



U.S. Support for Conflict Resolution During Ongoing Crises in Yemen

June 1, 2015

Dear Secretary Kerry and USAID Acting Administrator Lenhardt,

The U.S. government's prioritization of conflict prevention, mitigation, peacebuilding, and good governance is essential during times of ongoing crises when situations are the most dire. Not only are the benefits clear, but the risks of disengaging during crises are extremely high. As the U.S. considers how best to engage in countries and regions facing crises today, it must continue to support civilian leadership to resolve conflicts and support democracy, or risk working against its own goals. The 2015 QDDR states, "Mobilizing international action to prevent conflict saves lives and resources and improves the chances of sustained peace." As NGOs and individuals committed to the prevention of violent conflict and atrocities, we agree wholeheartedly. The recent announcement of the suspension of USAID assistance for conflict prevention and good governance in Yemen, without any provision to continue support to civilian-led conflict management efforts, sends the wrong message to the Yemeni people and undercuts U.S. foreign policy interests.

Yemen is in the midst of a widespread crisis and is an excellent example of a country where building social cohesion is critical during ongoing violence. Civilians across the country are suffering as different parties to the conflict jockey for power, including Houthis, forces loyal to former president Hadi, Al Qaeda, and regional powers. Over 1840 civilians have been killed, and over 500,000 people have been forced to flee their homes. Bombings and mass violence have entrenched social divisions, created new grievances and dividing lines, destabilized institutions, and created a humanitarian disaster that is getting worse every day.

The U.S. has significant interest in supporting a stable Yemen, despite the challenges and risks of engaging during ongoing conflict. A peaceful, just, and democratic solution to the current crisis is critical to countering violent extremism in the broader region, preventing mass atrocities in line with PSD 10, and reinforcing American values of supporting just and democratic

governance. Below are four priorities the U.S. should keep in mind as it works to help build stable peace in countries with ongoing crisis, and specifically in Yemen.

1. **Supporting civilian, locally-led conflict prevention, mitigation, peacebuilding, and good governance is both critical and feasible during ongoing conflict.**¹ While humanitarian assistance is essential to alleviating suffering, it is equally important to continue to support local leaders and civil society working to prevent violence and address the causes of conflict. Conflict resolution and social cohesion work can be done during ongoing crisis, and it must be part of a holistic U.S. strategy in countries such as Yemen. While this work may be seen as higher risk, the 2015 QDDR notes, “Guided by our foreign policy objectives, we will encourage our teams to err on the side of engagement and experimentation, rather than risk avoidance.”
2. **Continuity of programming matters. If support to local leaders working for peace and good governance is suspended, they can’t just pick up where they left off.** USAID and the Department of State support excellent conflict prevention programs in countless countries with difficult operating environments. It takes years to build the trust needed for this work, and the relationships built by long-term engagement are the most important during times of crisis. If programs are suspended during crises, it is impossible for them to pick up where they left off. These situations change daily, relationships are lost, key staff lose employment, and the U.S. loses influence.
3. **Supporting inclusive governance and local alternatives to violence sends a positive message to conflict-affected communities and public.** U.S. foreign assistance to build stability indicates that America is invested in long term peace and supporting civilian-led action to find solutions to violent crises. Any suspension of support to democracy and governance assistance or peacebuilding programming during crises sends the opposite message to local leaders and communities, implying that the U.S. government is not interested in supporting dialogue and will only respond to the results of the conflict rather than the causes.
4. **Support to conflict management and democratic governance is critical for upstream prevention.** Evidence shows that countries with a history of violent conflict are much more likely to have conflicts in the future. As a result, when the U.S. supports effective conflict resolution, these efforts do not just address one crisis but also build resiliency against future violent conflict. Fundamental components of conflict resolution include identifying and addressing drivers of conflict, building relationships and trust, and creating space for common ground. This work will continue to pay dividends, help break cycles of conflict, and contribute to preventing future violence.

¹ The U.S. has made a significant investment in supporting Yemen’s transition. USAID and State Department committed \$356 million to Yemen in Fiscal Year (FY) 2012 to support the national dialogue and constitution building – the largest amount of annual assistance ever provided by the U.S. government for Yemen. In (FY) 2014 and 2015, the U.S. government committed a further \$188 million in humanitarian assistance alone. This represents a significant investment in the future of Yemen and has helped build civil society and foster social capital amongst a diverse range of actors

In line with these principles, we request that the Department of State and the U.S. Agency for International Development (USAID) deepen their engagement in support of civilian, locally-led conflict prevention, mitigation, peacebuilding, and good governance amid the crisis in Yemen and in other crises in the world. We ask that the U.S. Government reconsider the decision to suspend civilian-led conflict management and democracy and governance-funded programs of USAID assistance and consider additional mechanisms to support the aspirations of the people of Yemen and other conflict-affected populations for peaceful, just, and democratic governance. Thank you for your support and leadership.

Sincerely,

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