

National Democratic Institute for International Affairs - Yemen

Tribal Conflict Management Program

Background

In 2004, the Yemen office of the National Democratic Institute (NDI) was approached by the Yemeni Organization for Development and Social Peace (YODSP), an organization formed by a group of tribal leaders from Mareb, Al-Jawf and Shabwa. YODSP leaders requested NDI's support to address the endemic problem of revenge killing and tribal conflicts in their areas.

NDI organized a field survey to collect information about the causes and impacts of conflict, in addition to assessing the various conflict resolution systems utilized by the tribal leaders in the three target governorates. Overcoming the government's sensitivity to international NGOs conducting programs with tribes, NDI was able to conduct the field study through a local research institution.

Based on the findings of the research, NDI designed the current Conflict Management Program and secured funding for the program from the United States Agency for International Development (USAID). This program began in May 2007.

Program Rationale

Conflict management has not been traditionally a core area for NDI programs, however it is clear that tribal conflicts in Yemen have undermined development efforts and as a result created an environment that is not conducive to the development of democracy in vast parts of the country. For example, NDI's elections observation network determined that serious elections irregularities and violations with the potential for violence take place in tribal areas possessing active conflicts.

Unlike conflicts in other places in the region, tribal conflicts in Yemen do not have any roots in cultural, religious or ethnic differences. The nature of tribal conflicts in Yemen involves social, political and economic aspects that one needs to look at while thinking of supporting initiatives and efforts for interventions.

NDI's program operates in areas where government institution's role is very weak and ineffective while tribal customary law is still effective and manages to maintain a reasonable level of stability in those areas.

Program Approach

NDI's Conflict Management Program aims to assist the Government of Yemen and Yemeni tribal leaders in their efforts to resolve long-standing conflicts that have caused violence and delayed much needed democratic, economic, educational, judicial and security reforms.

NDI believes that it is important that the state institutions and justice system fulfill their role in maintaining peace and order in tribal areas. However, NDI understands that these institutions are still very weak and that although traditional methods of tribal conflict resolution system are breaking down, they are arguably still the most effective systems on the ground. NDI's approach is to help the Yemeni government and tribal leadership through the transition process in order to reduce the gap between emerging state institutions and fading tribal resolution systems.

On one hand, NDI's Conflict Management Program aims at strengthening the role of government in addressing conflict by helping the government establish systems for conflict analysis and conflict management. This includes helping the government form sustainable structures at the national and governorate level. It also includes helping them design strategies to address the short-term and long-term causes of conflict.

On the other hand, NDI's Conflict Management Program supports local tribal NGOs through capacity-building programs. These aim to strengthen the role of civil society organizations in contributing to addressing the long term causes of conflict, such as lack of development, and public awareness about the implications of conflicts. In addition, the program supports local tribal leaders in their efforts to address existing conflicts, through traditional and modern conflict management techniques.

Unique Challenges and Lessons Learned

NDI has encountered a variety of unique challenges, including: 1) issues of government sensitivity about working with tribes and tribal leaders; 2) issues of suspicion and hostility between tribal program partners; and, 3) issues of physical security in the three targeted governorates.

Over the past two years, NDI has addressed these issues by using **experienced staff** who are well versed in local politics and traditions, **prioritizing transparency** in our activities in order to minimize suspicion, **consulting widely** with both government and tribal leaders to ensure appropriate program design, and **coordinating closely** with national and local authorities to ensure that objectives are met in a timely and secure manner.