhammad

⁸ Stohrer (2020: 4) says that *bar’a* is a genre of performance that would be classified as dance in Western academic terms; but in indigenous terms it constitutes a separate category of non-verbal movement-based performance, distinct from *raqs* (dance).

Mahmud al-Zubayri took this a step further, introducing poetry as a revolutionary power, particularly from the 1940s until 1962. 'Abd al-Aziz al-Maqalih, one of the most recognized poets in Yemen's modern history, says about the poetry of al-Zubayri and his fellow poets from the North: "Political poetry became one of the most widespread and accepted poetry genres, as it discussed sensitive issues of common interest to the public." In the South, in the 1940s, the poet Lutf Ja'far Aman "revolutionize[d] the role of arts"; while the Tihama, the coastal region of western Yemen, also witnessed an active role played by poets like 'Ali 'Abd al-'Aziz Nasir, whose poems were described as "revolutionary", "deep", and "novel" (al-Thawrah 26.09.2016).

The first songs supporting the 26 September (1962) Yemeni revolution⁹ were sung by Egyptian singers like Fayda Kamil, 'Abd al-Halim Hafiz and Fu'ad Ghazi¹⁰ but these were soon joined by those of Yemeni singers, who enthusiastically wrote and performed songs with revolutionary content and style. Well-known examples of these singers include 'Ali bin 'Ali al-Anisi, who composed and sang 'Under the Flag of My Revolution, I Announced My Republic'. This was at first used as an informal national anthem before, in 1974, being adopted by presidential decree as the official national anthem of North Yemen, where it was used until unification in 1990. Al-Anisi also performed 'Our Army, Our Army, Our Heroic Army', which praised the army for liberating the country from the imamate. Other examples of revolutionary songs in North Yemen include 'We are the People' by Ahmad al-Sunaydar and 'Live Long, Liberating September' by Ayub Tarish, while in South Yemen, Muhammad Murshid Naji, Iskander Thabit, Muhammad Sa'ad 'Abdallah and others all performed in support of the revolution against the British occupation.

Lots of plays were also written and performed following the two revolutions, most of which conveyed simple, heroic and repetitive narratives of toppling the imamate and the British, with the victors often depicted as "selflessly dedicated to liberating their nation from the shackles of an evil and tyrannical regime" (Hennessey 2012). A few plays also provided a little more nuance and depth, including *Shahid al-Watan* [The Nation's Martyr] in Aden, 1968, which focused on torture and truth; a 1969 Yemeni adaptation of the Berthold Brecht play *Die Ausnahme und die Regel* [The Exception and the Rule], which criticized class division; and *Khadija*, 1970, performed in Abyan, which looked at women's rights and freedoms (ibid.). However, for the most part these plays

⁹ The 1962 revolution led to the overthrow of the Imamate that had ruled northern Yemen for the past millennium, ultimately setting the stage for the creation of the modern Republic of Yemen.

¹⁰ The Egyptian art scene in the 1950s and 60s was more developed than it was in Yemen, and Egyptian artists made a great number of songs supporting their own revolution in Egypt. This was of great influence and inspiration for Yemeni artists to use art, particularly songs, for revolutionary purposes (Yahia 2020).

belied the rich social, economic and political changes taking place, instead serving the governments, who in turn supported theater troupes from the 1970s through to the 1990s – but only as long as their performances celebrated the regimes (Hennessey 2015).

Following unification in 1990¹¹ the new government of the Republic of Yemen made a great deal of use of traditional and tribal art forms as part of its nation-building efforts, putting on national festivals to present an image of national unity, peace and patriotism, drawing on dance, music and poetry from tribal and folk traditions around the country. However, as Stohrer (2007) notes, the folk customs were not celebrated in themselves but were merged into a ‘national style’: “an artificial, imagined space that simultaneously symbolizes historical roots, modernization, democratization and unification.” *Bar’a* in particular was appropriated to represent Yemeni nationalism: officials performed *bar’a* at formal functions; National Day celebrations included performances of *bar’a* from all over Yemen; and television channels brought in expert tribal dancers to perform *bar’a* (Adra 1998). This use of arts as propaganda for the new Yemeni state continued, and the tenth anniversary of unification saw folkloric dances performed across urban squares in Sana’a, in front of national symbols such as the Monument of the Unknown Soldier and Bab al-Yemen, in an attempt to build on this “homogenized image of the present and past in Yemen” (Stohrer 2007).

More recently, in the past decade or so, al-Qa’ida in the Arabian Peninsula (AQAP) has been making use of traditional forms of Yemeni poetry to mobilize supporters, tapping into this tradition of poetry as a tool for social and political capital (Kendall 2015: 248). In areas of Yemen where electricity and the internet are still scarce and illiteracy levels are high, the tradition of oral poetry can have further reach, particularly when it is turned into chants, recitations and anthems (*nashid*, pl. *nasha’id*) that are easily memorized and passed on. Elisabeth Kendall, who studies Jihadi poetry closely in Yemen and other contexts, says AQAP use poetry to spark passion in their followers, inspire people to kill, mourn lost comrades, and encourage new recruits by furnishing them with a sense of belonging and identity (Kendall 2018). She argues that “the power of poetry to move Arab listeners and readers emotionally, to infiltrate the psyche and to create an aura of tradition, authenticity and legitimacy around the ideologies it enshrines make it a perfect weapon for militant jihadist causes” (Kendall 2015: 247).

¹¹ Interestingly, the first unified Yemeni institution of any kind was the League of Yemeni Writers, which was established in 1971 (Abdu 23.08.2018).

3.2 Fluctuating State Support for the Arts

Despite Yemen's governments regularly using traditional arts as a propaganda tool, formal support to artists from the Yemeni state has been limited. Prior to unification, there was somewhat greater support and space for creative arts in the South than the North, and in general quite different arts scenes developed within the two states, particularly with respect to the visual arts (Alviso-Marino 2014). In the South, Aden's painting clubs of the 1930s and 1940s participated – through organizing exhibitions, among other things – in the beginnings of a visual arts movement. The establishment of Aden's Jameel Ghanem Institute in the late 1970s marked a fairly major development for the arts in the South, and in the 1980s Aden's artistic movement grew and expanded, with private galleries and professional artists' associations and syndicates also being established (ibid.). A number of artists also received fine art scholarships from the Soviet Union as part of a Cold War cultural program.¹² The Adeni artists we spoke with all noted the setbacks and challenges for the arts after unification. For example, for singer and music trainer Firas Mahdi, the closure of music classes in Aden's schools as well as the closure of the Jameel Ghanem Institute for Fine Arts was "unfortunate and damaging." Shaima bin Othman, co-founder of both Takween Culture Club and Meemz, says the same of Hadhramawt: "right after unification, classes in schools were shut down – even painting classes." "Before unification there was a big art movement, especially in the South," says Saber Bamatraf, a musician, "we had theaters and a strong music scene, which influenced other parts of the Arabian Peninsula. It was very progressive. But after unification the theaters closed and art classes were suspended."

Despite some attempts by the post-unification government to support the arts and arts education, these have been few and far between and the sector remains weak. It wasn't until 1998 that the Faculty of Fine Arts at the University of al-Hudayda, Yemen's first public university, offered a visual arts degree. A decade later, a department for art education was established under the Faculty for Girls, Hadhramawt University, then departments for fine arts were established in the arts faculties of Aden University in 2013 and in Ta'iz University in 2014. Meanwhile, there were no arts faculties or departments in Sana'a University. This situation, however, did not mean there was a complete lack of state support for the arts and artists. 1999 marked the launch of the annual Award of Yemen's President. Of the eleven award categories, five were allocated to singing, poetry, novel writing, theater plays and painting. And between

¹² Alviso-Marino has uncovered how, during the 1970s and 1980s, a scholarship program took between 50 and 70 Yemeni painters, sculptors and poster artists to the Soviet Union to study fine arts as part of a Cold War cultural program. Many spent years in Moscow for their master's degrees, before returning to the Gulf (Cornwell 17.07.2019).

2002 and 2007, the Ministry of Culture established art centers in different governorates, where permanent exhibitions and training workshops were organized, and where artworks could be bought (Alviso-Marino 2014). However, such examples of state support to a certain extent mask a more general lack of structural state support, as well as a complete absence of the arts within the public school curriculum, particularly since 1994, when the Islah Party¹³ controlled the Ministry of Education.

The decline of support for the arts and the multiple constraints put before artists have been largely blamed on the rise of Islah Party-linked Islamists and their political and social influence in the 1990s and 2000s. People in Aden believe it was Islah's religious attitude that was behind the closure of the Jameel Ghanem Institute and the removal of music classes from the curriculum. Islah's political and social influence also exacerbated problems faced by women who wanted to participate and engage in the arts, as Islah used the pretext of social and/or religious norms to reject women's performances, including those of women from elsewhere in the Middle East. Islah's presence also affected private sector investment in the arts, as businesspeople who attempted to organize musical events were often challenged by powerful figures in the party.

As a result of this lack of support for the arts and for art education, particularly during the Salih years, many artists and experts describe how this left the Yemeni public with limited exposure to and understanding of the creative arts, including their own art history. Waleed al-Ward from Yemen Used To Be talked to us about how "we [as Yemenis] literally know nothing about culture; during our twelve years of schooling there was nothing in terms of the arts." This is especially the case for younger Yemenis who received the majority of their education after 1994. The general public's lack of understanding – and interest – in the arts is particularly true for contemporary forms of art. Abstract artist Shatha Altowai and her musician husband Saber Bamatraf told us how they have been constantly queried over their choice to produce non-figurative paintings and instrumental music with no vocals.¹⁴ "Some artists feel scared of people's comments whenever they want to draw something strange or weird, they're afraid they'll be judged," Shatha says. "I'm not afraid of anything. I just want to do whatever I love so that's why I just draw." Breaking away from traditional styles seems to be particularly difficult for women artists, who often receive a great deal of backlash for perceived transgressions.

13 The Yemeni Congregation for Reform, frequently called al-Islah or the Islah Party, is a Yemeni political party founded in 1990. In its constitution, it defines itself as "a popular political organization that seeks reform of all aspects of life on the basis of Islamic principles and teachings." It is closely associated with the Muslim Brotherhood in Yemen, but also includes representatives from the tribes and the business sector.

14 Watch one of Saber's original compositions 'Dear Her' on YouTube here: <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=wbS0dGgVpOU> (accessed 08.03.2021).



Shatha Altowai: Harmonic Coexistence, 2019

However, even with such limited formal support, the arts in Yemen have grown and adapted, and artists have practiced whenever and wherever they could. Many artists and experts told us that the five to ten years prior to the ‘Arab Spring’ was a particularly bountiful period for the arts, in terms of private gallery spaces opening up and greater commercialization of visual art (see also Alviso-Marino 2014), as well as increased publication of Yemeni novels and the writing and production of contemporary Yemeni theater (al-Rubaidi 09.10.2017; Hennessey 2014c). This included in some cases the emergence of all-female artist groups, such as the group of painters Halat Lawniya from al-Hudayda. “Halat Lawniya used the fact that they were all women in order to travel around Yemen and overcome the usual difficulties related to the segregation of spaces,” Anahi Alviso-Marino told us, “and this also allowed them to access the artistic circles in the capital.” The years leading up to 2011

also witnessed a proliferation of international funding for Yemeni arts, particularly theater, says Hennessey (2014c), and Yemeni plays became “increasingly pointed in their condemnation of the very problems that would drive the populace to street protests during the Arab uprisings,” acting as an incubator for much of the activism that emerged in 2011. During this time “there was great cultural and artistic activity,” filmmaker Yusra Ishaq told us, “and the authorities paid it a certain degree of attention. I was personally one of the beneficiaries of that period as a person working in the field of art.”

3.3 A 2011 Revolution of Art and Activism

In 2011, Yemen’s peaceful youth revolution opened up new spaces for both arts and activism, and “the real heyday of the arts started” (Haifa Subay, painter and street artist). Theatrical performances, rap, reggae and rock music, satirical comedy, street art, and even the revival of traditional tribal poetry played a huge role in the protests and the revolutionary camps that emerged across the country’s major cities. In Sana’a, Ta’iz, al-Hudayda, Ibb, Aden and other locations, tents emerged where people ran book clubs and literacy classes, held photography exhibitions and music performances, and provided spaces for artists of all stripes to experiment. Poets moved between tents, reciting politically charged verses. Visual artists also took to the streets, blanketing the walls with colorful graffiti: free writing, mural painting and stenciling slogans and images of the revolution.¹⁵ Revolutionaries chanted and sang both old and new compositions, drawing connections between the the 1962 September revolution, the independence of the South in 1967, and the current 2011 ‘hashtag’ revolution (Lambert 2018: 22). Songs by Ayub Tarish, an iconic Yemeni singer and poet who wrote the national anthem of the Republic of Yemen (see above), were recalibrated with 2011 revolutionary sentiment and emotion, with lyrics such as “your glory will be prolonged, in a new beginning woven by the pen” (al-Bakry 11.04.2018). Steven Caton said he was stunned to hear poetry he had studied 30 years previous being chanted in the protest marches: “Tribal poetry, far from being squashed politically, has turned out to be perhaps the voice of the Yemeni revolution” (Caton 2012).

Much of the art during this time was about mobilizing revolutionaries, expressing collective dissent and frustration, bringing people together and documenting the activities happening in the squares. However, in many ways the various arts forms were also a vehicle for exploring and pushing new forms of more inclusive, participatory ways of working, and collectively exploring a

¹⁵ Prior to the revolution, graffiti in public spaces had been limited primarily to religious messages or political party symbols (see Alviso-Marino 2017).

vision for a new Yemen. In 2012, one of Yemen's now most prominent street artists, Murad Subay, was joined by huge numbers of friends, families, children and even soldiers in a campaign called 'Color the Walls of Your Street', where everyone picked up a brush to cover up and decorate bullet holes created during the revolution, and express their own feelings on the canvas of Sana'a city's walls. Anahi Alviso-Marino writes about how Subay's street art transformed the way Yemenis viewed and interacted with public art and changed public space in Sana'a, "turning the walls into memorial sites of struggle and public paintings into political awareness devices, making them, at times, reflect and refract collective action" (Alviso-Marino 2014: 2).

Similarly, in her articles on how Yemeni theater 'staged the revolution' Katherine Hennessey (2012, 2015) shows how in both the lead-up to the revolution and its aftermath, Yemeni theater displayed an intense desire for social change and started to envision what this might look like, while also tracking the political and emotional phases of the revolution – trepidation, enthusiasm, euphoria, frustration and disappointment.¹⁶ For example, plays such as *Wajhan li-'Umla* and *Da'mamistan* also envisioned a new type of state for Yemen, similar to that advocated by many of the young revolutionaries – one where citizens have equal rights and the "apparatus of the state functions fairly and efficiently" (Hennessey 2015: 16), even if, as in the case of *Da'mamistan*, the utopian setting of the play was another planet. "Anyone seriously interested in a brighter future for Yemen, and who wonders where to find Yemenis who have the energy and passion to bring such a future into being, need look no further than the theater," Hennessey writes (2014c).

In the revolution's immediate aftermath, new non-governmental arts spaces began to open up, including organizations like The Basement Foundation in Sana'a and the Aden Again Cultural Foundation, offering space for exhibitions, concerts, debates and discussions. TEDx and PechaKucha-style events started popping up in cities around Yemen, and coffee shops and cafes¹⁷ also started providing exhibition and performance spaces. "I even took my piano to Aroma Cafe in Sana'a," says musician Saber Bamatraf, "families would gather around with their kids, and it would be very crowded." Collectives of artists who had taken part in the revolution continued to build on their work and take their stories and messages to new audiences. In Ta'iz, a group of young artists called Colors of Life recreated the works of Hashim 'Ali (Yemen's 'father

¹⁶ Plays include: Wajdi al-Ahdal's *A Crime on Restaurant Street* (2009), Amr Jamal's *Matchstick* (2011), Alfred Faraj's *Two Sides to a Coin* (2011), and Muhammad al-Qa'ud and Amin Hazabir's *Da'mamistan* (2013).

¹⁷ After 2011, it was common for coffee shops to open in major capital cities like Sana'a, Aden and Ta'iz, and quickly became spaces for youth gatherings and common places for artists and activists to meet. For further insight into the cultural side of the youth 'non-movement' emerging at this time, see Transfeld (2018).

of modern painting') in the streets, opening up an important part of Yemen's art history to a new audience. In Sana'a, a group of revolutionary activists came together to form the storytelling collective #SupportYemen, to continue their struggle for social justice through participatory art forms. "In the period after the 2011 revolution there was support for photographers, journalists, writers, and cartoonists, clips were created, and there was free production for artists; the number of artists increased dramatically," explains Sami Shamsan, a photographer and media production manager in Yemen, "and every party working in this field was motivated by the pursuit of peace from their point of view." Even for artists who didn't participate in the revolution, it was felt that a safe space had opened up. "We felt like there is a new freedom, that we will have music schools and schools of art and so on, and that we will have the opportunity to share our art in public," says Saber.

4 "We Have Become Afraid": The Impact of the War on Creative Arts in Yemen

"Due to the conflict in the city, everything has changed. We have become afraid. I swear to Allah that we feel helpless and handcuffed."

Ali al-Sonidar, photographer from Sana'a

The contemporary arts scene in Yemen is historically under-resourced but has still managed to thrive at certain times in certain areas, particularly in the years surrounding the 2011 youth revolution. But the recent conflict has proved extremely damaging to these pockets of creative arts – not only destroying arts infrastructure but also creating an incredibly unsafe and divisive environment for artists to express themselves. Many artists are struggling to find safe spaces to work, struggling to find resources at a time when their families lack income, and struggling to avoid the growing political and social divisions. "The war has had a very negative impact on artistic expression in all the art forms – theater, fiction, poetry and visual arts," says Muhammad al-Shaybani from the Yemeni Writers Union, "this has caused a backwards move in artistic expression and therefore artistic products have become weak." Artists are also being used by conflict actors to help spread the narratives of war and draw people into the violence. Despite this, the creative arts are surviving, with new spaces emerging both online and offline for artists to collaborate and create new narratives of peace.

4.1 Onset of War: Reduced Resources, Restricted Space and Safety Concerns

Much of the excitement and flurry of revolutionary artistic activity elicited by the 2011 protests has taken a downturn since the end of the transitional period and the onset of the current conflict. Six years of active conflict across Yemen has wrought a huge amount of damage on the country's arts infrastructure and cultural heritage, and there continue to be huge risks for groups who come together to perform or collaborate. "The spaces where artists may share their artwork are shrinking, and this is because of the war," says photographer Ali al-Sonidar. "We can't make exhibitions as there are no spaces for cultural events," agrees graffiti artist Haifa Subay.

Museums, galleries and other buildings that had previously been used as performance venues and exhibitions spaces, such as the cultural centers in al-Hudaydah, Ta'iz and al-Mukalla' and the Ta'iz National Museum have been damaged by airstrikes and shelling, and in some cases looted and ransacked by militias.¹⁸ Private institutions such as the Tourism Club and al-Sa'id Foundation for Science and Culture in Ta'iz¹⁹ and the al-'Afif Cultural Foundation in Sana'a²⁰ have also been forced to close for long stretches due to their proximity to the armed conflict. Others that have remained open are under constant threat of closure, such as the Arab Institute and the Muhammad al-Yamani Gallery in Sana'a. Artists struggle to move to or between cities due to the risks associated with travel and checkpoints, and the conflict in many places has also made it too risky to meet in cafes or other public places as they may have done in the past. The war's impact on electricity supplies and fuel costs means that many spaces that remain ostensibly open actually struggle to run events. Electricity is a major issue, particularly when groups don't have generators, says Shaima bin Othman from the art collective Meemz, who describes a karaoke event they ran where the electricity cut off mid-way through. "People were sweating in the dark, using their cellphones for light. But they were still singing and laughing and clapping. They wanted to stay." The advent of COVID-19 in 2020 has added further restrictions to artists gathering, collaborating and sharing their work.

18 In his chapter 'Heritage in the crosshairs. Can Yemen's museums survive?', Steinbeiser (2021) describes how parties to the current conflict have exhibited remarkable indifference to the targeting of heritage and museums.

19 The al-Sa'id Foundation in Ta'iz has been closed since April 2015 as a result of the conflict in the city. The Ha'il Sa'id Group, a large business conglomerate active throughout the Middle East but originally from Yemen, is in the process of repair with plans to reopen during 2021.

20 Al-'Afif Cultural Foundation in Sana'a closed its doors until further notice in April 2015 as the war and airstrikes were raging in Sana'a.

Arts spaces are also threatened by various local authorities and militias placing restrictions on the kinds of activities that can take place. This is particularly true in Huthi-controlled areas of Yemen. Huthi leaders describe arts and music as “impure and corrupt form[s] of expressions not to be encouraged,” says analyst Laura Battaglia, and militias regularly storm events, including weddings, seizing instruments and art tools and placing artists and musicians under arrest (Battaglia 2019: 57). A number of artists referred to the closure of the Sana’a book fair at the beginning of the war as being symbolic of the Huthi’s desire to curtail cultural activities and the sharing of cultural experiences. “We saw a particular shift in 2017 following the death of ‘Ali ‘Abdallah Salih,” one interviewee told us, “the mindset [of the Huthis] turned against all personal freedoms, revealing their true image. We were hearing that if they check your phone and find music you will be arrested or the phone will be confiscated.”

Most of the people we spoke with in Sana’a talked about their fear of interrogation or arrest over their work, particularly work or projects that reference peace or coexistence, and shared their experiences of being intimidated by the authorities in their area. “I know a lot of friends who have great potential and have the tools and equipment but are too scared and intimidated to work with them,” one photographer told us. “Some of them had their cameras forcibly seized and confiscated – even though they do not belong to or have any affiliation to any party.” Haifa Subay, now based in Aden says “Getting permission was difficult in Sana’a, and I was stopped by authorities even when I had permission. The authorities there threatened to kill me, took away my tools, scratched my works and stopped the media from covering them.” She says in Aden she has slightly more freedom to produce her street art and explains that “The Open Day of Arts 2019 was the last thing I did in Sana’a. [It took] about one month to get permission, but the words ‘coexistence’ or ‘citizenship’ were seen as too sensitive.” One young woman working for an arts organization in Sana’a says “We cannot implement events that directly talk about peace, because it’s considered as calling for surrender.” Another artist says “for the Huthis, the word peace has become an accusation.”

Haifa’s brother, Murad Subay, describes being detained by armed men in the city of Ta’iz while he was painting on a school destroyed by airstrikes, and imprisoned in a barn that had been converted by militia groups into a jail (Levkowitz 15.12.2017). And even in Aden, which Haifa Subay and other artists described to us as more open to artistic expressions than other cities, some arts events have been stopped or threatened by military units. One Aden festival, for instance, was stopped for displaying “Northern traditions in the South,” because areas were created to showcase traditional dance and customs from the North of the country. Recently, during an art event at an Aden primary school, the flag of the Republic of Yemen was raised as part of one of

the activities. One day later, the school was threatened with closure by local authorities supportive of Southern secession. “Any project that talks about spreading peace, whether in the North or the South, is rejected. Peace is considered a red line and can’t be discussed,” says Sami Shamsan, a photographer and media production manager based in Sana’a.

These restrictions have had a particular impact on women artists. Prior to the war, the conservative social and gender norms in many communities meant it was already difficult for female artists to be accepted as artists, particularly if this involved performing in public. Many families would place restrictions on their daughters, preventing them from travelling for lessons or scholarships or engaging in public performances. “Young women have a lot of dreams, but the restrictions enforced by the community forbid them from actually participating,” says Shaima bin Othman. Women who are active artists told us how local social and cultural norms prevent them from practicing their art freely. “The social cultural frames [restrict] my thoughts and innovation,” says graffiti artist Haifa Subay. “For example, when making graffiti of a woman, she should be veiled, [and] other people should [also] be wearing clothes that cover all parts of the body.”

The emergence of even more conservative and more repressive authorities during the war has exacerbated these restrictions and made it even less safe for women artists in the public sphere. Many of the authorities are also using issues such as mixed gender attendance at events as pretexts to shut them down. “We encountered a huge campaign with people using religion against us, accusing us of being *kafir*,” says Shaima bin Othman, who works in Hadhramawt, “they were calling girls bad names [because we were providing space for thinking and discussion], speaking to their families, and threatening us with death. Our families were afraid that we might be attacked.” “There is nothing to protect us as female artists when we hold events,” agrees Shatha Altowai, who also told us about a Sana’a cultural office event where young girls who participated in a music class received threats as a result, and when they notified a local government official he took the side of the harassers. Even female Yemeni artists now based outside of Yemen receive criticism and harassment for participating in the arts. Musician Methal told *Al-Madaniya* that she still receives “messages from people telling me I should quit what I’m doing and it’s not a good example of what girls do in Yemen.”

The dangers of producing and sharing art has forced a number of Yemeni artists, both men and women, into exile, or at least to publish their works to international rather than Yemeni audiences. Writer Rayan al-Shaybani says that although this has given these artists safer spaces, it has also caused a shortage of artistic works in Yemen, particularly written works. “We also lost some of our staff to the obsession that seemed to control many around us:

the obsession to travel and leave the country,” says Shaima Gamal from the Basement Foundation in a 2020 article for the *Jemen-Report*, “The idea of continuity at such a tense and uncertain time was dubious, and the questions on our minds were, ‘Should we continue? Is there now anyone who will be interested in art and our events? Has such interest disappeared, and is art now only a luxury?’” The war has also seen existing painting collections being sold internationally through the internet and Instagram – for example when a private Yemeni art collector dies and their family or community members sell the art for income. As a result, Yemeni audiences are further deprived of access to both contemporary and historical Yemeni arts, and the opportunity to learn from each other and their predecessors. “War destroys physical infrastructure but potentially also erases discourses and prevents new artists from historicizing their practices in relation to a larger art history,” visual arts specialist Anahi Alviso-Marino explained to us.

Finally, for the artists and institutions who remain in Yemen, lack of funding and resources – as well as lack of recognition – is a key challenge, particularly in areas outside of the cities of Sana’a, Aden and Ta’iz. Since the outbreak of the war, the majority of international funding has been diverted towards emergency response. “Between 2009 and 2013 there were embassies, foreigners and organizations which used to make exhibitions and this was a source of income to Yemeni artists,” says Shaima Gamal from Basement Foundation “but now, because such embassies are no longer there and because international organizations have turned to work on humanitarian and development [issues], such sources of income [have] stopped.” Yemeni state institutions, both in the North and South, are also failing to provide much if any support to creative arts and related industries, and there’s little interest from the private sector or individuals in owning artistic works or supporting art projects. “In IRG areas there is the Heritage Fund, and the Culture Minister has funds,” says Shaima, “but their funds go only to those studying abroad. With only a few exceptions, there is no support for cultural centers or events.” “The state institutions no longer care about this field,” says Muhammad al-Shaybani from the Yemeni Writers Union. Prior to the war, artists had a tax exemption on purchasing tools, but this no longer exists, and many shops that were previously able to import drawing and painting tools and photography and sound equipment have ceased trading. As a result, many arts organizations and individual artists are struggling to access the resources and equipment they need for their projects and performances, let alone managing to make any income from their work. Photographer Thana Faruq says that this is particularly problematic for the impact of artwork, as most artists can only afford to do isolated or occasional pieces of work. “The idea of working on a long-term artistic project does not exist in Yemen,” she says, “it is difficult to communicate your idea with only one action because only an integrated process can convey the whole idea.”

4.2 Artists Promoting Violence and Division, or Driven to Despair

Unsurprisingly perhaps, the war in Yemen has also impacted the ways that people are using the arts as well as the stories and narratives that are emerging. Much of the art produced since the end of 2014 reflects – and in some cases deliberately perpetuates – the political, social and cultural divisions driving the conflict. “Arts are another side of the war,” says Muhammad al-Shaybani. “There is almost no neutral voice. The war has created divisions among the cultured people and the artists, who have become biased towards one conflict actor, [and these biases] are expressed through their individual projects.”

“Music has changed, there are new forms of songs calling for violence, either in the melody or the lyrics,” says Haifa Subay, a painter and street artist now based in Aden. For example, ‘Abud Khawaja, a well-known singer from the South, previously sang about tolerance and Southern unity, but then released a song in 2015 calling for resistance and violence against Ansar Allah, who had just invaded the South. Poets have recorded *zawamil*, and visual artists have made paintings and caricatures to show their allegiance to conflict actors and their causes. Even television drama series do not focus on peace and forgiveness, says Muhammad al-Shaybani, but instead send the message that war is a right, with some actors appearing on Yemeni television wearing military clothing to promote violence and urge youth to fight. “The worst thing about such attitudes is that these artists are public figures loved by a lot of people,” says Sana’a-based photographer Ali al-Sonidar. “These are artists who have gained the confidence [of the public] and can disseminate negative messages that might be received with open ears.”

Conflict actors are also using arts to energize and mobilize their followers and fighters and actively promote violence, particularly through the use of *zawamil* and *shila*²¹ poetry. In the North, the Huthis have specific war poets who publish through platforms like Telegram. In a video uploaded and translated by Jean Lambert (2018),²² for example, a very young Huthi recites:

*“Greetings to whoever crackles the gunpowder
and who launched a deluge of fire on his enemies.
The one who threw himself on Jizan and terrified Ibn Sa’ud
and behaved like a hero in the capital Sana’a while God is present above our
shoulders.
We don’t fear either America or its proxies.”*

²¹ *Shila* is a form of folk poetry in Yemen and the Gulf countries. It is sung, and recently music devices are used for singing this kind of poetry.

²² View full video uploaded by Lambert here: <https://vimeo.com/288501029> (accessed 10.02.2021).

Lutf al-Qahum, killed in 2016 while fighting in Marib, was the most prominent *zamil* singer of the Huthis to promote the war. One of his well-known *zawamil* from 2015 is titled: 'We don't care, even if you turn it into a world war'. This use of poetry is "a very powerful war propaganda tool, it's heartfelt," says Elisabeth Kendall, who also studies the use of poetry in Jihadist propaganda in Yemen – "the Huthis are really getting on with an ideological campaign as well as a military one."

Similar videos also exist on other 'sides' of the conflict, including many *zawamil* and songs calling for violent resistance against the Huthis and praising the resistance fighters.²³ Abu Zahir al-Faqih is a prominent example of an artist who supports the internationally recognized government and has produced a number of *zawamil* promoting the war against Huthis. In one piece, he praises President Hadi for kicking out the Huthis from the South. As early as 2014, a *zamil* of the tribes in Arhab called for war against the Huthis: 'The Arhab Men say welcome to the war'. Muhammad al-Shaybani from the Yemeni Writers Union explains that each conflict actor has his own tools – including artistic ones.

A number of artists, including those based abroad, mentioned how difficult it has become to produce work without being labelled as serving the agenda of a particular conflict actor, thus placing severe limits on an artist's ability to work and on their freedom of expression. "You can easily get misunderstood and seen to be wrong for something you did not mean to do," says photographer Thana Faruq. "Artists are currently trying to stay away as much as possible from everything that might cause them problems or shed light on them negatively," says filmmaker Yusra Ishaq, "in previous times artists were able to be more daring." "Many people are neither with the Huthis, nor with the Saudis. But if you're part of the resistance, you are always pigeonholed," says Badr bin Hirsi, a Yemeni-British filmmaker, in an interview with Brookings analyst Noha Aboueldahab (2019: 14–15). "Your decision is to be Yemeni, but people assume you are either pro-Huthi or pro-Saudi. If I want to make a film that is anti-Huthi, I will find financing. If I want to make a film that is anti-Saudi, I will find financing. If I want to make an independent film, I will not find financing. This war has opened a whole can of worms. No one trusts anyone." North-South divisions within the arts have increased as the conflict has continued, and many artists spoke to us about how this has restricted not only where they can perform, exhibit or travel to, and who their audience is, but also what traditions they can draw on. "If any artist in the South performs

²³ Examples include a resistance *zamil* against the Huthis by 'Abd al-Ghani Muqhat: <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=N0w6gQsAh3c&pbjreload=101>, and a video clip produced by Ta'iz resistance titled 'You are terrifying them' 2015, praising the resistance fighters against the Huthis https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=LMT3I9J6OQY&has_verified=1 (all accessed 01.02.2021).

an artistic work that includes people wearing Northern costumes, the South will reject it categorically because then they will be counted as Northern, and vice versa, and their artistic career will end there,” says Sami Shamsan.

For those artists attempting to stay independent from the conflict, there is a noticeable thread of despair emerging from their work. “[While] the conflict made some artists more revolutionary, in criticizing the conflict actors,” writer Rayan al-Shaybani told us, for others “the conflict has shattered an illusion and made artists face bad realities, different from the imaginary world.” New poetry, novels and creative non-fiction, particularly from young writers, are characterized by grief and pessimism, one Yemeni academic told us: “It is not normal to find someone write about love in poetry and literature under such circumstances.” Even stories that aren’t directly talking about the current Yemeni conflict, such as Wajdi al-Ahdal’s *The Land of Happy Plots*, depict a sense that “Yemen has become a miserable land” full of harsh realities that destroy the dignity and humanity of its people (al-Rubaidi 09.10.2017).

Katherine Hennessey said the same can be seen in many of the plays being written and performed since 2014 – from the end of the transition period onwards, their tone has become incredibly bleak. In the past the Yemeni stage tended toward utopian, wish-fulfilling conclusions in which the honest but downtrodden hero or heroine eventually triumphs, but from 2014 onwards plays predominantly portrayed “villains who escape justice and suffering protagonists powerless to change their fate” (Hennessey 2014b: 17). “It feels like once again the theater is reflecting the way that people are feeling, and it’s reflecting a certain sense of hopelessness and sadness, like there is no good way out of this for any of us,” she told us in interview, commenting in particular on a play called *Execution at Dawn*, performed at the al-Mukalla’ theater festival in March 2020 that is “just a cascade of lies and suspicions and misunderstandings that then result in nothingness.”

4.3 New Talents, New Energies and New Spaces Emerging

“The war broke out and I found myself in an emptiness because of the war, but I believe that emptiness was what made me return to painting again and with more passion.”

Saba Jallas, a visual artist from Sana’a

Despite these seemingly insurmountable difficulties, there continues to be a great range of artistic activities happening across Yemen, even in the areas where much of this needs to happen either privately or online. A number of the artists and collectives we spoke to actually talked about becoming more

determined, and more inspired, to pursue artistic activities in the face of all the challenges in Yemen – particularly women and young people. “Despite the pressure exerted on [Yemeni artists] by the authorities and the surrounding environment, they have begun to see art as a way out from what they have experienced in the recent period,” says Yusra Ishaq, filmmaker and co-founder of Comra Films. “Many young people have discovered buried talents they didn’t know about before.” “To be in Yemen, means to continue doing what you love despite all the difficulties. Even despite the war, the weak economy, the lack of electricity or stable internet connection, we still create art,” ‘Asim Ahmad, a photographer from Aden, told *The New Arab*, “The resilience with which we live here is reflected in how we produce art. We have no art schools, there are no galleries, there is no art scene in Yemen, and yet we learn everything ourselves and don’t depend on our government. We are determined to become artists anyway” (Caramazza 04.06.2020).

Although under a lot of additional strain, some physical exhibition and performance spaces remain functioning in Sana’a, Ta’iz, al-Mukalla’, Aden and even al-Hudayda and Lahij. Theater specialist Katherine Hennessey describes Yemeni theater as “staggering on despite socio-political difficulties,” and a full Festival of Yemeni Theater took place in al-Mukalla’ in March 2020, just before the first cases of COVID-19 were confirmed in Yemen. In Ta’iz and Aden, outdoor spaces and heritage sites such as al-Qahira castle have been turned into venues for cultural festivals, taking the place or supplementing the work of governmental cultural centers. Ta’iz has even been continuing to host an annual book fair,²⁴ and major festivals like Aden is More Beautiful²⁵ are still taking place in Aden. In Sana’a, some arts organizations have been given permission to continue if they don’t hold public performances, such as a new 40-player strong string orchestra for young women directed by ‘Abdallah ‘Ali al-Duba’i (Battaglia 2019). “We want to pick up the baton and grow Yemeni music until we can perform it in public,” one of ‘Abdallah’s students said, “So what if we can’t do it now? In the future we will: for now, it’s important to prepare the ground!” (Battaglia 2019: 59).

Many local civil society organizations have also stepped in to fill a gap left by the closure of the more traditional arts institutions, with organizations like Basement Foundation, Romooz, Meemz and others offering up new spaces for artists and the public. Shaima Gamal says that the Basement Foundation’s

²⁴ More about the Ta’iz book fair can be found here: <https://www.khuyut.com/blog/tehami-accent-poetry> (accessed 12.02.2021).

²⁵ The Aden is More Beautiful cultural festival received significant (and positive) local media attention; some broadcast coverage can be watched here: <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=ATBoTkajqMA&t=29s> (accessed 12.02.2021).

cultural events continue to attract large, 300+ audiences every month in Sana'a, and similarly Shaima bin Othman from Meemz in Hadhramawt describes an event in an old theater where there weren't enough chairs for all the people who turned up.

All the individual artists and groups we spoke to use online and virtual spaces to share their work and connect with audiences and other artists, something that has increased as performance and exhibition spaces have decreased due to the war. YouTube clips of young singers – especially videos of a young man and woman singing together – are going “Yemeni viral” says Atiaf al-Wazir, and many young men and women have also taken to YouTube to perform comedy. “The competition ‘Yemen YouTuber’ organized by Yemen and Kuwait Bank was encouraging such youth to be YouTubers and now some of them are very popular,” a performer from Ta'iz's Stand Up Comedy group told us.

Similarly, many art collectives and cultural spaces have either been formed in or have moved into virtual spaces. Online creative writing groups, projects and competitions are relatively prolific, including poetry and creative writing projects like ‘In the Land of Shattered Windows’ and ‘Kitabat’ by the Romooz Foundation, Final Appointments, a Facebook group run by Rayan al-Shaybani to coach and mentor new writers, Il Maqqah, a weekly book club, and Yemen Writes, a 20,000+ strong Facebook group, whose members hold courses and trainings and also publish their own novels. There are also new online publishing houses emerging like Naqsh, who focus on supporting young writers and hold an annual writing competition via Facebook, and online cultural magazines like *Al-Madaniya* and *Khuyut* run by Yemeni artists and critics, as well as visual arts collectives like Yemen Used To Be and online art galleries on Instagram. Some arts organizations exist in hybrid spaces, part online and part in physical spaces. For example, Arsheef Gallery runs primarily through Instagram, but also has a physical space in Sana'a Yemenis can book to visit. Comra Films and Yemen Will Triumph run filmmaking trainings and mentoring programs in person and follow up with the young filmmakers online.

These virtual spaces, while difficult to access from Yemen with the high costs and low availability of the internet, bring other advantages: the ability for Yemeni artists to connect and collaborate across borders, for example, and the ability to share Yemeni art and stories with a global audience. A lot of these new virtual groups also focus heavily on mentorship, something that was lacking for young artists even before the conflict. In an article for *Al-Madaniya*, Jihad Jarallah (03.10.2020) explores how Facebook is influencing Yemen's literary movement in particular, and finds that writers are overwhelmingly positive about their experiences. “Recently, I have noticed an increase in my

Facebook friends' interest in reading literary texts," female writer 'Ula al-Salmi tells Jihad, "Facebook has created an audience who have pushed me to write more, and this has connected me to local and Arab writers and critics from whom I have received criticism about my writing. In turn, this has guided me to formulate my own style." To a certain extent, these spaces can also offer a degree of safety and anonymity, particularly for women, although several artists we spoke to mentioned how social media can also be used against artists, to defame or threaten them. It is also notable that far less Yemeni women are active on Facebook – and social media in general – than men, meaning there is likely still a gendered access issue if everything is held online.

5 “This Is How I Fight in This War”: Yemeni Artists Creating Narratives of Peace

“Art is a kind of soft power. We produce arts to create understanding – then with time it will grow, develop and explode. It is difficult to use art in one place only – just like perfume, it spreads around that place.”

Thana Faroq, photographer

All the artists we spoke with saw themselves as engaging with ideas of peace and conflict either directly or indirectly through their work. Everyone believed that artists can “make a difference” to people’s lives and to the culture and nature of society, and that art can (though does not necessarily) promote peace in various and quite distinct ways. Art is “a very powerful weapon” says Sami Shamsan, describing both the positive and negative impact of Yemeni cartoons and songs since the outbreak of the war, “[art] changes many concepts and [impacts] reality.”

The following section explores four key themes that emerged from our conversations with individual artists and art collectives: documenting the impact of the conflict and preserving collective memory; advocating for an end to violence and injustices; bringing back joy and hope to communities; and creating new narratives of peace and coexistence.

5.1 Documenting Life During the War, Telling Untold Stories and Preserving Collective Memory

“If filmmakers, musicians, painters, and photographers cannot change reality, they can document the present as their future history.”

Yusra Ishaq, filmmaker

For some of the artists that we spoke to, particularly writers and photographers, their work is an important part of documenting life during the war and telling otherwise untold stories. This can mean either documenting the negative impacts of the war – bearing witness to the atrocities faced by people and providing evidence of the conflict – or documenting everyday life that continues outside of the violence. “As a photographer, I can tell the story of our streets and the suffering of people, and also of the beauty of old Sana’a, which people may not be able to see firsthand due to the conflict,” says Ali al-Sonidar. “We have to say what we feel and what life is like in war, and what life was like before it. That’s what poetry is for,” says ‘A’isha al-Ja’idi, a student from Hadhramawt who took part in Romooz Foundation’s ‘In the Land of Shattered Windows’ project: “It’s our job to give this message to the world” (McKernan 19.05.2019).

Novelist and poet Rayan al-Shaybani talked to us about how contemporary writing and visual art “document the confusion of the war,” particularly in the conflict’s early stages when people were still shocked by what was happening. Shaima Gamal from the Basement Foundation agrees, telling us that in 2015, when the war escalated, many of the artistic works being produced were expressions of suffering and destruction, reflecting the situation people were living through. Examples of this are plentiful and have continued as the war has continued, with new difficulties emerging: from Haifa al-Subay’s street art showing the suffering and pain of women and children during the war; to Nabil Qasim’s exhibition of sketches at Basement Foundation entitled Moments of Fear, drawn during continuous electricity blackouts; Adly Mirza’s sketchbook contributions to Ammar Darwish’s diary about COVID-19 in Aden; Ta’iz photographer Muhammad al-Tawaji’s project capturing the lives of children who’ve lost their homes; to ‘Abd al-Rahman Husayn’s short film The Color of Injustice about the devastating impact of the violence, produced by #SupportYemen just a few months after the war began.

Similarly, short stories published by *Al-Madaniya* have also been documenting different aspects of the war, both in terms of the physical and the emotional impacts of the violence. For example, in ‘A Man’s Tears,’ ‘Aydarus al-Dayani writes about his experiences of his village being shelled and landmines being planted, and the fears this has instilled in him. In ‘Ice Cream,’ Suhayr al-Samman

writes about the pressure on young men to join the war for income, and an eventual bombardment which killed a young woman. Other stories, like Ranya Rassam's 'Daybreak,' address the conflict less directly, where the violence is something in the background, shaping how people act.

These artistic depictions of the impact of the conflict are important on a number of levels: Firstly, they can help both the artists and their audiences make sense of what is happening around them, even if they are not providing solutions to the conflict. "I wrote about everything I could not change in our new reality, so much so that I was accused of pessimism. But as the English saying goes, 'life is stranger than fiction'; and so if I could not give solutions to problems on paper, it is enough that I share the issues with readers," author Kawthar 'Abd al-Wahid al-Shurayfi (27.10.2020) says about her writing. "As long as I talk about Yemenis' rights, making a distinction between those who violate these rights and those who do not, classifying actors and actions, all my writings represent this [laying groundwork for peace]," says Rayan al-Shaybani. "It can be used to resist any repression by the authorities and to say who is right." For Rayan, these depictions of the chaos and negativity of the conflict are also important to stop the war becoming something normal for people. For others, the mere recognition of the problems 'out loud' is the first step towards fixing anything.

Secondly, as Yusra Ishaq mentions above, the documenting and preserving of individual and collective experiences of war will be important to future generations. In a recent article, 'The Interpretation of Life', the famous Yemeni novelist and playwright Wajdi al-Ahdal wrote, "literature is not a predictive tool, but an instrument of interpretation. If we understand it as such, it is imperative that it be a saving factor for millions of lives, provided we take literature seriously; that we consider it a warning call, an ultimatum, a word of truth uttered right on time, before it is too late, and before the catastrophe that could have been avoided or, at the least, minimized" (al-Rubaidi 09.10.2017). In Hadhramawt, Shaima bin Othman from Meemz told us that many of the young artists she has been working with have been keen to use their art to explore and understand the impact of the 2015/16 al-Qa'ida occupation of their area, as a way of preventing future generations from being drawn in by similar tactics.

Thirdly, it is also clear from our conversations with some artists that capturing and documenting the impact of the war not only helps others to process and understand the conflict but can also be a healing process for the artist themselves. "Artists' work is a healing process," says Rayan al-Shaybani, "it helps artists to overcome challenges and psychological trauma." Painters Haya

al-Hammumi²⁶ and Shatha Altowai, and writer Atiaf al-Wazir, talk about how their work helps them express their emotions and deal with trauma. “I find that practicing art or producing art helps me in terms of psychological effects,” says Shatha. “When you live in Yemen all the time there is stress everywhere because of the war, all the time we are waiting for bad news to come. But whenever I practice art, I feel like I go to another world.”



Haya al-Hammumi: Cry of Anger, 2015

Atiaf al-Wazir says that writing has allowed her to process her trauma at her own pace, in controlled dosages. Through fiction, she says, “I externalized the violence I had witnessed, positioned myself against deep grief and began to understand and reconstruct what had happened. In essence, I took control over what was once uncontrollable” (al-Wazir 16.10.2019). Atiaf also believes

²⁶ Hammumi’s paintings ‘The Victims’ and ‘Cry of Anger’ depict the state of society as a victim of a raging war – see Nasser (28.06.2018).

that broader community healing needs to start at this individual level. “Healing has to start with the individual, but by opening the conversation, making it public and engaging, then repeating it several times, society can slowly engage in a process of collective healing,” she writes. “There is a direct line between inner peace, peace in the family, in the community and then in the nation. But healing begins with the individual” (al-Wazir 2019: 4).

A number of artists are also focusing on documenting life outside the violence: sharing stories and images of everyday life and collecting and sharing memories of life before the conflict. For example, the visual art collective Yemen Used to Be has created an ‘archive’ of images and videos that highlight positive aspects of Yemeni life and culture before and outside of the war. Through doing this, they hope to present a more diverse picture of Yemen to audiences both inside and outside of Yemen and alter the negative stereotypes that are often held about Yemen. The nature of the archive is also about preserving and sharing a collective memory with a younger Yemeni audience who know little about their own cultural heritage. “Everyone just knows about his own generation and we never document things from each other,” Waleed al-Ward from Yemen Used To Be told us. “All that we know are either lies or unreliable information because nothing is documented.” Photographers Ali al-Sonidar and Thana Faroq have similar goals with some of their work, often seeking to capture people’s daily lives and intimate moments. “There are numerous unforgettable moments that I captured of people’s lives, their simplicity, the beauty in daily life,” Ali tells us. “People started to forget how our life used to be, started to forget about our elderly people, about the traditional cafés. So I tried to revive such memories and remind people of ancient places



Rofaida Ahmed (Yemen Used To Be): female musicians

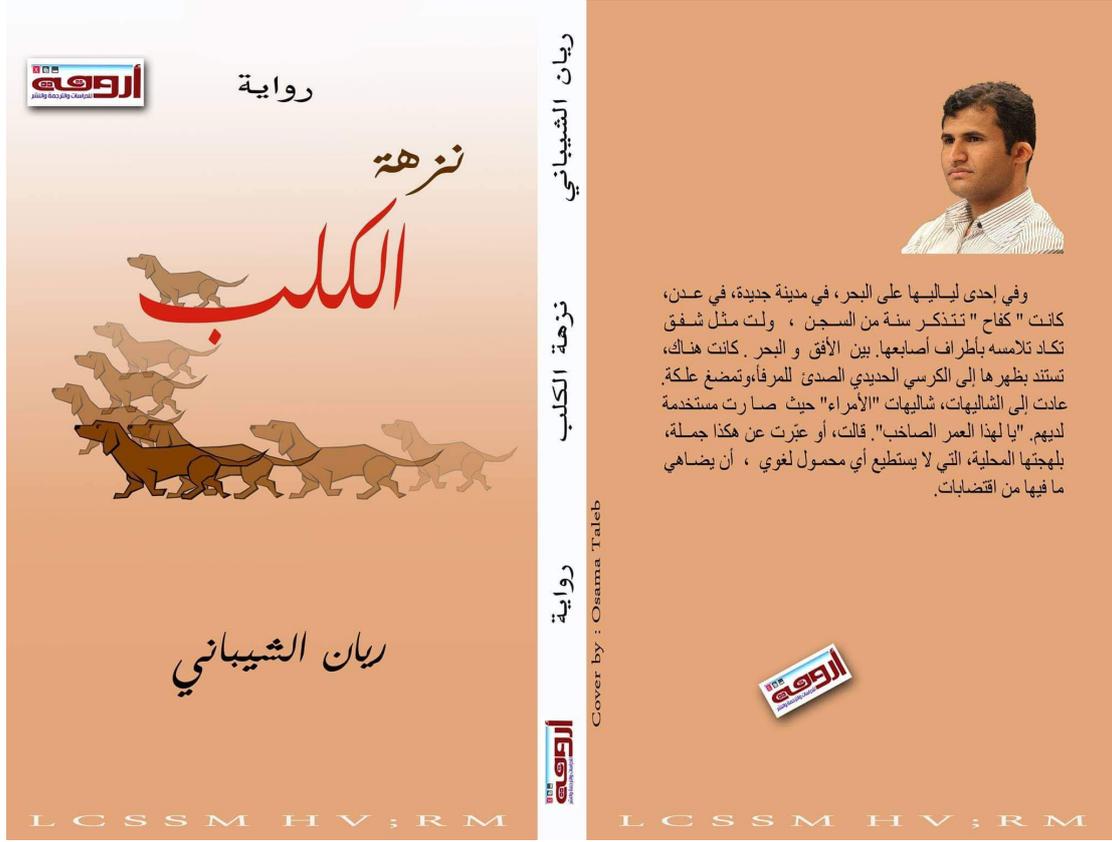
and traditional life.” Thana is working on a project where she is recreating some of her lost photo archives through memory. However, the images she produces are slightly out of focus, suggesting that memory can be illusional.

These shared memories and stories of Yemen outside of the conflict are “important to preserve reminders of the lives we once had,” says Thana Farooq. “Talking of the everyday lives we led sends a peaceful message.” Such images and stories are equally important to preserve for future generations as those documenting the violence, to “tell a story of Yemen as a civilization full of potential and promise, despite the cruelty of war and its disasters” (Al-Madaniya 20.12.2019). “The only thing we can control is not to let our memories be hijacked by all this blood,” says Atiaf al-Wazir. “This is my resistance, you will not make me forget the Yemen I lived.”

CASE STUDY: Rayan’s Dog’s Picnic – Mastering the Confusion of Conflict

Rayan al-Shaybani is a young novelist, painter and poet born in Ta’iz where he started writing for local newspapers in 2000, alongside his own practice. In 2009, he moved to Sana’a to work to secure an income source. He worked as a media coordinator and then as a journalist for a private newspaper, though his core interest was in the arts. In 2015, he lost his job and was internally displaced to his village where he painted a group of paintings named ‘Please Don’t Airstrike,’ depicting the war’s consequences on people’s lives. A few months later, he returned to Sana’a and wrote his novel ‘Dog’s Picnic [nuzha al-kalb],’ which was published in 2017.

‘Dog’s Picnic’ is a story of two journalists who have lost their jobs and are internally displaced because of the war. They return to Sana’a to seek work, but get trapped in a journey of endless and life-threatening challenges. One character is ultimately murdered, and the other has no option but to live in a small house and work as a servant for an old man. In its events, characters and scenes, the novel depicts the various consequences of the war in a country which has been unstable for many decades. Death is not the only impact of the war: ‘Dog’s Picnic’ shows how human relations have been affected and the social fabric torn, and how the economy and individual livelihoods have deteriorated. Psychological trauma caused by the war also plays a central role in the narrative, alongside gender-based violence. The war’s impact on artists, moreover, is one of the elements highlighted in the novel.



"أورثت الحرب أثراً لا يمكن إخفاؤه. هذا الترنح المتواصل لقومية، كانت الأفقر على الأرض. قبل الحرب. والآن ماذا؟"

"The war has left an unconcealable scar. Even before the war we already had that continuous staggering of a nation that was the poorest on earth. Now what?"

(Extract from 'Dog's Picnic,' by Rayan al-Shaybani)

Rayan's novel 'Dog's Picnic' is implicitly connected to peacebuilding, showing that the war is at odds with what normal life should be, and calling for a return to a normal life of peace. Rayan explains that writing the novel helped him understand the conflict better and take control of the narrative. "One of the purposes of writing this novel was to gain [narrative] control of the early phase of the war and its confusion," he says. "The war, later on, becomes something normal, death becomes normal, people's loss of jobs becomes normal. So, narratively mastering the early moments of the war is a way to show that the war is something abnormal."

5.2 Advocating for an End to Violence and Human Rights Abuses

Other Yemeni artists are using their work to directly call for an end to the violence, and an end to social injustices and abuses being inflicted on the people of Yemen. Perhaps the most prominent of these artists is Murad Subay, who, following his street art campaigns during the revolution, has gone on to create high profile graffiti campaigns against arms exports, airstrikes, drone strikes, and the general devastation inflicted by the conflict. For his campaign 'Ruins [hutam]', which ran from 2015 to 2017, he travelled across Yemen to paint murals on walls in different areas that had been destroyed in the conflict, "to break the silence of the war" and expose the nature of atrocities affecting Yemenis. The first painting was in the neighborhood of Bani Hiwat near Sana'a airport, where he painted a mural of children hanging up rows of flowers along an exterior wall where an airstrike had occurred, a strike that had killed 27 people, including 15 children. Two days later, one of the war's biggest explosions happened in the mountain Faj 'Attan, and Murad and his friends painted on the collapsed walls of the Faj 'Attan neighborhood. Further drawings and paintings were made on the walls of other residential neighborhoods, on houses, schools and even on the tents of displaced people and in people's living rooms whose houses had been damaged by the war. "This is how I fight in this war," Murad Subay told Joshua Levkowitz in 2017.

Although Subay has since left Yemen, his work has always been collaborative and many of his fellow members of the street artist group – including his sister Haifa – continue to paint and draw and stencil street art campaigns. "The reason I call my art projects 'campaigns' is because I do not work on them alone," he says (Levkowitz 15.12.2017). Subay and his group organize an open day for street art every March where many new young artists, such as Tammam al-Shaybani,²⁷ Thiyazen al-'Alawi,²⁸ and Haifa Subay, have found their voice and since become important anti-war artists in Yemen's graffiti scene (ibid).

Cartoons and cartoonists were also mentioned regularly as artistic voices rejecting the war and using their work to publicly advocate for an end to the violence. Specifically cartoonist Rashad al-Sami'i, whose work has included illustrations which call for criminalizing the siege imposed on Ta'iz (including humorous cartoons showing the day to day frustrations of the Huthi blockade) as well as cartoons which show the inanity and horror of deaths caused by shelling and shooting, including a particularly famous depiction of a young girl who was shot by snipers on her way to fetch water for her family. The

²⁷ Tammam's blogspot can be found here: <http://tammamalshebani.blogspot.com/> (accessed 12.02.2021).

²⁸ Thiyazen's Twitter feed can be found here: <https://twitter.com/thiyazen9> (accessed 12.02.2021).

فكوا الحصار عن تعز ..
الطريق حياة ..



*Rashad al-Sami'i: The Siege of Ta'iz
(alluding to the travel difficulties face by the people of Ta'iz due to the siege)*

focus group in Ta'iz felt that Rashad's work is a good example of art which is effective at rejecting violence and division and pushing all sides of a conflict towards peace and to end their violence.

Shank and Schirch (2008) refer to such artwork as "waging conflict nonviolently: using art to communicate dissent against social, political, and economic structures and raising awareness about issues so that they cannot be ignored." Overtly political art also has the potential to alter policies and decisions at the macro-level (Tellidis 2020: 2). In 2012, prior to the current conflict, Subay's street art campaign on individuals who had been forcibly disappeared pushed the then Minister of Human Rights to promote debate on the topic at institutional levels (Alviso-Marino 2017: 8). Although the complexities of the conflict in Yemen mean that drawing the attention of decision-makers and local authorities can be risky (and often pointless), street artists and cartoonists are still having an impact – whether on the local public, or on international audiences. "My art is from people to people," Haifa Subay tells us. "My art is not for decision-makers – it conveys what happens for the people and it conveys to the people. The artist is not responsible for the decision-makers' response, but for sending the messages to all." Street murals are not only a way of sending effective and enduring messages to the general public, but a form of art that

can mobilize people, encourage participation and democratize the use of public space (Alviso-Marino 2017). “Graffiti is not limited to elites, nor is it closed to some people in a closed place like a hall,” says Haifa, and says that the fact that people can join you while you are painting is an empowering experience for the public. It can also inspire further collective action.²⁹

The impressive talent of street artists and other visual artists in Yemen has also earned them the attention of an international audience, particularly for Subay’s work. Murad Subay was awarded the 2016 Freedom of Expression Arts Award by the Index on Censorship for his ‘Ruins’ campaign. “I heard of many initiatives outside Yemen, in Germany, France and America, in which they request some works of Yemeni artists and display them as part of anti-war campaigns,” says visual artist Saba Jallas, “I count on these steps as a way to stop the war in the future.” Sharing these images and advocacy messages can also result in tangible benefits for the communities being depicted. Photographer Ali al-Sonidar said that at one point he tweeted an image of young children studying on the ground – “there were no doors, no windows” – and received enough cash donations in response that he was able to rehabilitate the school with windows and doors and provide the children with school kits and materials. “I learnt how the arts can make a big difference in peoples’ lives,” he told us.

Filmmaking, including documentary, narrative film and animation, has also played a similar role in providing space for Yemeni artists to convey messages about human rights issues both within and outside of Yemen. In December 2020, the Karama Yemen Human Rights Film Festival ran its second edition, broadcasting packages of short films by Yemeni filmmakers online and free of charge. The film topics ranged from musicians hiding their talents from their families, the suffering caused by the closure of Yemeni airports and the restrictions on freedom of movement, young men in Aden being forced to pick up arms, as well as issues around displacement, education, democratic freedoms and freedom of expression. Nasir al-Manj, the founder of Yemen Will Triumph, who helped organize the festival, says the festival is a space where Yemenis can imagine together how to build a future where everyone is granted their basic rights, and where people can be inspired into action (Karama 17.12.2020). Maryam al-Dhubhani, whose film *In the Middle* featured in the festival, says that these films are not about giving voice to the voiceless, but about amplifying the existing voices in Yemen. “We do stories ‘with’ people not ‘on’ them,” she says “and the more we do this the better.”

²⁹ In a video made by filmmaker ‘Abd al-Rahman Husayn, Murad Subay talks about how he has been using his art to inspire collective action to build peace since the 2011 uprising and throughout the conflict: <https://www.youtube.com/watch?reload=9&v=Mie34EC25AU> (accessed 12.02.2021).

Comra's academy event, 'The Yemeni Film Days' is another filmmaking platform that offers a rare opportunity for Yemeni filmmakers to present their productions and tell stories of Yemeni suffering. During this event, which first took place between November and December 2020, young filmmakers were offered the opportunity to screen their films for free, some of which also focused on human rights-centered topics. Like Maryam, Omar al-Fotihi, whose film *Sandwiched* was featured in the event, also spoke of the power of films to make people's voices heard and their ability to tell stories that highlight the human rights angle. He says that, at the very least, such events open people's minds and provide space for conversation and dialogue.

Many of the artists we spoke with believed that art such as graffiti, films and cartoons are compelling ways of talking to people about human rights and violence, particularly when compared with often overly formal jargonistic international human rights language that has little cultural specificity. "When you read a human rights report you don't get as much of a connection as when you watch a film," novelist Atiaf al-Wazir said at a panel, "there's an emotional connection... you're not just seeing people as numbers. [It can] create solidarity with people around the world" (Karama 17.12.2020). In 2018, the film *10 Days Before the Wedding* by director 'Amr Jamal about a young couple navigating multiple obstacles to their marriage caused by the aftermath of the violence in Aden, was nominated for an Oscar. Although not its express purpose, Jamal's film perhaps did as much to bring the attention of the world to the everyday suffering caused by the violence in Aden than any non-fictional accounts. Its success was also a big source of pride for Yemenis, and the screenings in Aden brought a great sense of both relief and joy to residents, who "felt as though the film represented us and we were a part of it" (Kalin 03.09.2018). Marie-Christine Heinze, who watched the film when it was screened publicly in Amman, says that "for the diaspora community of Yemenis in Amman, it also, at least for a moment, helped bridge all their political divides. Everyone was crying and united in their joint feelings of loss, remembrance and longing for the homeland."

CASE STUDY: Haifa Subay's Street Art for Silent Victims

Street artists in Yemen during the war have not been limited to men, and a number of young women have been involved in creating murals, including campaigns to raise attention on gender-based violence during the war, child labor, displaced people and the mothers of men who have been unlawfully abducted and detained.

One of these female artists is Haifa Subay. Haifa is a young painter and graffitist, born in Dhamar and educated at Sana'a University. She started practicing painting in her early childhood with the support of her family members, developing her talent and creating a number of paintings in the Surrealist style. In 2012, she joined her brother Murad's campaigns using graffiti for advocacy purposes in the streets of Sana'a. She is currently based in Aden, which she describes as more open to her art than Sana'a.

The war and its impacts motivated Haifa to launch her own graffiti campaigns advocating peace. "I used to make art from my own point of view, [but then] the war impacted me as a citizen and a woman and my painting changed – I started working on street art," she tells us. "I started working on art that targeted everyone. Even the colors changed." Haifa has a team of women who work with her. Some of these women initially joined to keep Haifa company and to help keep her safe, but now also paint themselves. One of Haifa's team, Sabrin al-Mahjali, said she hopes that these forms of public self-expression will help create space for more female voices in Yemen. "The Yemeni woman plays a huge role in society, but she is still marginalized. Even if a woman has achievements or talents equal to men, she is still not seen as important as a man. We want to see that change" (Aziza 26.03.2018).

In 2017, Haifa had a campaign titled 'Silent Victims [dhahaya samitun]³⁰ where she painted about 13 works of graffiti in Sana'a's streets, depicting the human costs of the war, particularly for women, children and youth. Through this campaign, Haifa wanted to reject the war and share Yemen's tragedies with the world – showing how catastrophic it has been for Yemen's education and economy, as well as women's rights and the safety of its people, and how peace is the best alternative. "I love to show the world something that we miss and demand," she said, referring to the suffering civilians as "silent victims of the war" without means of expression, or political or religious power (Aljamra 11.09.2018). In one of the paintings titled 'Peace Finder', children are shown searching for peace; in another painting, titled 'Child of Bones', an emaciated child is depicted, reflecting on how children face hunger and famine due to the humanitarian situation. And in a painting titled 'International Women's Day', a woman is shown with her hands covering her mouth and eyes, mirroring how women are still suffering from a lack of rights.

One year later, Haifa created an online peace campaign titled 'Dove', where Yemeni artists were encouraged to share photos of their peace drawings using the hashtag #Dove_Campaign. Haifa was keen to make this campaign accessible to

³⁰ Haifa Subay's 'Silent Victims' campaign received a huge amount of media attention from Reuters, VOA News and others. A video about the campaign can be found here: https://www.youtube.com/watch?t=34s&v=gd_70oRslGY&app=desktop (accessed 12.02.2021).



Haifa Subay: *Peace Finder* ('Silent Victims' campaign), April 2018

all and easy for anyone to participate in, regardless of their education level or social class. She was also keen for it not to take a particular political stance: "its goal is purely humanitarian," Haifa confirmed to *Inside Arabia* (ibid.). When we spoke to Haifa towards the end of 2020, she had just started her latest graffiti campaign in Aden titled 'Women and War [al-nisa' wa-l-harb]', focusing on what it has been like to be a woman during the conflict – including what it is like to be a pregnant woman during wartime. In one of the paintings, a pregnant woman addresses her unborn child with a sense of hope and resilience: "we will survive together."

5.3 Bringing Back Joy and Hope to Communities

For artists like visual artist Saba Jallas, filmmaker and YouTuber 'Abd al-Rahman al-Ward, graffiti artist Haifa Subay, and painter Suhayla (who joined our discussions as part of our focus group in Ta'iz), art also has an even more basic function during times of conflict: to bring back joy and hope to communities torn apart by the war and give people some respite. "We bring art and creativity into everything we do to give people a break from all the news about the conflict," said 'Abd al-Rahman during the UNESCO Yemen Youth Culture Forum.

Saba, who sketches beautiful images over photos of airstrikes, says that she's had a tremendously positive response to her work, "which indicates the people's thirst for beautiful art and their tendency towards peace, as well as their distancing from the charged atmosphere and political news within Yemen." Sculptor and painter Ruqaya al-Wasi also finds beauty in the ruins of war, sifting through the rubble of bombed buildings for shards of glass on which she paints meaningful, colorful images of aspects of the lives of the families who have been affected.³¹ For Saba Jallas and other artists, this ability to create space for hope, joy and humor is in itself an act of defiance and resistance. Saba's sketches are "not just naive hope... [she is] reclaim[ing] agency and cultivat[ing] resilience," says Atiaf al-Wazir (Brookings 26.05.2019).

Despite the closure of many physical spaces, and the pressures from local authorities, many groups across Yemen are also still managing to put together cultural festivals and community performances – such as Aden is More Beautiful (a community initiative supported by Alif Ba Civilian and Coexistence Foundation, and Ta'iz's open arts days called 'Melody of Life' organised by YWBOD. Participants in the Ta'iz focus group discussion also mentioned how traditional Yemeni musicians and dancers like Mulataf Hamidi³² are spreading joy through their live performances and videos on YouTube, using Yemeni identity and culture to transcend political and geographic differences.

The focus group participants felt strongly that such public festivals, singing, dancing and theater can spread enjoyment and happiness among all segments of the society, making people feel that there are spaces where they can escape the pressures of life during conflict. Similarly, Shaima Gamal from the Basement Foundation says that their audiences continue to be upwards of 300 people, reflecting "people's desire to escape from the status quo" and talks about how their performance space literally and metaphorically drowns out the sounds of the war.

While street art is commonly associated with direct criticism of the conflict, a number of youth and women's groups in Ta'iz, Marib, Ibb³³ and elsewhere have been organizing large scale mural paintings in their cities to 'beautify' their areas and send messages of hope and motivation. Such work "breathes life into areas of destruction, turning ugliness into beauty," says Atiaf al-Wazir (Brookings 26.05.2019). Intisar al-Qadhi says that her organization Marib Girls

31 Watch a video about Ruqaya here: <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=IBUljQ2V66w&feature=youtu.be> (accessed 01.02.2021).

32 Watch a video of Mulataf Hamidi's music and dance here: <https://youtu.be/cGednLnsPK8> (accessed 01.02.2021).

33 For example, the 'Kun Anta [Be You]'; 'Hand by Hand'; 'For Better Future' and 'Bi-Ayadina [With our Hands]' initiatives in Ta'iz; various street painting projects by Marib Girls in Marib; and murals by students at the Faculty of Arts Education in Ibb.

is planning to do more murals once they have permission from the authorities, “but this time on messages of hope, rather than on war or negative messages.” “What is dominant on our streets is gloomy messages, mostly about war, abductees and captives,” she tells us. “We feel art can have a healing impact on people. We need to share positive messages, people need this especially these days. And this is what we are planning to do next in Marib.”

Use of humor and comedy is also surprisingly common. In Ta’iz, the Wasl Youth Initiative organizes a regular event called Stand-Up Comedy (see case study on page 60) aimed at improving people’s moods and reducing the tensions in their daily lives. Theater troupes, like the Khaleej Aden Theater Troupe, also often use comedy and satire as a way of indirectly engaging with the impact of the war while providing light relief for audiences, as do some musicians. For example, Osama Khaled’s “Atisbir” is a humorous song in which the two singers complain about the daily problems resulting from the conflict – in their homes, in the streets, everywhere – but despite all these problems they don’t lose hope. Participants at the Ta’iz focus group also told us that on-line Yemeni jokes pages³⁴ are beginning to flourish, and many young Yemenis are turning to this – even if the humor is quite dark – as a form of stress relief and a coping mechanism. Online and traditionally broadcast satirical political comedy shows which sprang up during the 2011 revolution have also continued to attract large audiences during the war, with shows like Karam BaHashwan’s weekly show *Wa-La Nakhs* on Belqees TV proving particularly popular (Nasser 2018). Karam began his career as a satirist via YouTube in 2013 in Aden, and while Belqees TV, being linked to the Islah Party, is known for its criticism of the Huthi and Salih factions, much of his comedy is also satire of the Hadi government and the Saudi-led coalition. Nasser writes that “satire has become an oasis for war-fatigued Yemenis” and estimates that over half of the 14 private Yemeni TV channels were broadcasting satirical shows in 2018 (ibid.).³⁵ Although live comedy performances are often not that hospitable to female performers, female comedians are also finding space for jokes and satire online. In her satirical video *What if Yemeni peace talks were a couple counseling session?*, Hadil Almowafak addresses the conflict dynamics in Yemen head on and has received praise from Yemenis of all different backgrounds.

34 An example of a Yemeni jokes page on Facebook is: <https://www.facebook.com/Yemen.Jokes/> (accessed 10.02.2021). In one joke President ‘Abd Rabbuh Mansur Hadi calls former President ‘Ali ‘Abdallah Salih asking him: “How could you rule Yemen for 33 years?” Salih replies: “Ruling requires men (manhood). I have taught you how to rule while you were here and you learnt only traveling and luxury. How to teach you now while you are away in Riyadh? By phone?!”

35 Satirical comedy is not new to Yemen, and likely dates back to at least the 1950s when the al-Fadhul satirical newspaper was launched in Aden. For more background on satire in Yemen, see Nasser (2018).

CASE STUDY: Saba Jallas' Images of Hope

Saba Jallas is a young Yemeni artist who has received domestic and international recognition for turning the horrific images of war and destruction into images of hope, music, affection, and beauty. She is based in Sana'a.

Like many Yemenis, Saba was appalled by the frightening scenes of smoke resulting from the airstrikes on her city and across the country. But Saba's creativity and imagination have helped her draw messages of hope and resolve through superimposing beautiful figures on the smoke. This idea, according to Saba, was inspired by Palestinian artists who paint on photographs of the smoke rising from bombed sites.

For Saba, when a person turns away from art completely, she feels that their heart will be full of cruelty. She sees this as growing worse "when the soul



Image from Saba's 'Hope Remains' collection

becomes familiar with images of war, destruction, blood, and death, it (the soul) becomes hostile in one way or another." Therefore, she started to paint on the images of smoke because she believes that when people see beautiful things, joy and smiles will be drawn on their faces.

Saba's work has become extremely popular both inside and outside of Yemen. She says "when I started posting my work on Facebook, I grew very surprised by the positive reaction of people. Initially I had only 500 followers on social media, mostly friends and family members, but [following the paintings] the number of followers reached over ten thousand." Saba sees this as an indication of people's love and appreciation for beautiful art and for their tendency towards peace.

Besides helping people restore smiles and hope, Saba also believes in the power of art as an effective tool to raise people's awareness on tolerance, peace, and co-existence. She believes it is every artist's responsibility to advocate, through their art, people's unity and ability to live in peaceful co-existence because "our language, religion, and history are one, so what has made us grow divided and fragmented like this?" She adds, "the painter who does not paint for peace has given up a large part of their responsibilities. As an artist, I feel that I am responsible for spreading the idea of coexistence and of the acceptance of the other."

5.4 Promoting Values of Peace, Equality, Cultural Diversity and Coexistence – and Creating New Narratives for Yemen

"Art has a big role in building peace by encouraging acceptance of others, enhancing existing principles, or laying down new ones. The negative energy of people can be changed to positive."

Haifa Subay, street artist

In addition to trying to instill joy and hope and take people's minds off the war, some artists are also implicitly or explicitly using their works to convey the kind of values that they see as core to building peace, both in their communities and at a national level. Many of the artists we spoke with talked about the importance of their art as a way to both express and encourage ideas of equality, coexistence and cultural diversity. "Even watching the clips of young artists, we find that they wonderfully call for peace and coexistence," says painter and illustrator Saba Jallas. "The artists communicate their message easily and clearly and art is starting to revive despite the circumstances we are going through."

Theater and music in Yemen have long been used to convey social messages and values to their audiences, and can “push the envelope a little bit” in terms of public debate, says Katherine Hennessey. This has continued during the conflict when opportunities have been available to put on performances. “Even under really difficult circumstances, those involved in theater really do feel that the work that they’re doing is helping to shape the way that people think about these kinds of issues,” says Katherine Hennessey. “I still act in a lot of drama,” says actor Khalid Hamdan, also star of the recent film *100 Days Before the Wedding*. “Drama has messages to convey to society, to people – we send them pictures of things they need to see.” One play he describes, called *Ma’ak Nazil*, addresses the social realities of the lives of young girls in Aden, focusing in part on the importance of girls’ education despite the financial difficulties families might face. In Sana’a, the Yemeni House of Music and Arts recently put on a youth theater performance of a play called *Coexisting* involving performers from all sectors of society. “We want to convey the message that we can live together, that we can coexist,” says Fu’ad al-Sharjabi from the organization.

Dismantling stereotypes and promoting narratives that overcome differences are further common themes. Participants in the Ta’iz focus group discussion also mentioned songwriters such as Amin Hamim, whose ‘No Racism, No Sectarianism, No Ideology (*la ‘unsuriyya, la ta’ifiyya, la madhhabiyya*)’, explicitly calls on his audience to end hate speech and work for a more tolerant society, and Hajar Nu’man, who found in music and melody a way to voice Yemenis’ desperate need and desire to live in peace.

The goal of the visual arts collective Yemen Used To Be is to create and share an archive of images about Yemen that celebrates Yemen’s cultural diversity and brings people together across divisions. “Even if the country gets split up, we share a lot of things in common. We’re still one culture,” says one of the co-founders, “this is also a way of coexistence.” Photographer Ali al-Sonidar also describes one of his most popular images of two elderly men embracing as “conveying to people that no matter how long we live compounded by disagreement and grudges, there comes a moment when we must place forgiveness and tolerance above all.” “No one knows when death will come to claim our life,” Ali says, “so we should put what keeps us apart to one side and come together again with good hearts.” This theme of overcoming geographical, political and personal divisions in order to coexist is common among a lot of the art being produced since the beginning of the war. It is also implicit in the way some art is consumed: with music videos from particular locations shared and enjoyed throughout the country, regardless of the political or geographic identity they represent. “In a conflict environment where political polarization



Ali al-Sonidar: Human Faces, 2019

and identity politics take center stage, only art can tap into that unconscious and transcend such binaries,” argues writer Atiaf al-Wazir (2019: 4).

Finally, Yemeni artists are not only using their art to promote particular values, but also to imagine and create new narratives and new futures for Yemen. In a context fraught with political risks, the imaginative world to a certain extent allows greater space for new ideas to be discussed, and new voices to be heard – and creates the conditions necessary for inclusive and pluralist narratives to emerge (Premaratna and Bleiker 2010: 377). In the short film *The Helmet* by Osama Khalid, the main character is a creative inventor who dreams himself out of the sounds of nearby airstrikes and his feelings of loss and desperation. “In fiction no-one will blame the author as they give voices to different characters,” says ‘Abd al-Salam al-Rubaidi, “no political authority would be able to catch you.” Painter Shatha Altowai agrees, saying that through her art she can “express more – if I want to express my own opinion in real life I cannot because I will be threatened.” Fictional voices and ideas can also enter into dialogue and create space for multiple perspectives, ‘Abd al-Salam argues – something that is often lost at times but especially during war, when opinions become more binary and polarized (al-Rubaidi 2018: 13).

“Fiction allows me space to consider divergent ideas and think in non-linear ways,” says Atiaf al-Wazir, “because the novel appreciates the complexities of human nature.” As with traditional tribal poetry and dance, fiction writing cannot represent a new identity or a new idea, but actually starts to construct

it. “We failed in Yemen: we failed in politics; we failed to have a project for the new generations,” ‘Abd al-Salam al-Rubaidi told us, “so the writers try to compensate for that by writing fiction that presents some solutions for Yemen’s existential problems.” “By elevating the new narratives and repeating them from multiple places, the narrative of peace can gradually become a part of the consciousness of the society,” writes Atiaf al-Wazir (2019: 5).

CASE STUDY: Enhancing Peace Through Music in Aden

“Throughout Yemen’s modern history, there has always been a strong bond between Aden and music,” says Firas Mahdi, a musician we interviewed in Aden. The strength of this bond was first manifested in the 1940s and 1950s, when Aden offered the platform needed to host the creativity of many of North Yemen’s most prominent singers and musicians as well as to those coming from Hadhramawt and Lahij. The city has been described as “the oasis of arts” as singers from North Yemen sought a peaceful haven there to live their passion after singing was prohibited by the imams in the North (Hassan 16.09.2018). Notable singers and musicians of southern regions, like Abu Bakr Salim, found Aden the epicenter of music and arts, with ample opportunities for promising careers (Jarrah 10.12.2017). “The strong bond between Aden and music has always been the ground that unites and connects Yemenis even in times of [geographic and political] division, and has been the beacon of acceptance of diversity,” adds Firas Mahdi.

The artists and youth activists we spoke to agreed that it is no surprise that people in Aden love music and hope to see their city “restore”³⁶ the strong musical vibe it used to have in the past. Khalid Waleed, a guitarist, says “look at how people get excited when they learn there will be a musical event at Crown’s resort or at any other place; families go there in large numbers. People have suffered and continue to suffer from the impact of conflict, our families have endured a lot, and it is music that offers a dose of recovery to their troubled souls. We see this as well in the way that Adeni families and more specifically Adeni young people interact with music at the graduation ceremonies and festivals, you see them finding relief and restoring joy and hope through music. If you want to see youth energy at first hand, if you want to see hope, peace, and understanding, attending one musical event in Aden would suffice.”

Not only do artists in Aden recognize the role of music in enhancing peace in the community, but so also do young activists and youth community leaders. The co-founder and head of the largest youth movement in Aden, known as the

³⁶ This word was used by several of the artists interviewed.

Assembly of Single Young Men (AoSYM), Muhammad Ihab, says when it comes to making peace in times of conflict, young people need music, sports, and safe spaces to live their passions and get rid of the negative effects of conflict. In December 2020 AoSYM organized a giant camping trip to the island of Dunafa for over 1,600 youth from Aden, calling it “the trip of all trips.” Muhammad says, “We had more than 1,600 young men on a remote island and in an isolated place – these young men are from Aden and from other different governorates. Some are also from northern cities like Ta’iz, Sana’a and Ibb. Many of these young people have [political] affiliations or may support different political sides, they come from different places, but it was music that united them all. There was no discussion of politics, no discussion about the hardships of life; rather, all wanted to listen to music, to sing, and to dance. It was a clear expression of how young men and how people in Aden promote coexistence, believe in peace, and want to have lives free of violent conflicts.”

6 “We Believe in the Power of Art”: Communities Using Creative Arts as Tools for Peacebuilding

“Artistic modes of engagement have been shown to be more effective than rational methods in expanding the worldviews of people towards empathy, mutual understanding, and psychosocial recovery.”

Muhammad al-Jabari, UNESCO Yemen

Civil society organizations and community groups across Yemen are also using creative arts as practical peacebuilding tools in their work. Arts organizations, women’s organizations and peacebuilding organizations are using painting, theater, street art, music and many other forms of art to bring people together across divisions, as vehicles for inclusive and accessible messaging in their peace education work, and as practical tools to help marginalized communities express themselves and heal from trauma. Shank and Schirch (2008) describe this as ‘strategic arts-based peacebuilding’, where the arts offer peacebuilders unique tools for transforming interpersonal and intercommunal relationships.

6.1 Arts as an Alternative to Violence and a Voice for Marginalized Groups

At a very practical level, many of the civil society organizations and groups we spoke with feel they are directly contributing to violence prevention by providing alternative spaces and activities for people outside of the conflict. “There is actually a huge link between making peace and using the arts, especially for young people in Yemen,” says Shaima bin Othman from Meemz, “young people don’t have opportunities, they don’t have a decent income, so they can easily be attracted by bad groups. But if they have a chance to perform their arts in a safe, welcoming space they will be a very good example of peacemakers within our community.”

Some organizations see the creative arts as a potential – and positive – source of income for young people in particular, providing an alternative to financial support offered by violent groups. For example, the Yemeni House of Music and Arts in Sana’a continues to train young people in musical instruments, which can then be a source of income for the students. The youth-led initiative ‘Art for Change,’ by Meemz in Hadhramawt, continue to work with the young artists who have been involved in their projects, helping them to develop marketing strategies for their work; and Comra assist their trainee filmmakers in similar ways, “providing them with work and facilitating them to obtain some income, even if it is intermittent,” says co-founder Yusra Ishaq. Similarly, Yemen Will Triumph focus on projects that will ultimately provide a source of income for their young artists and filmmakers, in the meantime equipping them with skills and providing small grants for their work.

Shaima from Meemz says that they had one young male dance group performing hip hop who have since become well known in the community, despite an initially negative reaction to their choice of dance, and who are now regularly invited to perform at graduations and wedding ceremonies for payment.³⁷ Virtual spaces are also enabling young people and young artists to gain income via social media content creation, and a number of CSOs are helping support young people in these endeavors, including Yemen Art Base, who have created the first online database of Yemeni artists inside and outside of Yemen.

As part of the European Union-funded project ‘Cash for Work: Promoting Livelihood Opportunities for Urban Youth in Yemen’, UNESCO has recently started a large-scale program of work across four cities in Yemen (Sana’a, Shibam, Zabid and Aden) focusing on providing youth in Yemen with economic and cultural alternatives to participating in the conflict, through engagement in

³⁷ Watch a video of the dance group here: https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=src_8-nv_AY&t=13s&ab_channel=MeemzArtInitiative (accessed 02.02.2021).

cultural programming and the arts. Many of the artists we spoke to were excited about the existence and engagement coming from this project, and felt it had a lot of potential.

Even if the activities are not ultimately income-generating, spaces for creative arts can still “pull people out of the atmosphere of violence,” says Saba Jallas. Creating and maintaining space for freedom of expression and places where people – particularly young people, women or other marginalized groups – can discuss and share their dreams for their future can be equally important in providing alternatives to violence. Shaima bin Othman from Meemz says that their ‘Art for Change’ project was the first time she’d seen young talented people gathered in the same place in al-Mukalla’, able to draw, sing and dance. “They were discussing their dreams, and how they can tackle the issues in their community using an artistic idea,” she tells us. “Just because you are a Yemeni and live in such difficult conditions [shouldn’t mean] that you are not even allowed to dream.” Participants in similar projects elsewhere in the world report that these experiences in themselves can build their resilience and reduce their vulnerability to violence, helping them feel more protected against the risks of their social contexts.³⁸

For organizations and groups with a specific focus on supporting and empowering marginalized or minority groups – especially youth, women, disabled people and internally displaced people – creative arts are also a vehicle that can help give agency and voice to people with little power within the conflict, and provide safe ways to engage with social and political issues that affect them (Naidu-Silverman 2015). For example, in the recent theater project ‘Let’s Coexist’ by the Yemeni House of Music and Arts, performers included marginalized people, internally displaced people, and blind and disabled people, who were able to convey their own messages and stories in ways that are not usually available to them.³⁹ Similarly, the young women’s string orchestra at the Higher Institute of Music at the Cultural Center in Sana’a is set up to specifically develop the talents and skills of young women. Safa’, a violinist in the group, said that women in Yemen have become bolder and more willing to learn and participate in creating a state of peace with the help of music through these kinds of projects (al-Jaedy 24.07.2019).

In 2017, the storytelling collective #SupportYemen ran a project called ‘Magnet’, with the aim of providing a safe space for women to share their stories through speaking, writing and drawing. One of the main results of the project is the first ever Yemeni comic written and drawn exclusively by women, which

³⁸ See the example of the Venezuelan National Youth Orchestra discussed in Bailey (2019).

³⁹ YouTube videos of the performances: <https://youtu.be/mK0Rz7DKzkl>; <https://youtu.be/5Lkvr7H4K6M> (accessed 02.02.2021).

discusses violence experienced by women “in ways that are both daring and deeply personal” and provide the women with the opportunity to take control of their own narrative (al-Wazir 2019: 3). Both Basement Foundation and Marib Girls have also been working on art projects that highlight the roles women play as peacebuilders in Yemen.

CASE STUDY: Meemz and Basement Foundation Create Spaces for Peace, Art and Youth

The Basement Foundation in Sana’a and Meemz in Hadhramawt are two organizations for whom arts for peacebuilding and arts for social change are central to their work, and who see themselves as ‘spaces for peace.’ Both organizations also focus on engaging young people in the arts and are run by young women – both called Shaima – who are leaders in developing arts and culture in Yemen and in integrating arts and peacebuilding work.

Basement started as a small initiative by young artists in 2009 and was founded as an official organization in Sana’a in 2012. It aims to provide a safe environment for youth, to help them develop their talents and support them to make use of arts to express themselves and their ideas, as well as more broadly to help create a culture of peace, diversity and tolerance in Yemen. “Providing these ingredients gives the youth a little hope, as their options are so limited,” says Shaima Gamal, Executive Director of Basement, “but it is also an idea that gives hope to many people.” Shaima believes that Basement is one of the first institutions in Yemen to link art with peace and is particularly proud of being able to continue



Meemz music workshop

to provide space for arts and culture “living in a civil war, in the midst of this hunger, fear and constant arrests.” “We do not consider art as entertainment or something dispensable, but rather as a priority and one of the most important needs that society must work with,” she says.

One of their projects is called ‘Tell Me Your Tale,’ or ‘Ehki,’ in which Basement brings together the experiences of active Yemeni women who have faced the difficulty of the war in positive ways, promoting their stories through art (Gamal 2020). Shaima also told us about a time when a local shaykh changed his attitude towards the arts events happening and was ultimately persuaded to leave his gun at the door and participate in an ongoing poetry event.



Meemz was founded in 2017 in Hadhramawt by six young people active in Yemen’s cultural sector, who felt driven to do something about the lack of arts and cultural activities in their governorate, especially following the impact of the AQAP takeover of al-Mukalla’ in the previous year. Its main objective is to harness the arts to bring about positive change, and to create a safe space for young artists to express their thoughts, concerns and ideas through arts of all kinds and make their voices heard in the world. “Meemz first started as an idea and a dream,” Shaima bin Othman, one of the organization’s founders, tells us. “In Hadhramawt we don’t have any artistic institutions or places where artists can go and get training. We don’t have theater, we don’t have a cinema, so basically we don’t have any form of art here.”

“It took us a year to plan and create relationships within the community,” Shaima says. “We sat down with young people like us, but also with religious figures and different segments of our community to hear feedback so we know how we can approach this [something that might feel radical or new in our area].” It was clear to Shaima that young people in her area had big dreams and talents but few opportunities to express their ideas and use their skills to pursue their art, particularly young women. As a result, Meemz has gone on to run a huge variety of activities for young artists and their communities, including karaoke events and hip hop dancing, as well as courses on painting and engraving, screenwriting, design and filmmaking, and are now considering new projects around participatory theater and more.

6.2 Using the Arts as a Tool for Peace Education

“When conveying a message through art, it reaches people’s hearts more smoothly. In addition to that, art expands people’s horizons and perceptions and makes them see things from other perspectives.”

Yusra Ishaq, filmmaker

The most common use of creative arts by peacebuilding and community-based organizations in Yemen is as an educational and outreach tool. Organizations like Meemz, Basement Foundation, YWBOD, Resonate!, Youth Leadership Development Foundation (YLDF) and others talk about how the arts can be an effective way of engaging with a broad audience – even more effective than “thousands of workshops or trainings,” says Shaima from Basement. Various representatives from local CSOs told us that art is a “unifying language” that can “reach all of society.” Art can convey messages in simple and accessible ways, said participants at our focus group discussion in Ta’iz – “the arts are attractive and there is no need for training or education for them to be understood.” Accessible art forms, such as music videos, animations and collective mural painting, are particularly common, and these work well in communities with high illiteracy rates.

Since the eruption of the conflict in 2015, civil society organizations in general and non-governmental organizations (NGOs) working on peacebuilding in particular have been facing multifaceted challenges and threats that have undermined their contribution to peacebuilding. As a result, they’ve had to find alternative ways of continuing to build peace in the community, and the creative arts has been one such avenue for many organizations. As a program

coordinator for one of the local peacebuilding organizations based in Sana'a puts it: "We work in an unfavorable context where using the word 'peace' or the notion of peacebuilding in our activities is prohibited and may lead to dire consequences, including the forcible shutdown of the organization. So we've had to adapt to these new realities, and of all the creative ways that we have brainstormed, arts-based peacebuilding activities – but especially songs – have proven to be the most impactful in terms of bringing people together and raising their awareness of different issues." In a wordless animated video produced by Volunteers in Spite of War with support from YLDF as part of their campaign on active citizenship, powerful messages are conveyed about coexistence and dialogue without any speech or text.

The popularity of using music – particularly music videos – to advocate peacebuilding-related themes in Yemen is markedly growing among CSOs and capturing the attention of UN Agencies like UNFPA, and international non-governmental organizations (INGOs) like the Manasati30 platform of RNW Media.⁴⁰ The relatively recently formed Youth Peace and Security Pact [al-tawafuq al-shababi li-l-salam wa-l-amn] have also opted to use music videos as part of their initial outreach to young people in Yemen. A recent and popular music video called 'It is Impossible [mustahila],' produced by youth CSO Resonate! and the Civil Alliance for Peace (CAP) uses a polychromic visual style to show how "it is not possible to live with only one color," as expressed by the artist Saba Jallas when she spoke about this video. Similarly, the music video 'The Same Location [nafs al-makan],' produced by YWBOD and CAP in January 2020 is used to show that "though we may have different ways and directions, love, arts and songs gather us here in the same location," says a representative from YWBOD. "'The Same Location' symbolizes the country, the homeland. Then the song goes on proclaiming that we are in the same boat, we shall use our arms to move it forward." These videos are getting upwards of 120,000 views on YouTube.

For a number of years, GIZ has been working with Yemeni artists to develop gaming apps intended to contribute to peace in Yemen. A series of four games launched via Google Play in 2017 "take [young people] on a journey of adventure from conflict to peace" with two games aimed at young people aged between 12 and 18, and two games aimed at 18 to 35 year olds (GIZ no date). The games have been well received, and the Facebook page of 'The Secrets of Arabia Felix' alone has more than 63,000 followers.

⁴⁰ Examples of videos produced include this video by UNFPA <https://www.facebook.com/watch/?v=1093416807779645> and this video by Manasati30 <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=VsfK1pjcXY> (all accessed 12.02.2021).

The impact of songs, videos and games that carry peacebuilding messages into the public is difficult to measure. However, when we asked visual artist Saba Jallas which works she felt best conveyed peace messages and gained widespread community appreciation, her immediate answers were the songs ‘The Same Location’ and ‘It is Impossible.’ “Although there are no centers for measuring awareness or for analyzing quantitative data for people’s attitude before and after listening to songs, as the effect of one song is not expected to change public opinion,” she says, “when you continue to display such messages, there will be momentum and peace spreading.”

CASE STUDY: Marib Girls Experiment with War Poetry to Raise Awareness Around Child Recruitment

The Marib Girls Foundation was established in 2016 by a group of Yemeni activists concerned with empowering Yemeni women and youth in the governorate Marib and their participation in building peace. They often use creative arts as a tool in their peacebuilding work, including mural painting, painting and drawing, music and poetry. “We are lovers of the arts in the first place as staff working in the Marib Girls Foundation and we believe in the power of art,” Intisar al-Qadhi, Executive Director of Marib Girls Foundation, told us. “We held several workshops aimed at raising participants’ awareness. But there were limitations because we could [only] target specific numbers. In the case of arts-related activities, we



Using art in peacebuilding at a Marib Girls training workshop

could reach more people than through running a workshop or training. We can talk to people again and again to deliver certain messages, but some messages can be conveyed more powerfully through a painting.”

One of the art forms that Marib Girls has been experimenting with is the shila, a form of singing becoming increasingly popular in rural areas in Yemen. Usually in Yemeni society shilas are meant to motivate and mobilize fighters and combatants. However, Marib Girls have turned this use on its head, deciding to instead use this traditional form of singing as a way of raising awareness about sensitive issues related to the conflict, such as child recruitment. “What we recorded is something with a different purpose; on a very sensitive topic,” says Intisar, “and it has been well-received by people.”

Using this form of art was not without challenges, however. Intisar told us that initially local radio channels refused to broadcast it, as the internationally recognized government insisted that child recruitment is not an issue in the areas under their control. The poets they reached out to help write the shilas were also hesitant, as “most poets here in Marib are still not into the idea of writing lyrics on peace,” and the poet they worked with had concerns that if he was seen as an advocate of peace, he would stop receiving work from other clients who wanted shilas to motivate their fighters.

Instead, therefore, Marib Girls disseminated the song through WhatsApp and other internet channels. “It became popular. Maribi people are lovers of poetic expressions and of poetry in general, so it was appealing to people,” says Intisar, “and when the poet himself saw how popular the shila had become, he asked us to write his name on the video and posted it on his page saying he is the lyricist of this work.”

“We have seen how art is more powerful in raising people’s awareness than any other tools or means,” says Intisar. “We are now convinced more than ever that the best activities that we can implement to promote peace and peacebuilding are through the arts.”

6.3 Using Creative Arts to Help Heal Trauma

Much has been written globally about the arts as a vehicle for trauma therapy and healing, at both individual and collective levels (see Cohen 2005). From storytelling to engaging physically with paint or music or dance, art can help people recover from and transcend traumatic experiences, and has been used to great effect in Sri Lanka, Syria, Bosnia-Herzegovina and many other

countries affected by conflict. Naidu-Silverman (2015) also writes about how art has the power to “democratize” and localize therapy and healing, moving it out of the realm of professionals and enabling ordinary people – who may often not have access to specialist mental health services – to work together to engage in their own, culturally specific, therapeutic processes. “Art can be used as a form of healing that is more affordable and easier to access than psychotherapy,” says writer Atiaf al-Wazir (2019: 3). “In fact, art helps people process trauma at their own pace, in controlled dosages. Through art, artists externalize the violence.”

As discussed briefly in Section 4.1 above, a number of the Yemeni artists we spoke to find the process of producing artworks – whether through writing, painting or performing – useful for their own wellbeing. This appears to be particularly true for Yemeni artists in exile, who perhaps have a degree of distance from the ongoing conflict to allow them to process the events of the war.⁴¹

However, in talking to both artists and community organizations across different areas of Yemen, we did not find many examples of mental health-oriented programs using arts. This is likely related in part to the lack of mental health provision in general in Yemen⁴² as well as the social stigma attached to the idea of mental health problems and psychological support. There was also a degree of hesitation expressed by some individuals over the risks and potential negative impacts of trauma-focused work. “Trauma healing sometimes has negative impact,” explained a painter during the Ta’iz focus group discussion, “it makes them feel that war is normal, particularly for the generation who does not know peace.”

We did, however, find a fair number of examples of small projects working with children, often using painting and drawing to help children express their feelings about the war. For example, children’s safe spaces – centers established by CSOs or governmental offices in coordination with local communities across Yemen and the UN protection cluster – use activities such as reading, drawing, music and puppet theater to help provide psychological and social support to children affected by armed conflict. They usually work with children aged between six and seventeen years old, with special programs for internally displaced children and children with special needs. In addition to

41 For example, see Bruni (25.01.2019) on painter Muhammad Murshid, based in Oregon, who uses his art to help him with the PTSD he’s been diagnosed with following the death of two of his friends during the revolution.

42 The Yemen war is having a huge impact on the mental health of the population, but there is very little specialist support and culturally specific support available. Prior to the conflict it is estimated that there were less than 50 mental health specialists in Yemen, which can be counted as 1 for every 600,000 people. For more information, see the work by Sana’a Center and Columbia University on the impact of the war on mental health in Yemen (Sana’a Center for Strategic Studies 2017) and by CARPO on post-traumatic stress disorder among Yemeni children as a consequence of the ongoing war (al-Ammar 2018).

the activities provided there is a case referral service for highly vulnerable or at-risk children. Puppet shows for engaging with children and families are also a popular tool in some areas of Yemen, including Ta'iz. In 2019, the Social Fund for Development also supported the Culture Office (an institution under the Ministry of Culture present in every governorate) to provide puppet theater for families in Ta'iz, with the objective of providing psychological support for children and their families affected by the war, and Volunteers in Spite of the War youth initiative have also staged puppet theater in Sana'a, to raise awareness on the dangers of violence and the importance of addressing trauma.

Similarly, smaller more informal projects like filmmaker Sara Ishaq's and street artist Murad Subay's 'Out of the Rubble' (a workshop for children who survived the Sana'a airstrikes but lost members of their family) and the National Organization for Community Development's (NODS) 'Yemen In Our Hearts' (an exhibition of art by seven to ten year olds in Ta'iz) have provided groups of children time and space to engage in escapism, fun, and emotional relief. "We tried not to talk about death or the war directly," writes Sara about the 'Out of the Rubble' workshop (Ishaq 03.02.2016). "Most of the time, they expressed their fears or sadness through their drawings, and refrained from speaking about their pain. The children exhibited signs of trauma and anxiety, and their drawings and paintings reflected this." Sara says that after the first day of activities, the children began to mingle more, laugh more and behave like children again: "On the first day, they seemed quite edgy, but as time passed, they became more immersed in games, artistic activities and playing together" (ibid.).

Although many of these activities are small in scale, and not always linked to specific protection mechanisms or professional mental health service provision, they are spaces in which the groundwork is being laid for opening communities up to the idea of the importance of mental health and wellbeing. "It would be naive to think that a four-day workshop could have any long-lasting benefits or suddenly change the lives of these children for the better," says Sara Ishaq, but explains that it is important for children to feel that they have not been forgotten. Promoting wellbeing is also implicit in a lot of the work done by local organizations, even if their projects are not framed under the banner of mental health or psychosocial support. Fu'ad al-Sharjabi from the Yemeni House of Music and Arts, explains that "through art young people can be strengthened to adapt to hardships. It can promote mental health, physical health, economic empowerment, skills and talents."

It is also likely that these kinds of activities will increase over time, if the right resources are made available. Many youth organizations and young artists in particular are increasingly open to conversations about mental health and trauma, and are pursuing solutions that are locally-driven. Meemz, for

example, are in the process of exploring the use of playback theater (a form of interactive, improvised theater where audience members share personal stories and watch as their story is retold and recreated by others) as a method of healing and providing relief from trauma. “We are still discussing ways to fund it,” says Shaima, but “we’re aiming to bring together normal people who are willing to express their feelings so they can heal from within.”

CASE STUDY/PROFILE: Ta’iz Comedy: Healing Through Humor

Stand-Up Comedy was a comedy event organized for four seasons (2016–2019) in Ta’iz by the Wasl Youth Initiative. The core motivation for organizing these events has been to “change the war mood to humor and comedy,” one of the organizers tells us. “In 2015 and 2016, people were depressed and disappointed because of the war and had only two options: getting involved in the conflict or not, by seeking work or humanitarian aid,” and the initiative thus wanted to provide an alternative and a safe space that could motivate and engage talented young men and women.

Many of the comedy performances put on by the club addressed issues of peace and coexistence, sometimes directly and sometimes indirectly, by talking about the difficulties and humor to be found in everyday life. In the second season, one young woman’s stand-up show satirically criticized the harassment of women and



Magician at a Wasl Youth Initiative Stand-Up Comedy show, 2017

girls, and the carrying of weapons; the two issues have become more common in the city due to the conflict.⁴³ Bullying and regional bigotry are also among the issues satirically addressed by the comedians. Other performances were about encouraging people not to give up hope, despite the horrors of war. In season three, a juggling show ended with a statement shown to the audience, written on a cardboard box: “Don’t feel disappointed, strive to achieve your dreams.”

People’s increasing interest in Stand-Up Comedy shows is reflected in the increased number of attendance each season (100 in 2016, 150 in 2017, 350 in 2018 and 600 in 2019) and this motivated the organizers to keep developing the agenda and the implementation of each season with more focus on issues relevant to people’s daily lives.

For Wasl Youth Initiative, comedy also provides psychological support for their audiences, and “contributes to trauma healing and to mitigating the tensions among people.” Outside of their comedy program, they also deliver projects for children and families in response to finding people “depressed and disappointed because of the war.” In ‘The Smiling Campaign’ a clown went to neighborhoods and areas affected by the war to have fun with children and bring humor and laughter alongside providing psychosocial support. This included sessions at the local cancer center, as well as at schools, mosques and public spaces in the city. These campaigns “were accepted and liked by the people” says Hussam from Wasl Youth Initiative, “and we have started to innovate something bigger to target other community members like youth and women, who are also affected by the war.”

6.4 Using Arts to (Re)Build Relationships, Foster Dialogue and Promote Reconciliation

“Because of the war, the social fabric has been affected. Bringing people from different social and political backgrounds into one place to have fun and share humor diffuses the tension among them.”

Hussam from the Stand Up Comedy Group in Ta’iz

Similar to mental health work, we didn’t find many examples of fully-fledged conflict resolution or reconciliation programs that use the arts, perhaps because Yemen’s war is still too much at a peak of violence, and often in other contexts these projects emerge as countries or regions start moving into a

⁴³ For further analysis of these issues and how they have been affecting women, see Heinze and Stevens (2018).

post-conflict phase.⁴⁴ For example, in Sri Lanka and various Sub-Saharan African contexts, participatory theater is commonly used as a way of addressing deep-seated, identity-based divisions that remain among and between communities following the cessation of violent conflict.⁴⁵ Such participatory theater allows people to take part in conflict narratives outside the risks of real life, where the performance itself is a safe space that makes room for multiple voices and perspectives, and for people to transcend or even overcome divisions (Premaratna & Bleiker 2010). There is some history of community theater in Yemen for addressing local conflict issues prior to the current war, including by the organization International Relief and Development (now Blumont), but participatory theater in general does not appear to be in common use in development or conflict prevention work since the outbreak of the current conflict.

What we did find, however, was a relatively large number of community-based Yemeni organizations using the creative arts to foster some of the dialogue and relationships that in the longer-term could lead to peace and reconciliation at the local and ultimately the national level. For example, a theater, music and comedy show called 'Ta'iz... Soul Restoration' was produced by YWBOD, which works with local youth on peacebuilding, to engage a local audience. The show reminded people of "the bonds that unite us and the human values that connect us," creating empathy for others' situations and reigniting a shared sense of identity. At the end of the show, the audience – including different political actors, local authority, security institutions, local councils, *'aqils* [neighborhood representatives], and other local leadership figures, as well as ordinary members of the public – signed a code of ethics to work together in recovering security and peace in the city and improving local service delivery. In January 2021, the 'Usaylan Cultural Festival in Shabwa (organized by 'Usaylan Association for Heritage and Culture) used arts and culture to bring together people from all the districts of Shabwa with the aim not only of maintaining local cultural heritage but also enhancing the relationships and peace among the Shabwani tribes.⁴⁶ Shaima bin Othman from Meemz also told us about a dance performance held by Meemz in al-Mukalla' where a dance troupe showed how sectarian differences can be resolved through dance.

44 A representative from Search for Common Ground also noted in an interview that there have not historically been many attempts to roll out large social or participatory theatre programs in Yemen, and when organizations tried to use participatory theatre techniques in the past they hit various obstacles, such as difficulties with women being prevented from participating in more rural areas and comparatively high expenses compared to producing radio or television dramas. This means there is not much ground to build on. However, the representative did feel that there could be scope for introducing this type of work in urban settings in Yemen.

45 See: Premaratna & Bleiker (2010) and Search for Common Ground's Participatory Theatre training manual, available here: <http://dmeformpeace.org/sites/default/files/Participatory-Theatre-Manual-EN.pdf> (accessed 02.02.2021).

46 Read more about the 'Usaylan Festival (in Arabic) and view images here: <https://www.independentarabia.com/node/187636/ثقافة-مهرجان-تراث-عسيلان-اليمنية-يحتفي-بالموروث-ويحمل-رسالة-سلام> (accessed: 22.02.2021).

This kind of relationship-building is a core part of conflict transformation, even if it begins at a very small scale, or involves initially small steps to build intergroup understanding, trust and empathy. Creative processes such as theater and storytelling offer nonthreatening spaces for dialogue to begin, argues Naidu-Silverman (2015: 12): by facilitating processes of empathy, art can enable opponents to understand the plight of the other and once again see the human being within. Each and every performance can help promote social cohesion, says Yusra Ishaq – “like when you see a street musician surrounded by casual bystanders who do not know each other and who are united only by the music.” However, this kind of work is also something that takes time and committed engagement. In their study of music and art in conflict transformation, Bergh and Sloboda (2010: 9) spoke to an elder in Sudan who said that relationships between tribes in his area had strengthened over time due to regular joint musicking over a ten-year period. “As of now, the different art initiatives provide a coping mechanism for Yemenis,” argues Levkowitz (15.01.2016), “yet, they are also instilling a sense of community, which sets the stage for reconciliation the day after the fighting stops.”

There is also a strong tradition of using creative art – specifically poetry – in conflict resolution in tribal areas of Yemen, a technique which has continued during the current war. As mentioned above, Steven Caton, Najwa Adra and Flagg Miller have all written in detail about how tribes in various regions of Yemen have used poetry and dance to prevent, interpret, mediate and resolve community conflict over issues such as land and livestock ownership and family disputes. Najwa Adra describes how short, two-line poems are utilized between ‘combatants’ to synthesize the issue at hand and allow for disagreement without confrontation. “When someone feels insulted, expressing anger in a poem is more sophisticated than physical violence or shouting,” she explains. “Moreover, rhetoric that one’s adversaries appreciate increases their willingness to accept compromise.”⁴⁷ In a 2020 video showing Yemeni tribes resolving a dispute, one tribe comes to another tribe and uses poetry to request forgiveness for the bloodshed of one of the other tribes’ men.

This tradition is something a number of youth groups feel can be built on in different ways, as well as tweaked for different audiences and participants. For example, the above-mentioned recent project by Romooz Foundation, ‘In the Land of Shattered Windows’, brought together a group of young poets from different regions of Yemen to compose and perform *balah*, long form poems meant to be performed competitively or as part of a dialogue (McKernan 19.05.2019). The young poets were connected in pairs, exchanging audio recordings via WhatsApp under five different themes. This project built on the tradition of

⁴⁷ See Najwa Adra’s blog on the topic of literacy here: <http://www.najwaadra.net/literacy.html> (accessed 01.02.2021).

poetic jousting – “a more controlled way of doing battle, that helps as a safety valve in getting rid of frustrations,” says poetry specialist Elisabeth Kendall. Poets involved in competitions and exercises such as these “are supported by all Yemenis in spite of their differences,” says Fu’ad al-Sharjabi from the Yemeni House of Music and Arts, “forgetting the sectorial, political and social divisions that exist among them.”

7 “Broken People Can’t Heal a Nation”: Conclusion and Recommendations

“Art is a process of inner healing. Inner peace is the start of peace in a society, of inner peace, family peace, community peace, and a nation that heals. Broken people can’t heal a nation.”

Atiaf al-Wazir (Brookings 26.05.2019)

Creative arts have the capacity to contribute to building peace in Yemen on multiple levels, from preserving collective memory of the conflict, to promoting a culture of tolerance, joy and coexistence, to giving space to marginalized voices and creating opportunities for communities to come together and begin a process of healing.

Creative arts can also help broaden out peacebuilding efforts, away from the more traditional focus on institution-building, military and political arrangements and top-down negotiation frameworks, and into arenas that are more inclusive and accessible and relevant to everyday life (see Premaratna & Bleiker 2010 and Piotrowska 2015⁴⁸). Peacebuilding activities based on imagination and creativity – although often small in scale, and viewed as ‘soft’ – may also be better placed than formal processes to deal with the complexity, messiness and “cacophony” of peace and conflict (Tellidis 2020: 3; Naidu-Silverman 2015). Arts also make for better tools for helping communities with the emotional and psychological impact of protracted violence than the ‘rational’ deliberations of a negotiation table (Cohen 2005).

As al-Wazir (Brookings 26.05.2019), Naidu-Silverman (2015) and Lederach (2005) argue, dealing with violent conflict is essentially dealing with brokenness: brokenness of society, community and individuals. Art and cultural activities

⁴⁸ Piotrowska (2015) argues that the traditional set of tools used in peacebuilding (such as various reconciliation and truth commissions, training and advocacy programs, peacekeeping, transitional justice, demobilization and disarmament efforts and others) rests on the promotion of democracy, market-based economic reforms and other processes associated with modern state building which often overlook the needs and capabilities of local populations.

provide spaces to creatively deal with the feelings of loss, hopelessness, despair, shame, betrayal, anger and pain that need to be addressed in order for a society to mend its wounds following conflict.

While creative arts may be put to good use within peacebuilding, they are also important to the future of Yemen in their own right. Many of the artists we spoke with talked about the need for freedom of expression and spaces to create art, regardless of whether the art directly supports peacebuilding. It is also important that arts are not instrumentalized – art should not be expected to convey a peace message, or promote a particular set of values. “Narratives should be implicit in their support for peacebuilding,” Rayan al-Shaybani told us. “If narratives directly support peacebuilding, they lose their beauty.” “I’m fed up with making art about peacebuilding, about coexistence, about trending topics,” said YouTuber and filmmaker ‘Abd al-Rahman during the UNESCO Yemen Youth Culture Forum, “I want to make art for art’s sake. We’re just like everyone else, we want to talk about art – filmmaking and storytelling is an art in itself, and we are all enthusiastic about stories from Yemen. There are more stories than [just] about hunger and suffering. Yemen is full of art, and we want a chance to show the art that we do.”

The current situation for both arts and community-based peacebuilding in Yemen is complex but promising. Although Yemeni artists are struggling in terms of infrastructure and resourcing, safety, specialist training and support, there is a huge amount of talent and energy in communities across the country. This includes a great number of talented and visible young women across all the different fields of art, even comedy videos, despite the additional restrictions they face. Similarly, though there are few fully-fledged, long-term peace projects involving the arts, small, innovative projects and collaborations between artists and peacebuilding organizations are emerging organically under exceptionally difficult circumstances. Many artists and peacebuilders that we spoke with also felt that public attitudes towards the role of the arts – and who can and cannot be an artist – are also changing. Intisar al-Qadhi from Marib Girls told us that in the beginning they faced challenges, with members of the public questioning and even destroying their artwork and murals. “But this perception is changing,” she told us – “people are becoming more aware of the value of art here in Marib.” Following the unfortunate passing of Ra’id Taha, a well-loved young Yemeni actor and star of the Khaleef Aden Theater Troupe, it’s been positive to see the Ministry of Culture recognizing his work, even naming a theater after him on 1 March 2021.

Finally, in the past year or two, international organizations and donors have also started to re-engage with non-emergency work, including supporting arts projects as forms of potential income generation and/or as a tool for

promoting longer-term peace and development. Both Meemz and Basement report a number of recent successes in fundraising and persuading donors of the importance of their work. Larger scale internationally-led projects are also emerging, such as the UNESCO-EU Cash for Work Partnership and the Goethe Institute's 'Cultural Networks Yemen', which are both supporting Yemeni creatives in socio-cultural and cultural fields, and helping to build skills and networks. 'Cultural Networks Yemen' has a particular focus on supporting cultural managers, including through a qualification and mentoring program. However, difficulties remain around using peace language in projects and programs, particularly in the North.

While it is important to not overstate the potential impact of art on the war – or overlook the role of art in inflaming and promoting violence – it is clear that as Yemen's conflict continues, locally-driven community-based peace programs will be increasingly important and arts can be a useful component within these. Further, a vibrant independent arts scene in itself is an important part of driving progressive social change more broadly, as we have seen in the run up to the 2011 revolution, particularly with theater. As writer and poet Rayan al-Shaybani argues, "even if arts are not a direct solution for the war, they can be peaceful expressions which stand against it." "Despite art's inability to change the course of conflict, its impact is very substantial on the human soul," agrees visual artist Saba Jallas.

Creative arts, with their ability to tap into the complex, emotional aspects of conflict, are an important part of the long-term processes of transforming attitudes, healing trauma, and creating the visions needed for social change. While artistic productions "do not have the ability to directly influence peacebuilding through political negotiations, their gradual impact on the long-term political, social and cultural environment is significant," writes Atiaf al-Wazir (2019: 5). "The artists in Yemen have proven that a small group can have a transformative impact, because their single episodes of collective action are perceived as components of a larger struggle."

Recommendations

The following are recommendations for local, national and international stakeholders interested in supporting the development of both arts and peacebuilding in Yemen:

For Local CSOs

Arts and peacebuilding projects and programs have the greatest chance of success when they are locally led, based on an understanding of local cultural traditions, and enable artists and communities to creatively identify and solve

the issues themselves (see Bailey 2019). Different communities will also need different things at different stages of the conflict, and local CSOs and local artists are the best placed to make decisions on how to engage community members, what the risks are, and how to be sensitive to the local conflict. This work is also about long-term relationship building, so it is important for it to be led by people embedded in the local community.

***Developing networks of community activists,
local artists and psychosocial support providers***

A key starting point for CSOs and artists is to build local networks and safe spaces (online or offline) of community activists and peacebuilders – artists, individuals and organizations – providing formal and informal psychosocial support locally. “I feel like we all work individually,” said Nasir al-Manj at the launch of the Karama Yemen Human Rights Film Festival (Karama 17.12.2020). Local CSOs can convene sessions for these groups and individuals to get to know one another better, identify issues or project ideas where they share common goals, and collaboratively develop community safety and wellbeing plans for the networks, including making collective decisions on the kinds of language safe to use about their work. Sessions could also include peer-to-peer learning on how artists and local CSOs can use arts to help themselves and others deal with trauma, exploring ways in which arts can help on both an individual and collective level.

Piloting new arts-based projects on trauma healing and community dialogue

Arts and peacebuilding projects can start small and still have an important impact within the community. Ideas for projects that have emerged from this research include collaborative work between CSOs, artists and local mental health practitioners to create safe spaces for communities and vulnerable groups to tell and process their stories using painting, poetry, oral storytelling or dance, building on the former groups’ existing relationships with communities and knowledge of their needs. Community dialogue projects using the arts could also be explored, engaging with communities and complex local issues through puppetry performances and even comedy; and exploring how participatory theater or theater of the oppressed could work in certain Yemeni contexts to bring communities together in dialogue. Other suggestions involve making more use of traditional tribal forms of poetry and dance, including turning poetry traditionally used for war propaganda into a tool for peace. Projects that get women involved in music, painting and theater are particularly important, but can create problems for the women involved so risks need to be fully analyzed and discussed. There are examples of small

projects around Yemen that have happened in these areas both before and since the outbreak or conflict, and where possible we would recommend that CSOs collaborate and share learning on what has worked well previously, and how this could be built on or expanded.

Improving understanding of peace, gender and conflict sensitivity

Local CSOs, particularly peacebuilding and youth and women's organizations, are well placed to run training programs for both artists and community activists on key aspects of peacebuilding, including conflict sensitivity and gender justice. This can help ensure that artists are playing a positive role, particularly for artists who may be otherwise unintentionally propagating negative or divisive messages or exacerbating local tensions, but also help artists who are worried about publishing their art in a complex environment where it might be interpreted in the wrong way. "We must first teach artists how to use art to achieve peace and set up courses for them in promoting peace so that they know the dimensions of the subject and can integrate their talent into peacebuilding" says Sami Shamsan, "then they are ready to build peace." Ideally, workshops and trainings will be two-way dialogues where the peacebuilders, youth and women's activists also learn from the experiences of the artists. During the trainings and workshops, codes of conduct could be collaboratively developed, as well as action plans for how to build conflict and gender sensitivity into the heart of any new projects.

For INGOs and Donor Governments

In addition to providing support to local CSOs and to artists to lead on the above, INGOs and donor governments have various ways in which they can play key roles in supporting Yemen's artists – by strengthening their significant contributions to civic life and to peace-building in Yemen, as well as by supporting art for art's sake.

Supporting spaces and collaborations for young Yemeni artists

Many of the artists we interviewed in this study spoke about the need to have arts spaces where artists can receive training, meet fellow artists, practice, perform, or watch and learn from the performance and production of other artists. Through helping establish and sustain safe physical and virtual independent art spaces, artists are very likely to take the opportunity to come together, learn, collaborate and share their work. Within this, it is possible to help create connections between artists in different areas of Yemen, and bridge some of the growing geographical divisions. "Gathering artists from all

over Yemen to do a collaborative piece of art for ‘unity’ can mend divisions between people,” said a number of participants at the focus group in Ta’iz. Assisting intergenerational collaborations was also raised by a number of both artists and peacebuilders.

International NGOs and arts organizations should also consider expanding their regional and transcontinental networks of both artists and peacebuilders,⁴⁹ to help facilitate exchanges of ideas and lessons learned, and create peer mentoring networks. As one of the Yemeni artists, who now lives in Europe, puts it: “a great challenge that we face in Yemen is the absence of the concept of mentorship. In Yemen, we do not have that. It is something basic – artists need guidance but even that is not available.”

Other artists spoke about the importance of having access to international training and capacity-building centers and art residencies which allow artists space to think creatively, without an overemphasis on the end product, as well as opportunities to enhance Yemeni artists’ visibility more globally – particularly for female Yemeni artists. This would not only provide professional development and networking opportunities to artists but would also give artists national and international recognition of their important roles in their communities. For artists and CSOs interested in pursuing trauma healing work, training on how engagement with the arts can boost mental health and provide psychosocial support for vulnerable adults and children could be provided, though with a strong emphasis on local, culturally-sensitive practices and perhaps involving practitioners from other Middle East and conflict-affected countries where Yemeni practitioners are not available. Artists and peacebuilders from these networks should also be included in international policy discussions and policy forums to bring greater creativity to complex problem-solving, rather than creating silos between artists and policy analysts.

Developing different ways of thinking about funding and evaluation

INGOs and donors should focus on developing different ways of thinking about funding and evaluation when it comes to arts and peacebuilding projects or programs. Artists reiterated the need for INGOs and donors to design flexible funding modalities that don’t place additional constraints on artists or ask for a particular focus, but instead allow for innovation and even ‘failure,’ and place trust in the artists’ and peacebuilders’ decision-making on the ground. Space and opportunity for arts and peacebuilding work is likely to open up as quickly as it might close down, and projects will need to be flexible enough to handle an extremely dynamic environment, with different

⁴⁹ An interesting example of this in the Syrian context is the Syria Cultural Index, an online platform that aims to map and connect the Syrian artistic community around the world.

types of intervention appropriate at different times and with different communities. Photographer Thana Faroq commented on this, saying “what is happening now is that they give funds to artists to make exhibitions and I feel like they are instructed to do what the funder is asking them to do.”

Funding mechanisms also need to take into consideration the structural barriers that artists and arts organizations have long been subject to, and budgets should allow for infrastructure items such as generators, as well as proper remunerations for artists and peacebuilding teams. An example of a funding mechanism which could be emulated for arts and peacebuilding projects in Yemen and elsewhere is the FRIDA young feminist funding model, who use a participatory grantmaking model to make grants for flexible funds and core costs, rather than just short-term projects. Capacity-building programs to build proposal writing skills are not always the best use of time for small organizations and informal groups, and donors should also consider engaging directly with artists and arts organizations to understand their needs and priorities and develop funding mechanisms accordingly.

It is also vitally important to rethink what positive impact on the community in the longer term might look like when it comes to evaluation and assessment frameworks. Relationship-building and attitude change is at the heart of most community-driven approaches to peacebuilding, and much peacebuilding work therefore is about the process as well as a (potentially quite far off) end result. Writer Atiaf al-Wazir argues that the same can be said about art: the process and the interactions are as important as the final product (Karama 17.12.2020). This can be hard to measure, as indicators for success are often either intangible or process-oriented, and progress is often non-linear (see Bailey 2019). Further, in traditional results-driven frameworks, often the creativity and even the wellbeing of those delivering the projects can be put at risk, which can threaten to undermine the work in the longer term. While there is currently very little guidance globally that shows how to effectively measure the impact of ‘soft’ creative arts approaches on peace, human rights and reconciliation, an open, exploratory and collaborative approach to thinking about change is required, with learning collected and collaboratively discussed and analyzed as work takes place.

Improving human rights protections for artists

Shatha and Saber, two artists who have been awarded an APF Fellowship and are currently in residence at the University of Edinburgh in Scotland, say that part of the problem is the lack of value placed on artists, compared to journalists, politicians, humanitarian workers, or even conflict actors. Concerns over freedom of expression tend to focus more on the news media, rather than on arts and artists – threats to artistic freedom are rarely mentioned

in international discourse about Yemen. “No-one mentions when artists are getting abuse,” they told us, “nobody cares, not even the human rights organizations. When you see their reports for each year, there’s nothing about the regulations against artists.” It took them over two years and multiple applications to find protection after they started receiving a concerted campaign against them in Yemen, while at the same time some of the key instigators of the campaign of harassment against them were being presented with gifts at the Stockholm negotiations. “That time was really, really hard on us psychologically,” says Shatha, “but [once we heard from APF] we felt like someone cared, that someone had listened, and that kept us strong.”

In addition to making more international protection funds, safe havens, residencies and visas available to artists, Saber and Shatha say that it is equally important to start properly recording the abuses and violations against artists and freedom of expression within Yemen. International human rights organizations should include this in their investigations and reporting and support local human rights organizations and cultural organizations to document, monitor and advocate for freedom of artistic expression. Where possible, INGOs should be working to proactively identify artists at risk, making funds available for legal aid and legal support within Yemen where relevant. Information about artists’ rights, resources and protection programs should be made accessible and easily available in Arabic. Particular attention should be paid to artists receiving online abuse and threats which are likely to spill over into real life risks such as abductions, arrests and violence,⁵⁰ and to the specific threats faced by women artists. International governments should put pressure on Yemeni authorities and the conflicting parties, within and outside of any peace process, to commit to protecting space for art and artists, and cease inciting and enacting violence and abuses against the arts community. “We strongly demand the protection of artists from hate speech so we can return to our civil peace foundations and to productivity,” says Shaima bin Othman (02.12.2019) from Meemz.

For the Yemeni Authorities

Government actors, at both the central and local level, can be a powerful support for the development of arts and culture, and can play a key role in helping ensure equitable access to the arts even in times of conflict. Supportive state actors can also help establish an encouraging environment and a more supportive space for art and artists, providing better infrastructure and facilities and also by integrating creative arts into education. Artists and CSOs both require support from the state, as well as space to be independent from it.

⁵⁰ Theatre Without Borders have a good collection of resources on their website, but nothing available in Arabic <https://theatrewithoutborders.com/artists-human-rights/artists-safety/> (accessed 21.02.2021).

Including creative arts as a core part of the public education curriculum

Currently there are no art classes in primary and secondary schools and only a very small number of departments, colleges and technical institutes of creative art exist across the country. "In schools," says visual artist Saba Jallas, "we were far from art, we disputed it, and thus we quarreled with each other." The relevant education ministries should support the resumption of art, music and drama classes at both primary and secondary level, reestablish creative arts on the education curriculum, as well as support schools (where they are functioning) to partner with artists to provide extracurricular activities such as theater production, music performances, painting activities and competitions, paying particular attention to students who are often excluded from or marginalized within the arts, such as girls, children with disabilities and IDPs. Salary payments need to resume for all teachers as soon as possible, and additional teachers and tutors with arts backgrounds should be supported to join the workforce.

Establishing departments of creative arts in the universities and colleges is also important, as is funding art-specific institutes and centers where possible. Supporting a greater emphasis on arts at all levels of education will not only discover talents and generate creative arts and artists in Yemen, but also help establish a culture where art is valued and protected, and seen as an important part of life for everyone in Yemen. "The new generations should believe in the role of arts," says Haifa Subay. "If we start at the smaller level – let's not look at the macro level, but at the micro level, bringing art to the household and schools – then slowly, slowly it can evolve from there," says Thana Faruq.

Improving public access to the arts

Limited public access to arts and art activities can make art a luxury of only the elites. Many public spaces have been either partially or totally affected by the conflict and many are located in conflict zones and this is an actual bottleneck to art and artists as well as to the general public. It is important that Yemeni citizens have access to spaces such as libraries and theater even during an ongoing conflict – as places of learning and entertainment, but also to escape the trauma of the war and keep community links alive. Cultural authorities and respective ministries should prioritize re-opening and re-establishing public spaces, particularly libraries, theaters, cinemas, museums and cultural centers.

Particular attention should be paid to ensuring inclusive access to the arts: local government authorities should support events and arts organizations in rural as well as urban areas, and also consider how to overcome any barriers to access for disadvantaged and vulnerable groups such as women, children,

internally displaced people (IDPs), and people with disabilities. For example, by supporting arts spaces within particular places, such as IDP camps, children's public hospitals and girls schools, and establishing (even within existing public premises) theaters, libraries, cinemas, etc. exclusively for women and children. The cultural centers can also run in a way that separate internal spaces for women and/or run specific days for particular groups of society. The authorities should also take appropriate action against those who abuse or harm any such groups, particularly women, for attending or participating in art activities, and speak out when social or religious norms are being manipulated or used as a pretext against such activities.

Offering a more enabling environment for artists

The restrictive and non-supportive environment is a key challenge for artists who are trying to produce and disseminate their art within Yemen. Not only does Yemen have "no national strategy" for supporting art, says Rayan al-Shaybani, but there is also "no legislative support for art and artists." Many artists and CSO representatives also told us that when they experienced problems or threats from members of the public as a result of their work, local authorities did little to help them. This was particularly the case for women, with the authorities often even siding with those issuing the threats. The authorities' restrictions on artists and censorship of artworks are also challenges artists have faced during and even prior to the current conflict. Moreover, customs charges are imposed on art materials, tools and instruments so that affording these is also a challenge. All of these factors contribute to an environment for artists in Yemen that is not enabling, but rather thwarting and disappointing.

State authorities should develop national and even local strategies and plans to make sure that women and other marginalized groups are supported to engage in art through targeted initiatives and by helping them to promote their work. Authorities should also offer more legislative support for art and artists, including considering tax and customs exemptions for art supplies and equipment, the removal of official censorship and restrictions, while also ensuring action against hate speech and incitement to violence.

For the Yemeni Private Sector

In the past, Yemen's private sector has played an important role in supporting and investing in independent arts in Yemen, both through its own initiatives and in partnership with the government and local authorities. As Rayan tells us, the private sector "played a role in supporting art and cultural activities, but this role has been demolished because of the war." This role could be usefully revived at a time when little government support is available.

Investing in local art and arts events

Private sector organizations, such as the Ha'il Sa'id Group,⁵¹ have long played an important role in supporting arts in Yemen, and the resumption and expansion of such contributions is highly recommended. Yemeni companies can sponsor and help establish arts centers and institutions for art education, as well as organize arts events such as concerts, festivals, and exhibitions, either for profit or free of charge. Financing or organizing large-scale arts contests and competitions, like the al-Sa'id Prize for Science and Culture, is another way for the private sector to support the arts and raise the visibility of new Yemeni talent, and themes could include peace and development-related issues. Hundreds of artists used to compete to win Ha'il Sa'id's Prize for Arts every year before the eruption of the conflict.

Many of the artists also have to have other jobs in order to secure income and livelihood. Haifa Subay, for example, works as an administrative assistant in a private company, while Rayan says that the need to secure a separate income source "makes writing marginal in your life." This doesn't only cause uncertainty for the future of art in Yemen, but also hinders the creativity and practices of individual artists. The private sector can itself play a key role in creating employment opportunities for artists by investing in arts projects and infrastructure development, as well as working alongside government authorities to place value on artistic productions as an important part of the development of Yemen's economy.

Contributing to public-private partnerships to help develop Yemen's art infrastructure

Prior to the conflict, the private sector in Yemen used to have partnerships with the government, primarily supporting infrastructure development such as schools, universities, roads and sport clubs. Such a partnership can also exist in the field of arts, and the building of cultural centers, cinemas, theaters and art institutes are good opportunities for this partnership. This kind of support can also lead to marketing opportunities for the private sector, just as in sport clubs and stadiums, where advertising sign boards are used. This will be a good opportunity for the government-private sector joint partnership to ensure more outreach with sustainable impact, contributing to civic engagement and peacebuilding at both local and national levels.

51 Al-Sa'id Foundation for Science and Culture established in 1996 by Ha'il Sa'id Group, the biggest private sector group of companies. It works on research, motivation and support for the arts, organizing events, capacity building and competitions.

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About the Project

This paper is part of the Yemen Policy Center's project al-Siyasa al-Madaniya funded by the German Federal Foreign Office. The project seeks to contribute to discussions on Yemen in and outside of the country, while acting as a bridge between Yemeni and non-Yemeni writers and academics. Focusing specifically on peacebuilding, it combines academic writing with creative formats such as storytelling, photography and film, to create a dialogue between local and international knowledge.

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About the Partners

About CARPO

CARPO was founded in 2014 by Germany-based academics trained in the fields of Near and Middle Eastern Studies, Political Science and Social Anthropology. Its work is situated at the nexus of research, consultancy and exchange with a focus on implementing projects in close cooperation and partnership with stakeholders in the Orient. The researchers in CARPO's network believe that a prosperous and peaceful future for the region can best be achieved through inclusive policy making and economic investment that engages the creative and resourceful potential of all relevant actors. Therefore, CARPO opens enduring channels for interactive knowledge transfer between academics, citizens, entrepreneurs, and policymakers and supports research that's relevant for the region and beyond.

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About YPC

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 Ta'iz, Yemen. Yemen Policy aims to impact local and international policymaking with the ultimate goal of improving 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 doesn't only aspire to put local communities into a position to help themselves, but also to put Yemeni civil society activities into the spotlight.

Website: www.yemenpolicy.org

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About YWBOD

Established in 2013, Youth Without Borders Organization for Development (YWBOD) is a Yemeni NGO working on youth empowerment, peacebuilding, coexistence and community peace and security through capacity building, awareness raising, research, and technical and financial support for youth initiatives at the local and national level. It recently established a Youth Services Center as a safe space for young women and men, providing capacity building; legal, health and trauma-related services; and sports, entertainment and art activities. In its work, it establishes partnerships with local communities, state institutions, the private sector and other CSOs. YWBOD is a member of the Civil Alliance of Peace, which is a coalition of CSOs in different Yemeni governorates. It is also a member and currently the Steering Group Representative of the United Network of Young Peacebuilders (UNOY) for the MENA region and a member of the Civil Society Platform for Peacebuilding and State Building (CSPPS).

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