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National dialogues as an interruption of civil war – the case of Yemen

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ABSTRACT

Yemeni tribes have traditionally used dialogues to prevent clashes. At national level this tradition has been applied to prevent civil wars. This article discusses whether national dialogues are suitable instruments for setting disputes at national level, looking at the circumstances under which these dialogues could lead to successful results. Several criteria are considered, of which building an environment of trust and ownership of external interventions seem to be the most significant. Trust-building before entering into formal negotiations is important, but it is unclear whether this should be a separate phase, or can be part of a reconciliation stage, which the literature on dialogues singles out as highly conducive for success. Local ownership is an important precondition for success in the theoretical discourse, but (direct) international and regional involvement is required, as external bodies are often the cause of internal conflicts in Yemen.

INTRODUCTION

While US President Trump obviously regards citizens of Yemen as a threat to national security (considering his March 2017 decree forbidding them to enter the United States), the country at the southern end of the Arabian Peninsula generally only makes the news in the West because of its poverty, hunger or frequent civil wars. The latter is no surprise as the history of the Republic of Yemen at first glance seems to be an almost continuous war between different political and/or tribal opponents. A closer look, however, shows that there have actually been different civil wars and that almost each of these have ended in what broadly could be called a dialogue that discussed important national issues.1

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The latest of these dialogues was the National Dialogue Conference (NDC) that took place in 2013 after the Arab Spring. The NDC might be the most well known, and certainly the most recent, but it certainly wasn’t the first. In fact, these dialogues already go back to the time before unification of North and South Yemen in 1990. Between 1962 and 1970, North Yemen was plagued by a civil war between supporters of the revolution of September 1962, backed by Egypt, and supporters of the Imam (the former ruler of North Yemen) backed by Saudi Arabia. It took four dialogues – each aimed at bringing political factions to the table to discuss and solve the contentious issues that led to conflict – before reconciliation was reached between the two warring factions in 1970.

While North Yemen was fighting and discussing its civil war, South Yemen got its autonomy from the British Empire (1967) and subsequently witnessed a profound clash between the Marxist wing and the Liberal wing within the National Front for Liberation. In June 1969, the clash was settled with the Marxist wing taking over power. At the end of 1970, the People’s Republic of South Yemen was officially renamed as People’s Democratic Republic of Yemen and all political groups were converged in the Yemeni Socialist Party. While North and South Yemen occasionally took up arms against each other (i.e. in 1972 and 1979), this one-party rule in the South witnessed many political conflicts, ending with military coups (e.g. the massacre of 13 October 1985 in the city of Aden, when most of the Socialist Party’s leaders were assassinated). At the same, the one-party rule also prevented a competitive opposition from emerging and thus a dialogue that could have brought different groups together. Essentially the bloodshed continued until unification between South Yemen and North Yemen on 22 May 1990.

From unification in 1990 until 1994, integrating the two states into one union went hand in hand with conflict. Severe political crises took place between the former ruling elites of the South (represented by the Socialist Party (SP)) and the General People’s Congress (GPC) in the North. These two main political factions decided to form a Committee for a dialogue that sought to reconcile the views and heal the crisis, which resulted in the signing of the national document of convention and agreement. However, in the summer of 1994 civil war broke out in the country.

The GPC and the Muslim Brotherhood/Islah Party formed a coalition, led by the former President of Yemen Ali Saleh, to eliminate the insurgency of the SP in 1994. After the first parliamentary elections in 1997, with the GPC winning full majority in parliament, the Islah Party was ousted. Between 1997 and 2001, several small dialogues were held between the two parties. In the meantime, Yemen faced many clashes in that period (e.g. about the division of the political and economic legacy of the War of Secession (Civil War 1994)) with the GPC and Islah Party cooperating to remove the SP from the power map in Yemen.

Between 2002 and 2010, Yemen faced successive political, economic and security crises. In 2002, the opposition political parties formed one political entity under the name of the Joint Meeting of the Yemeni Oppositions (JPM). This combined the Muslim Brotherhood Party (Islah Party), the Socialist Party (SP), some of the

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3The unification was concurrent with the falling of the autumn leaves and with the collapse of the Soviet Union, which was the primary patron of the Socialist State of South Yemen. Lacking the budgetary support from the Soviet Union, South Yemen was confronted with a troublesome time, and the main alternative for the political leaders became just to go together with North Yemen. A few centres of power in North Yemen resisted this unification, yet it still happened.
Nasserist parties, and the Party of Truth (in Arabic: Hizb al-Haqq), which is the Zaydiyyah Islamist political party in Yemen. Regardless of the different ideologies and philosophies of its segment parties, the JPM provided ‘a substantial challenge to the longstanding rule of President Ali Abdullah Saleh and his General People’s Congress party (GPC),’ by putting pressure on the ruling regime to bring about real political and economic reforms in the country. During that period, a dialogue was held for a long time, but it did not result in any practical solutions.

During the Arab Spring in 2011, Yemen witnessed numerous demonstrations and sit-ins in several provinces led by the JPM and young people. While demanding the ruling regime to relinquish power, interactions between different groups were deadlocked. This time, international and regional communities intervened with the Gulf Cooperation Council (GCC) Initiative. This Initiative aimed to persuade conflicting Yemeni parties to enter into peace talks and to have a two-year political transition period starting with President Saleh ‘agreeing’ to step down (after 33 years) and Abed Rabbo Mansour Hadi, the Vice President from South Yemen, being installed as Interim President.

In 2013, an international consortium consisting of the UN, EU, Russia, China and the GCC helped the country to organise a Comprehensive National Dialogue Conference to solve all the national issues and to plan a new future for a democratic and federal State of Yemen. However, even before the NDC was officially concluded in 2014, the Houthi movement allied with former president Saleh to control the majority of Yemen’s provinces. With Yemen once again being plunged into civil war, Saudi Arabia upon the request of transitional president Hadi formed a coalition with a number of countries to crack down on the Houthis.

All in all, civil wars and (national) dialogues seem to go hand-in-hand in Yemen. It begs the question why these dialogues, which for all purpose were intended to provide a platform for discussing and resolving important national issues, did not manage to solve war and prevent the outbreak of new hostilities. We investigate this question by analysing to what extent these successive dialogues lived up to six preconditions for a successful dialogue: (1) trust; (2) inclusion; (3) shared vision; (4) balance of power; (5) visibility of implementation and (6) ownership. By analysing national dialogues from the 1960s up to the present, it adds to our understanding of the history and trajectory of (national) dialogue processes in Yemen; an issue that up to now has only been dealt with minimally and fragmentarily. Besides, analysing and scrutinising the similarities and differences between the NDC 2013 and its precursors opens a learning window for future and systematic peace processes in the country.

We start by delving deeper into preconditions for creating an environment for successful dialogues coming up with six of these based on literature. We then describe and analysis the historical dialogue processes in Yemen (1962–2013) based on this preconditions framework. After a comparative analysis between the NDC 2013 and its precedents, we summarise our findings providing both a theoretical reflection as well as recommendations for future dialogues.

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5Gulf Cooperation Council (GCC), political and economic alliance of six Middle Eastern countries – Saudi Arabia, Kuwait, the United Arab Emirates, Qatar, Bahrain, and Oman. The GCC was established in Riyadh, Saudi Arabia, in May 1981.9 June 2015.
For data collection, we relied on a mix of methods. First, with respect to the past dialogues in both North and South Yemen, and later the Yemen Republic, a review of secondary sources was carried out. With information on these historical dialogues often being incomplete, not in all cases all six elements for a successful dialogue could be included. As the National Dialogue 2013 in Yemen is relatively new, we were able to include different sources. Interviews have thus been conducted in 2015 with 50 Civil Society Organisations (CSOs), 3 political factions, 12 bloggers and 3 local academic scholars who have either organised or taken part in activities/platforms related to the NDC 2013. The CSOs represented organisations that had a seat at the NDC table (14 CSOs), were involved in the dissemination of NDC outcomes and are thus to some extent ‘insiders’ as well (11), or were not involved in the NDC (25). The semi-structured interviews were organised under the following broad headings: strengths, weaknesses, and lessons of the NDC. On each of these aspects, the interviewee was requested to rank the points they raised in terms of importance, more specifically in the form of a ‘top 3’ (most relevant/urgent).

Towards an enabling environment for a successful dialogue

Overall, the term dialogue refers to a wide range of activities, from high-level negotiations and mediation to community attempts at reconciliation. The objective of a dialogue is to achieve practical and peaceful solutions to problems and conflicts. At a deeper level, the aim is to address conflict drivers, build a greater national consensus and social cohesion, and define a shared vision of the future. Although dialogues are only one aspect of peacebuilding, they play an indispensable role in efforts by national actors and the international community to respond to violent conflict and to build national vision in fragile contexts.

Dialogues take place in many forms; are initiated and facilitated by a variety of actors; and take place at various levels of society. Odendaal identifies four main types of dialogue: (i) high-level or summit dialogues involving the top leadership of contending sections of the population, often initiated or mediated by the international community; (ii) track two interventions by civil society organisations that provide discreet and relatively low-risk opportunities to explore options, and build trust and skill in the process of dialogues; (iii) dialogues that take place as an indispensable aspect of planning for peacebuilding, state

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6 The data was gathered within the framework of a research project entitled: ‘The 2013 National Dialogue Conference (NDC) in Yemen: Why did it fail to prevent conflict?’, for which a grant was obtained by the Dutch Science Foundation NWO-WOTRO under its Security & Rule of Law window. The project takes up the following two tasks: 1) a meta-analysis (‘systematic review’) of a comprehensive set of NDC evaluations published by academic researchers, political analysts, donor agencies etc. to pinpoint the NDC’s strengths and weaknesses; and 2) interviews with local civil society actors (including women’s rights organisations), political factions, and bloggers to document their perspective on the merits and flaws of the NDC.


building and development starting from the idea that such planning has to be driven by political dialogue; and (iv) multi-level dialogues, where dialogue takes place at various levels of society in an effort to engage citizens in building sufficient national consensus on critical challenges. These four types are not mutually exclusive, but rather complementary. It is often advisable to pursue different types of dialogue in parallel, on the condition that they have the same overall objectives and are not contradictory.

Being a complex political and psychological process, the success of dialogues relies on specific preconditions. An under-estimation of its complexity contributes to failure. Moreover, pursuing dialogues in an inappropriate manner and at inappropriate times may do harm by reducing confidence, increasing cynicism and contributing to what has become known as ‘dialogue fatigue’. Six such preconditions can be distinguished based on different views of change in peacebuilding theory: (1) trust; (2) inclusion; (3) clear and shared vision; (4) power balance; (5) visibility of implementation and (6) ownership. Table 1 provides an overview of the main questions with regard to these six preconditions.

The first important issue entails bringing representatives of belligerent groups together to interact in a safe space. The expectation is that the interactions will put a human face on the other, foster trust, and eventually lead to a reduction of tensions. This strategy relies on a theory of change known as the contact hypothesis essentially stating that if key actors from belligerent groups are given the opportunity to interact, they will better understand and appreciate one another, be better able to work with one another, and prefer to resolve conflicts peacefully.

Inclusion is of critical importance if only because exclusion is often a major cause of conflict. It is in most cases a contentious issue and in reality it is difficult to satisfy everyone. In order to safeguard the legitimacy of decisions taken during a dialogue, it is necessary to be ‘inclusive enough’. The inclusion of women, for instance, is crucial as the political dialogue process can be a window of opportunity for addressing structural inequalities. The inclusion of youth at the same time would reflect the demographic realities of many societies. Comprehensive and systematic inclusion should also ensure the incorporation

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**Table 1. Successful dialogue and hypotheses.**

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Theoretical Dimensions</th>
<th>Hypotheses. To have successful dialogue the following is considered:</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Trust</td>
<td>Trust-building (Was there trust?)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Inclusion</td>
<td>Comprehensive Inclusion (how broad was dialogue, and how inclusive was the dialogue?)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Clear and shared vision</td>
<td>Clear objective and Vision (Were the objectives clear; did the participants share them?)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Power balance</td>
<td>Power Balance (Was there something of a balance of power?)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Visibility of Implementation</td>
<td>Possibility of implementing the outcomes (Could the decisions that were taken be implemented?)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Ownership</td>
<td>Very high level of local ownership (Was the dialogue externally or internally driven?)</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

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10 Andries Odendaal, ‘The role of political dialogue’.
11 Ibid., 10.
of implicit and explicit local knowledge, which can help to determine who can change the course of the conflict and/or has the potential to resolve the conflict. In general, these actors can be found at three levels: top formal and informal leadership (elite); middle-range formal and informal leadership; and grassroots formal and informal leadership.

The objectives of the dialogue should be not only being clear but also be shared if a dialogue wants to address the root causes of conflict, especially the ‘protracted ones’ as they are deeply rooted and reflect identity problems like tribe, community, religion or nation. This is particularly of importance as there may be a long history of ethno-political conflicts within a nation-state. ‘A dialogue’s objectives should provide for substantive conversation around the major grievances of all key interest groups but not get mired in details, which are often better resolved by technical bodies or future governments […] All the related factions involved in the dialogue have to share the same objectivity as the dialogue as a whole seeks to reach agreement on key issues facing a country. In cases where an elite agreement was missing, dialogue processes could not independently alter existing power balances and lead to peaceful transitions.

Another critical factor determining the success of dialogue is the capability of leaders to form coalitions across political and social divides in order to implement decisions stemming from the dialogue process. Where the capability to form such coalitions does not exist, little can be expected from dialogue in terms of lasting results. There should therefore be an agreed mechanism for implementing outcomes. This agreed-upon plan ensures that the resulting recommendations are implemented through a new constitution, law, policy or other programmes. Because national dialogues take place within a broader transition, they often have formal or informal relationships to transitional justice, constitution making and elections.

Without a clear implementation plan, a national dialogue risks consuming extensive time and resources without producing any tangible results. Political will is important for the dialogue to reach inclusive agreements, and for effective implementation. Political commitment is influenced by internal and external political pressure, but is strongest when participating parties enjoy a sense of ownership of the dialogue process. Stigant and Murray argue that local ownership is essential for the success of a dialogue process. Without a solid and well-regarded national facilitator and an adequate coalition of the nation’s groups, a dialogue is probably not going to create any expressive change. This will mean that the fundamental duty and basic leadership stays in the hands of national actors.

While national ownership is fundamental, there are points at which the international community can provide important assistance. On the diplomatic side,

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14 Moosa Elayah, Donors-Promoted Public Sector Reform in Developing Countries and the Local Knowledge Syndrome (Leiden: Leiden University and Smart Print, 2014).
15 Lederach, Building peace.
18 Stigant and Murray, National Dialogue a Tool.
19 See note 10 above.
20 See note 18 above.
concerned countries or multilateral organisations can help to negotiate the initial agreement that establishes a national dialogue and make public statements encouraging an inclusive and participatory process. In terms of technical assistance, international actors can work to build the capacity of delegates to participate effectively, particularly those who have less experience in deliberative processes.

Following the above, we expect that without trust, a dialogue can be comprehensive yet not viable. This is based on the assumption that if the conflicting factions have no trust, they will not have a shared vision or execute any choice taken. Additionally, we surmise that ownership and power balance will have an impact on building trust among conflicted factions, as the group that has more power will attempt to impose its plan over the national motivation and alternative groups. At this stage, a dialogue will not end up in conflict, as the solution will be enforced by the stronger factions over the weakest ones. We anticipate that a trust-building phase, before entering into formal negotiations, is vital to turn into a successful dialogue. However, Lederach, Odendaal believed that be it is unclear whether trust-building should be a separate phase, or can be part of a reconciliation stage, which the literature on national dialogues singles out as highly conducive for success.21

**Analysing Yemeni historical dialogues (1962–2013)**

After the revolution of 26 September 1962, North Yemen entered into a seven-year war between the Republican faction powered by the Arab Republic of Egypt, and the Royal faction powered by the Kingdom of Saudi Arabia. In an attempt to stop internal strife and to build peace, several conferences and dialogues were held between the warring factions, namely at Imran, Khamer, Ta’if and Harad. We will look at each of these in turn below.

**The dialogue of Amran**

In September 1963, a conference in the city of Amran22 took place that included the conflicting factions of the Royalists and Republicans. This peace process was a prelude to involving all parties in a national government to rule the country for a transitional period. However, this process did not achieve any progress in dealing with the conflict or even in establishing a national government. Some argue that the conference was exclusive as it was held under the pressure of the moderate leaders within the Republican faction, who were not welcoming or trusting to the intrusive political role

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21 See note 15 above; Odendaal.
22 Amran is a city located about 45 km from the capital Sana’a. It is the city of Sheikh Abdullah Al-Ahmar, who was the leader of the Hashed tribe (the strongest tribe in North Yemen). He and his family and tribe played a big role in the 1962 revolution in Northern Yemen. At first, Sheikh Abdullah Al-Ahmar had an adversarial relationship with Saudi Arabia, but in the 1980s he became Saudi Arabia’s strongest ally. Sheikh Abdullah Al Ahmar made the balance of power, as he was the Sheikh (top man) of the President of Yemen (who was from the same tribe), and at the same time was the political leader of the religious party (Islah Party). Accordingly, Amran has had a role in determining Yemen’s political and social paths during the last 60 years.
of Egyptians in Yemen, and the goal of the conference was to discuss the right mechanism to determine the relationship with Egypt.\textsuperscript{23}

It should be noted that after the revolution of September 1962, the Republicans split into two wings. One of these wings, led by former president Al-Salal and his supporters from the military, civilians, and left-leaning factions, sought to establish a state on the lines of the Egyptian one that was far from Solidarity (‘Asabiyah’ or tribalism). They dreamed of a state that side-lined imams, sheikhs and generally conservative factions within society. The other wing represented tribal elders, religious scholars and judges, who opposed the attempts of the former president Al-Salal in monopolising power and countering the political role played by the Egyptians against the sheikhs and tribes.\textsuperscript{24} In other words, there was no trust and differing visions of how to build the new State of North Yemen among the conflicted factions related to the republican wing. The conservative group targeted the dialogue of Amran as the correct path of the revolution. They wanted to diminish the excessive authority of the Egyptians and their interference in the political affairs of Yemen, as well as to limit the role of the Egyptians on the military side, to fight against the Royalists.\textsuperscript{25} Interestingly, the liberal Republican group aimed to give more power to Egypt to force the conservative forces to accept a new state of North Yemen. Towards the end, the traditional powers crushed the liberal Republicans, but the balance of power was in their favour. This dialogue was the primary interrupter of the Seven Years’ War in Yemen (1963–1970).

**The dialogue of Khamer**

The national conference in Khamer was held from 2 to 5 May 1965.\textsuperscript{26} This dialogue was named a ‘peace conference’ by the local people of Yemen. As is clear from the documents of the dialogue, it was not inclusive, as while many from the Republican side attended, there were no representatives from the Royal side. The main objective of this dialogue was to develop solutions to the differences among factions and to bring about peace.\textsuperscript{27} One of the most important outcomes of this dialogue was the formation of a permanent Commission of National Peace made up of five sheikhs and four Islamic scholars. This Commission took charge of communicating with tribal opposition to the Republican system in Yemen in order to build a mutual understanding with them, to establish national peace, and to provide the necessary proposals for the Yemeni government to carry out its procedures. Among the most prominent decisions of the conference were: (1) emphasising an amendment to the Constitution; (2) establishing a Yemeni Republican Council; (3) forming a Yemeni Shura Council; (4) accelerating the comprehensive popular entity; (5) forming a national army; (6) forming a National Defence Council; (7) forming a legitimate court and (8) forming a committee to follow up the implementation of the conference’s resolutions.


\textsuperscript{24}Ibid., 2012.


\textsuperscript{26}Khamer is one of the main cities of the governorate of Amran located about 45 km from the capital Sana’a. It is a city of Sheikh Abdullah Al-Ahmar.

\textsuperscript{27}Zaid Bin Al-Wazier, ‘Reading on the Texts and documents of the Khmer National Conference’, the Union of Yemeni Popular Forces, the Committee of Information 2011.
Although this conference and its main permanent Commission issued formal decisions that the government’s official bodies should carry out a large part of the resolutions of the conference, the distrust and the power struggle between the various factions in Yemen continued. In this dialogue process, the Yemenis agreed to prevent outside interventions, yet the effects of the foreign power struggle in Yemen between Egypt and Saudi Arabia was the decisive blow for the dialogue process and the main source of the on-going conflict in North Yemen (the Seven Years’ War in Yemen 1963–1970).  

The dialogue of Ta’if

In early August 1965, an inclusive dialogue was held in the city of Ta’if, Saudi Arabia, including representatives of the Republicans and the Royal factions. This dialogue process was sponsored by Saudi Arabia, which built up trust between the conflicting factions. On 10th August the so-called ‘Charter of Ta’if’, an agreed vision for the state of North Yemen, was drawn up, with a number of decisions including establishing a Yemeni state under the name of ‘Islamic Yemeni state’ based on the provisions of Islamic Sharia, and having temporary official institutions to take the President’s functions, namely the Council of State, the Council of Ministers and the Shura Council.

These institutions took responsibility for consolidating internal security, controlling the withdrawal of Egyptian troops from Yemen that were supporting the Yemeni Republicans, stopping the military support of Saudi Arabia for the Yemeni royalists, and paving the way for a referendum on a future governance system in Yemen.

On 24 August 1965, the Egyptian president Gamal Abdel Nasser visited King Faisal in Saudi Arabia for three days. Together they signed an agreement to settle the Yemeni conflict that became known as the ‘Jeddah Agreement’, in which Egypt and Saudi Arabia agreed that the Yemeni people would have a referendum to decide about the type of government for the country no later than 23 November 1966. They agreed that the period until the date of the referendum should be a transitional stage to prepare for the referendum. They also agreed to cooperate on forming a transitional Conference consisting of 50 people from all national forces and influential people in Yemen. This conference should take place in the Yemeni city of Harad on 22 November 1965. They agreed that this conference would have several tasks including forming a future governance system for Yemen, forming an interim government to conduct governmental affairs during the transitional period, and taking a decision on the system of the referendum. Egypt and Saudi Arabia also agreed to halt support for warring factions in Yemen. They decided to stop fighting immediately, and formed a joint committee of peace from both sides to monitor the ceasefire, and control Yemen’s borders and ports.


29 Ta’if is a city in the Mecca Province of Saudi Arabia, and the unofficial summer capital of the Saudi Royal Family.

The dialogue of Harad

In accordance with the Jeddah Agreement, 25 Yemeni Republicans and Royalists met at Harad\textsuperscript{31} on 22 November 1965 to discuss the nature of the plebiscite on the future form of government, which was to be held within a year, the system of government in the transitional period, and the formation of a provisional government. This conference included all parties related to the conflict in Yemen as well as representatives of Egypt and Saudi Arabia. However, no agreement was reached because of the large discrepancy between the demands of the two delegations regarding representation at the dialogue, and other core issues such as the future governance system in Yemen.\textsuperscript{32}

Over the eight years from 1962 to 1970, many attempts and efforts were made to stop the armed conflict, but they did not work and the conflict continued until Egypt and Saudi Arabia held a national reconciliation between republicans and monarchists in 1970. This time reconciliation and trust building was real, as it took place after the withdrawal of Egyptian troops from Yemen. There was a real conviction by Saudi Arabia that the Royal side could not win the war, so they forced the Monarchists to stop the war and accept reconciliation with the Republicans. This action resulted in the exclusion from Yemen of the family of Hamid Al-Din (ex-imam or king of Yemen). Another outcome of the 1970 reconciliation was that a number of political figures in royal ranks returned to Yemen and participated in the government. In the end, Saudi Arabia recognised the republican system in Yemen.\textsuperscript{33}

What can we learn from the dialogues discussed so far? Reviewing and describing the previous national conferences that took place in Yemen in the period of 1962–1970 yields different analytical elements that could lead to success in future peace processes in the country. The first is that building trust is a precondition for any future NDC in Yemen. There was no trust between the republicans and monarchists during several national dialogues. The second analytical element is that the sheikhs of the tribes are the most present and influential actors in the course of dialogues and they tend to seek to maintain their positions, power and interests. The third analytical element is related to the external roles of Egypt and Saudi Arabia, which were strong and more influential than the roles of the internal factions (republicans and monarchists). Apparently, it was necessary for regional actors to step in to resolve domestic political crises.

The dialogues before and after the civil war in 1994

The declaration of the unification of Yemen on 22 May 1990 was the start of a transition period of two-and-a-half years that ended on 21 November 1992. The new Yemen adopted a wide national construction programme of political, economic, financial and administrative reforms. This programme was approved by parliament in December 1991 in order to conduct broader reforms and to build a modern Yemeni state.\textsuperscript{34} However, the programme was not implemented in practice due to several factors, most notably political

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\textsuperscript{31}Harad District is a district of the Hajjah Governorate, Yemen, on the northern part of the Saudi border.

\textsuperscript{32}Al Janahi, The National Movement, 301–302.

\textsuperscript{33}Fares Al-Saqqaf, ‘The national reconciliation in Yemen and its dimensions and perspectives’, a series of symposia of the future studies, the tenth episode, Sana’a, Center for Future Studies 1998.

\textsuperscript{34}Yemeni Center for Strategic Studies, 2013: 88.
ones. The two ex-ruling elites of former North and South Yemen both claimed that they had won the parliamentary election and then wanted to monopolise power.35

During the transitional period, there was a huge deterioration in the internal situation, and implementation of some of the transitional period items was stalled. This situation caused misunderstanding, suspicion and negative political tensions between the political leaderships of the two ruling elites: The General People’s Congress in the North and the Socialist Party in the South. This situation was a huge threat for society, forcing some national actors onto the national scene to calm tensions. Then the political factions agreed to extend the transitional period by adding six months, during which Yemen was able to conduct its first unified state parliamentary elections. In these elections of 1993, the Socialist Party got third place (56 seats), the Muslim Brotherhood party was ranked second (63 seats), while the General People’s Congress won with 122 seats.36 The results caused more political tension, as it showed a decline in voting for the Socialist Party. It was painful for the ruling elite in the former south to accept the democratic result and they felt that they were handing over their ex-state to the ruling elite in the North. Consequently, the friction between the two factions dramatically increased; the situation was about to explode.37

The decision of ex-vice president Ali Salem to leave the capital Sana’a and return to the city of Aden in August 1993 after travelling abroad represented the official start of the political crisis between the two parties. Ali Salem expressed his refusal to return to Sana’a before executing 18 specific Socialist Party demands.38

In an attempt to contain the crisis, the various political forces sought a dialogue, and formed a committee known as the ‘Committee for the Political Forces’ Dialogue’. This Committee made tireless efforts in both Sana’a and Aden between 22 November 1993 and 18 January 1994 in order to reach a real deal to resolve the crisis. It tried to promote national unity, democracy and stability, and consolidate an institutional state of law and order.39

The Committee made great efforts, held multiple meetings and produced a draft document called the ‘Document of Pledge and Accord’. This document was signed in Amman, capital of the Hashemite Kingdom of Jordan, on 20 February 1994. Many political actors signed this historic document, including the secretaries or heads of political parties and NGOs, and the Committee of the main political/social forces Dialogue. This document provided a comprehensive view on the overall trends in the political system and the construction of the Yemeni state.40

The Document of Pledge and Accord highlighted the importance of evacuating the armed forces from the cities, re-repositioning army units through one national plan as a prelude to its integration. After that, the armed forces had to directly affiliate with the national government. The army was not allowed to follow any party of the two

ruling elites in the former South and North. The Document called for the establishment of a local government system based on administrative and financial decentralisation and the principle of broad popular participation in governance and the democratic approach. This Document introduced a new administrative division of the Republic, exceeding existing administrative units and making all aspects of the former South and North disappear. Comprehensively, it included constitutional amendments and revision of the electoral parliamentary and local systems, in particular the public voting system.\(^{41}\)

Although all factions signed the document, it did not solve the crisis. The Socialist Party’s leadership, after signing the document, had no trust in the Northern ruling elite. Directly after the dialogue, they visited a number of Gulf states and then returned to Aden but refused to return to Sana’a. This action increased the armed conflicts between the military units, and after former vice-president Ali Salem called for the South’s separation from the North, civil war broke out in several locations across the country on 5 May 1994. This lasted until 7 July 1999.\(^ {42}\)

By tracking the course of the 1994 civil war and the national and international dialogue processes that took place to resolve this crisis, we can draw many lessons. The first is the absence of trust between the two sides regarding the implementation the Document of Pledge and Accord. There was a balance of power as the armed forces, who had not been integrated after the unification of Yemen in 1990, aligned with either one or both sides. Second, the local factions, especially the Southern ruling elite, relied on external power and interventions (some GCC countries),\(^ {43}\) which had a negative impact on achieving a convincing agreement for both sides and in resolving the armed conflict. Third, the national dialogue was considered by both sides as a way to protract the crisis, so they could buy time to arrange some domestic and regional positions to develop an armed scheme. Fourth, the media discourse was one of the main components fuelling the conflict on both sides. Finally, the tribes (sheikhs) were not included fully in the dialoguing process even though they had an influential role in the course of the crisis, both during the settlement efforts and at the armed conflict stage.

**The dialogues before the Arab spring (2006–2010)**

Between 2000 and 2010, dialogues took place intermittently in Yemen. The opposition parties made accusations of fraud regarding the victory of the General People’s Congress in the parliamentary elections in three sessions, and in the presidential and local elections in the first and second sessions. The opposition parties coordinated with each other, and in October 2001 declared a political bloc called the JMP, united against the GPC.\(^ {44}\) With the imminent parliamentary elections of 2003, the JMP escalated demands for reforming the electoral system. This movement translated into a national dialogue between the GPC

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\(^{41}\) Al-asbahi, ‘The path of a political settlement in Yemen’, 13.

\(^{42}\) Mohammed Al-Ashmali, ‘The unity and political conflict; the study of the historical and political configuration of the State of Yemeni Unity 1820–2003’, Alnhar Center for Political Studies, 2004, Sana’a.

\(^{43}\) In 1990, during the First Gulf War when Iraq invaded Kuwait, Sana’a regime took a neutral position. Accordingly, the Gulf states began their endless attempts to destabilise Yemen by all possible means, including the issue of the separation of the South from the North.

\(^{44}\) Al-asbahi, The path of a political settlement in Yemen, 5.
and the opposition parties in order to ensure the provision of equality, freedom and fairness in elections, but this NDP did not achieve tangible results.\footnote{Yemeni Center for Strategic Studies, 2013:91.}

With the start of preparation for presidential and local elections in 2006, the crisis between the ruling party and the opposition returned, as the JMP demanded the implementation of free and fair elections once more. The disagreement between the political factions centred around the re-formation of the Supreme Commission for Elections and correcting the electoral register. After several meetings and dialogues, the JMP and GPC reached an agreement of principles on 18 June 2006 that the presidential and local elections could be held in September 2006.\footnote{Ibid, 5.}

The ‘Agreement on Principles’ or Safeguards’ Agreement was signed by 21 parties under the supervision of the ex-President to secure free, fair and secure elections. This agreement included 12 items with several issues, the most important of which were: (1) appointing two members of the JMP onto the Supreme Commission for Elections and Referendum; (2) forming the election committees (54% for GPC and 46% for JMP); (3) addressing the problems within the electoral register; (4) ensuring the neutrality of the official media, the civil service, public funds, and the armed forces in the electoral process; (5) identifying the functions of security committees for the elections; (6) forming the supervisory committees for electoral partisanship and transparency issues; and (7) ensuring the role of women in democratic processes.\footnote{Jamil Al-jadbe, ‘Five agreements in the five years of dialogues between the GPC and JMP’, The Yemeni Foreign Ministry open access. http://www.mofa.gov.ye/mota.htm (accessed 25 December 2014).}

In light of this agreement, a presidential election took place between the GPC candidate Ali Abdullah Saleh and the JPM candidate Faisal bin Shamlan. The EU sent a strong monitoring team to Yemen for the elections, which presented its recommendations in a report on the electoral/presidential process.\footnote{Al-asbahi, ‘The path of a political settlement in Yemen’, 5.}

The GPC candidate won the election, to the dissatisfaction of JMP. JMP again questioned the fairness of the election, and therefore relations between the GPC and JMP became strained again. The two parties turned to the EU report on the monitoring of the election, which shaped their references to object to each other.

In order to find a solution to the existing crisis, the two parties resumed a dialogue aimed at reaching a national consensus. The agreement was reached and signed by the secretaries of all political parties on 26 June 2007. The document included several issues of agreement, the most important of them being\footnote{Ibid., 2013:5.}: (1) adopting what had been agreed upon in the document of principles agreement between the GPC and JMP on 6 June 2006; (2) adopting the European Union recommendations from its report on the supervision of presidential and local election; (3) adopting constitutional reforms including the development of parliamentary activity through the two chambers, interpreted by the dialogues of the necessities and requirements; (4) developing the local authority system and elections and the local councils and administrative division; (5) developing laws for rights and freedoms (for parties, press and publications, peaceful expressions, trade unions and civil society organisations); (6) developing economic policies and tools; and (7) addressing the effects of the war in 1994.
After numerous in-depth dialogues, the political parties signed an agreement on 23 February 2009. This agreement gave the right for the Presidency of the Council of Representatives to take the necessary measures to amend constitutional procedures in article 65 of the Constitution relating to the duration of the House of Representatives. The Council of Representatives got two more years, due to the lack of time to make the necessary reforms. This provided an opportunity for the political parties and civil society organisations to discuss the constitutional amendments needed for the development of the political system and the electoral system. The House of Representatives gave political parties the opportunity to complete the discussion of topics that had not been agreed upon during the preparation of amendments to the election law. The House of Representatives had the authority to form the Supreme Commission for Elections as stipulated by law.

Thereafter, many dialogues were intermittently held between the GPC and JMP, giving the impression that each side was trying to invest time in their own way for their own benefit and not for the benefit of the nation. The efforts of dialogues over four years did not lead to tangible results and genuine reforms; conflicts and disagreements remained between the GPC and JMP. The outbreak of the Arab Spring in 2011 led to other kinds of conflicts between the GPC and JMP.

By tracking the course of the dialogues between the GPC and JMP that took place in the period before the Arab Spring, two main lessons can be learned. The first one is that the absence of trust was the dominant feature between the two conflicted parties. JMP was looking for hard guarantees for the implementation of agreements they reached with GPC. The second one is the absence of a collective vision among the conflicted factions, as dialogues were used as a political tool by the GPC to divert attention away from the crisis, and it seemed that an intention to reach an agreement was lacking.

The NDC after the Arab spring 2013–2014

During the Arab Spring of 2011, many demonstrations took place in Yemen demanding the overthrow of the ruling regime. The then-president, Ali Abdullah Saleh, invited the opposition JMP to return to dialogue, but JMP rejected these calls. Instead, JMP organised sit-ins in several public squares in the capital city Sana’a and in a number of provinces to put pressure on the president to relinquish power. These actions of the JMP caused a number of clashes between protesters and security forces, leaving hundreds of victims dead and injured. With the increasing trend towards obstruction in the political situation in Yemen, a number of regional and international powers intervened to try to find a solution for the crisis. They presented the Gulf initiative that included a regulating mechanism for peaceful transition of power. This Gulf initiative provided the foundation for organising a comprehensive National Dialogue Conference.

\[50]\text{Al-jadbe, ‘Five agreements in the five years of dialogues’}.
\[51]\text{Al-asbahai, ‘The path of a political settlement in Yemen’, 15.}
\[52]\text{Al-jadbe, ‘Five agreements in the five years of dialogues’}.
\[53]\text{Sami Al-Shamiri, The sociology of the popular revolution of Yemen (Sana’a: Ebadi Center for Studies and Publishing, 2012).}
\[54]\text{Saleh Basurrah and others, The Gulf initiative and executive mechanism between the pros and cons (Sana’a: The Gulf of academic development Center, 2012).}
During the preparation of the National Dialogue Conference, a Presidential Decision was made on 16 March 2013 to name the 565 members, including from the different traditional social centres of power such as GPC and JMP. Young people, women and civil society organisations were also key components in the conference for the first time in the Yemeni experience of dialogues. The National Dialogue Conference lasted for nearly ten months until 25 January 2014 (The Presidential Decree No. 11–2013). The key local, regional and international actors had identified the principal areas for national dialogue that represented the most important issues on the national scene. The NDC was divided into nine separate working groups, each with their own members: the southern issue working group; the Sa’ada issue working group; the national issues and the national reconciliation and transitional justice working group; the state-building working group; the good governance working group; the foundations for building and the role of the armed and security forces working group; the independence of special entities working group; the rights and freedoms working group; and the development working group. Two extra groups were formed: the draft of constitution committee; and the assurance of successful implementation of conference outcomes’ committee.

The NDC naturally did not take place in a vacuum and thus was not only influenced by what went on within the walls of the conference hall. It appears that the NDC had an excellent format, but a number of political factions expressed reservations about some of the dialogue outcomes, such as the issue of transitional justice, where the parties did not agree on the concept and details of this issue. There were also disagreements over the representation of the components, as occurred in the Committee on Safeguards, on the division of territories and on the draft constitution. This coincided with the progress of Ansar Allah (Houthis) militarily in several provinces during 2014, until their arrival in the capital Sana’a where they captured all the state institutions, and spread into the various provinces. The Houthis’ actions led President Hadi and PM Bahah to escape to Saudi Arabia. After that, Saudi Arabia formed a coalition of 12 countries in order to attack Yemen and crush the power of the Houthis, and to support President Hadi to return to power. At the time of writing, the attacks and war are ongoing. The question is then whether the preconditions were conducive or not for smooth and efficient proceedings of the dialogue process. Put differently: was there an enabling environment for conducting the NDC?

**Enabling environment for a successful dialogue: comparative analysis**

After reviewing the historical peace processes in Yemen during the period 1963–2013 and highlighting the main features in each episode, this section offers a comparative analysis to illustrate the similarities and differences between the historical dialogues for peace and the NDC 2013. This analysis thus tries to open up opportunities for learning why dialogues have only been an interruption to civil war in Yemen. Table 1 presents an overview of performance, both in terms of content and process, across the different dialogues. The focus is on the criteria of having a successful dialogue, as discussed in the

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55The NDC was headed by a nine-member presidency: President Abd Rabbu Mansour Hadi (NDC Chairman), Abdul-Kareem Al-Eryani (GPC), Yassen Saeed No’man (JMP), Sultan Al-Atwani (JMP), Yassin Makkawi (Southern Movement), Saleh bin Habra (Houthis), Abdul-Wahab Al-Ansi (JMP), and Nadia Al-Saqqaf and Abdullah Lamlas (Youth-JMP). The conference was overseen by Jamal Benomar, representative to the United Nations in Yemen.
theoretical part of this paper above, namely: (1) Trust; (2) Inclusion; (3) Clear and shared vision; (4) Balance of Power; (5) Visibility of Implementation; and (6) Ownership:

From the above table, we can infer or conclude that Yemeni dialogue procedures could be considered as an interference of a civil war, yet we have a special case in the dialogue of Harad in 1967. In Harad, the Yemenis agreed to stop the war and to build up a stable state for all Yemenis. The conflicted factions built up an enabling environment and trusted each other. This precondition was missing both in the past political experiences in the modern history of Yemen or within the recent NDC 2013.

The general impression that emerges from the interviews is that the NDC suffered from the absence of trust among the conflicting parties, and each party started working according to a private agenda that differed from the public aims that the national dialogue conference was trying to reach. In other words, the absence of trust between the warring factions to enter into a dialogue can be attributed to the fact that no pre-conciliation phase was organised among the conflicted factions. Various factions were not able (or willing) to provide real guarantees that would provide for an environment in which trust could be built before embarking on a dialogue.

The NDC 2013 marks, certainly in more general terms, inclusiveness as a major strength, and was the first serious attempt to achieve this in the sphere of Yemeni dialogues. This NDC was inclusive and very much in the spirit of popular agency bringing together both powerful socio-political factions and marginalised parties (e.g. civil society, youth and women groups). As such, this NDC is generally seen as being based on a workable and inclusive basis. The NDC enabled a diverse group of political and social actors in Yemeni society to sit at the same table. Various political and social components of society were represented in both qualitative and quantitative senses, and the NDC created space for community participation of various social groups through different means. Besides, the idea that a focus on a highly inclusive National Dialogue did little to change the dysfunctional and elite nature of the governmental system or the political power imbalance in Yemen was brought forward. At the Harad dialogue in 1967, there was a moderate power balance, but it could not create public support for the transition process in the other dialogues. Furthermore, the economic inclusion of citizens was weak at Harad, which is a strong structural impediment as Table 2 shows.

The adoption of decision-making by consensus instead of using majority rule was unique to the 2013 NDC peace process. This meant that many decisions enjoyed broad support, given that it was difficult for individual power blocks to manipulate the decision-making process in their favour. Most of the outputs were approved by all components, which was the first step in building a future Yemeni state. The solidity of the outcomes, being backed by all factions, was seen as an important first step towards building a future Yemeni state. However, there was no focus on the common issues in the future, for example, what Yemen could offer to the world, the country’s strengths, and how it could unite its forces. A long-term vision was lacking in the NDC and the focus was on short-term wishes. Furthermore, the factions who traditionally had discretionary decision-making power, for example in the Harad dialogue in 1967 and other historical dialogues, in other words the ‘strong men’ in society such as sheikhs, were not offered a seat at the NDC table. They were not authorised to interfere with decision-making, especially in the crucial and sensitive issues of dialogue. The media acted against their attempts to meddle,
which was a tool for fuelling the crisis. The fact that the traditional power brokers were side-lined was ultimately not supportive of the efforts for dialogue.

Moreover, there was an absence of an agreed mechanism for the implementation of outcomes. Many argued that the responsibilities of the NDC were too great both for its duration and for the nature of its membership. It was even difficult for the NDC process to produce and implement a high-level political compromise. It was not transparent in decision-making procedures, especially at the highest level, which led many to assert that the decisions of the NDC would not be binding to many conflicted factions, like Houthis, Hiraak and Saleh. There was slowness and a lack of seriousness in implementing the NDC outcomes. Accordingly, we recommended immediate and serious implementation of the NDC’s outcomes according to mechanisms and guarantees agreed upon by all social and political factions. The NDC either should have had a consultation process followed by a more restricted conference of decision-makers, or the constitution and federal laws as part of the NDC outcomes needed to be given enough space for the varying customs, traditions and social realities of the different regions and states.

Although the negotiations within the NDC were perceived as one of the main tools for bringing peace back to Yemen, at the same time many people doubted whether the NDC was the right mechanism for working through political deadlock given the historical failure of NDCs in Yemen. For a start, just as previous NDCs in Yemen had witnessed, the situation facing the agenda of the NDC was so complex that it required longer than the six months allotted, resulting in an extension of the Conference. Apart from more time, the NDC also needed a different composition of participants and/or different types of negotiations and discussions and actors directly involved. For example, while national dialogues require a large sense of local ownership in order to be successful, international and regional involvement is almost by definition a sensitive issue, but in Yemen, the latter is required, due to the importance of the regional conflicts on internal affairs. The direct presence of regional powers Iran and Saudi Arabia as part of the dialogue process would have resolved many of the disputes. This is what actually happened in 1965 when Saudi Arabia and Egypt signed an

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Susan Stigant and Elizabeth Murray, National Dialogue a Tool, 2015.
agreement to resolve conflict, and they were directly involved in the Harad NDC process (1965) that led to real solutions for many problems between the internal factions in Yemen. Involvement of the regional strongholds also led to the end of the civil war in Yemen that lasted about seven years between the Royalists, backed by Saudi Arabia, and the Republicans, backed by Egypt.

Therefore, it would have been fully judicious if Iran and Saudi Arabia had been directly involved in the NDC 2013’s negotiations and discussions. This would have been principally done in terms of regional conflicts (i.e. between Iran and Saudi Arabia), which are then reproduced in, and dropped upon, Yemen. In the past two years, this proxy war has been confirmed on the ground. The international community would have been called upon to not support specific factions as this could have damaged the NDC’s trustworthiness or the integrity of the process in eyes of the other participants and the general public. In the same vein, there would have been a call for international support for security and economic development alongside technical and logistical support to the dialogue itself.

**Conclusion**

This article was devoted to looking into whether national dialogues have only delayed the outbreak of civil wars in Yemen, since historically, dialogue processes for peace-building in Yemen were, with one notable exception, directly followed by a civil war. It can be concluded that the Yemeni dialogues as a gateway to resolve political crises and armed conflicts were not the right tool for several reasons.

Firstly, in historical dialogues in Yemen, we have seen that building an environment of trust between the warring factions before embarking on the agenda of the dialogue is imperative for the effectiveness of whole peace process. It important to make some concessions or put controls which refer to the goodwill of the various factions. This is especially because the peacebuilding process represents a place of encounter where concerns about both the ‘past’ and the ‘future’ can meet. Therefore, investment in trust building among negotiating groups prior to a dialogue or peacebuilding allows space to articulate experiences of loss and to acknowledge these feelings. The recommendation is to have a ‘slow start’ to provide some space to build basic levels of trust between incumbent and new factions. However, while a trust-building phase before entering into formal negotiations is important, it is unclear whether trust-building should be a separate phase, or can be part of a reconciliation stage, which the literature on dialogues singles out as highly conducive to success.

Secondly, in many cases, external/regional actors had a great influence on the course of the conflict and the course of the dialogue, which made the dialogues less feasible. Weaker factions tried to establish links with some external powers in order to get more weight internally. The solution is direct involvement of outsiders in the negotiations and discussions of a dialogue process as they are part of the conflict in Yemen, as well as calling upon international economic, technical and logistical support. Therefore, the Yemeni case showed that to have successful dialogues, a large sense of local ownership is only by definition or theory an important precondition; empirical evidence has shown that international and regional involvement is also essential as external bodies are one of the causes of internal conflict in Yemen.

As previously argued, we found that in the case of distrust among conflicting factions as well as non-positive external interventions, there is no common view or shared objectives in a dialogue because the agenda of the conflicting factions is different and
externally driven. Even if there is a margin of inclusiveness to embrace the different segments of society at the dialogue table, this would not create an environment conducive to successful dialogue. Because of the imbalance of power in the community, the deep state/traditional actors would control everything in society. In a historical moment, these actors can use a dialogue process as a tactic to overcome temporary unrest, in order to reorder their power means and try to retain power. This is what happened in the National Dialogue Conference of 2013.

In this article, it is recommended for the future towards conflict resolution to incorporate information on the implicit and explicit local knowledge of non-democratic society.\(^{57}\) There is vital need for more investigation about the direct and indirect/formal and informal actors and their external and internal sources of power, as it will be helpful to distinguish who can change the course of a conflict and who has the potential to resolve a conflict. Those actors can be found in three levels: top formal and informal leadership (elite), middle-range formal and informal leadership, and grassroots formal and informal leadership.\(^{58}\) This pattern of local knowledge is very important for realistic analysis of the situation and for making an appropriate strategy to deal with conflict, thereby helping to bring peace. In other words, there should be prior careful analysis of who the main players are in Yemen at leadership, intermediate and grass-roots levels – and what their interests are – in order to determine in advance who might be able to play a positive role in changing the course of the conflict. This is an important recommendation that could accompany the whole process-initiating national dialogue, conducting national dialogue, and implementing national dialogue recommendations. The second recommendation is that in tandem with the NDC there might be a parallel political dialogue at leadership levels to underpin the peacebuilding, state building and development agendas formulated via national dialogue. Here the prerequisite is, if not balance of power, then readiness to share power. At national level, it is control over the constitutional arrangements that will be critical because these will determine who holds power. The balances – and above all the safeguards for election losers – need to satisfy the main power brokers, and allow continuing political struggles to be fought out non-violently within the new constitutional framework. Finally, the NDC process is not finally dead. On the contrary, it is still a key element in both the Houthi and the Hadi regime conceptual toolboxes for any eventual renewed peace process that might – as we all fervently hope – eventually emerge in future.

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