



Politics, Governance, and Reconstruction in Yemen

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The Project on Middle East Political Science

The Project on Middle East Political Science (POMEPS) is a collaborative network that aims to increase the impact of political scientists specializing in the study of the Middle East in the public sphere and in the academic community. POMEPS, directed by Marc Lynch, is based at the Institute for Middle East Studies at the George Washington University and is supported by Carnegie Corporation of New York and the Henry Luce Foundation. For more information, see <http://www.pomeps.org>.

Yemen's war has become one of the world's worst humanitarian catastrophes. In September 2014, the Ansarallah (Houthi) movement allied with former President Ali Abdullah Saleh to seize control over the capital city Sana'a and renegotiate Yemen's fragile power-sharing agreement, and then several months later pursued President Abed Rabbo Mansour Hadi south to Aden. In March 2015, Saudi Arabia and the United Arab Emirates launched a military intervention, ostensibly to restore Hadi to power. More than 1,000 days later, that war has settled into a brutal stalemate. Officially, the Houthis remain in control of Sana'a and much of the north, while the Saudi-UAE coalition controls much of the south. A comprehensive Saudi-UAE blockade and air campaign has caused incipient famine conditions, the spread of communicable diseases such as cholera and diphtheria, and a wave of internal displacement.

The war and humanitarian catastrophe in Yemen has received relatively little analytical or scholarly attention compared to the conflicts elsewhere in the region, such as Syria and Iraq. Both the Houthis and the Saudi-UAE coalition tightly control access for journalists and researchers, making up-to-date, on the ground research difficult. Media coverage is dominated by propaganda, reinforcing prevailing narratives of either Iranian encroachment or Saudi adventurism. These conditions have not been conducive to sustained, rigorous, empirically and theoretically informed analysis of Yemen. How have political coalitions and movements adapted to more than two years of war and economic devastation? How does governance actually work under the Houthis, the coalition, and in other areas of the country? How has the intervention changed the prospects of the southern secessionist movement? What prospects exist for a political agreement which might end the war?

On November 10, the Project on Middle East Political Science convened a workshop on these questions with participants from Yemen, Europe, and the United States. The invited scholars and analysts all have longstanding research ties to the country, and most have been able to carry out very recent research inside the country. It is worth noting that assembling the workshop proved exceptionally challenging. The highly polarized political situation in Yemen extends to the analytical community, making publishing analysis a potential problem for Yemenis who live – or aspire to return – to Yemen. More directly, changing American travel regulations ultimately deterred numerous invited participants from attempting to reach Washington D.C., including several Yemeni scholars and several European scholars with deep experience in the region. While some participated via Skype, the loss of a number of critically important Yemeni and European scholars from the workshop tangibly represents the broader cost to academia of these travel restrictions.

Despite these obstacles, the workshop brought together a remarkable group of American, European, and Yemeni scholars. Their papers and workshop discussions offered insightful analysis into the central actors, alliances, and war dynamics, and how these are likely to shape whatever future agreement may arise in Yemen.

The most central point that emerges from all of the essays in this collection is that Yemen has fractured in ways that will make any negotiated settlement extraordinarily challenging and fragile. Once robust movements and alliances have been torn apart, tentative coalitions formed during the 2011 uprisings have disintegrated, and governance in its many forms has broken down. Reaching

an end to the war will be difficult, and doing so will only be a first step in what promises to be a prodigiously difficult reconstruction. Grappling with this reality means moving beyond narratives dominated by regional politics and instead develop a more well-rounded understanding of local dynamics, actors, and interests. Given the scope of the man-made humanitarian crisis that has left so many millions of Yemenis acutely vulnerable, the need for such analysis cannot come soon enough.

International policy narratives tend to approach the war in Yemen through a binary lens of Iranian-backed Houthis and a Gulf-backed President Hadi. This binary is deeply and dangerously misleading. There are at least four axes around which events are simultaneously in motion. The first and most familiar of these is essentially a northern conflict, pitting forces aligned with former President Saleh and Ansar Allah (the Houthis) against a Saudi-backed coalition of forces loyal to displaced transitional president Abd Rabuh Mansour Hadi. The United Nations-sponsored peace process, for example, has taken these factions as the primary participants in several rounds of (failed) negotiations, and most media reporting on Yemen discusses the war largely in these terms.

But there are also significant developments in South Yemen that have little to do with these northern alliances and, at times, seem to be following a logic of their own, such as the conflict between the secessionist Southern Transitional Council and President Hadi's government. Both southern secessionist and pro-government forces also contend with a third axis, an increasingly active jihadist movement that is more (or less) aligned with al-Qaeda in the Arabian Peninsula (AQAP). Southern forces, both in their fight against AQAP and increasingly in their confrontation of the Hadi government, have found support from the United Arab Emirates, which indicates that the fourth axis is a regional one, tied up in the fracturing politics of the Gulf Cooperation Council. None of these conflicts can be addressed in isolation of the others.

(1) The Houthi-Saleh Alliance

When former President Ali Abdullah Saleh agreed to leave office in November 2011, a controversial immunity provision enabled him to remain in the country. International sanctions imposed by the United Nations and the United States did not prevent him from retaining important financial and military resources, and he remained one of several important powerbrokers during the transitional process. His de facto alliance with his former adversaries, the Houthis, puzzled many observers, but was widely viewed in Yemen as a marriage of necessity, doomed to dissolve when circumstances changed.

Those changes came in early December, first with Saleh's defection and soon thereafter, with his death. As [April Alley](#) ably demonstrates in her essay in this collection, the seeds of the Houthi-Saleh alliance's disintegration were in place well before then. Following Saleh's announced break with the Houthis, the Saudi-led coalition of forces signified its realignment by offering air support for Saleh's forces as they conducted five days of intense urban combat and house-to-house fighting. Both sides claimed victories, but as this collection goes to press, former President Saleh has been killed, the battle lines have changed only marginally, coalition airstrikes continue apace, and UN humanitarian agencies struggle to secure the ability of besieged civilians to leave their homes. As Alley's essay

argues, the Houthis were the militarily stronger faction in the Houthi-Saleh alliance, so while it is difficult to predict anything with certainty, it seems safe to conclude that Saleh's death and the end of this alliance will, as Alley argues, "deepen and prolong Yemen's regionalized civil war to the detriment of Yemen's people and regional security."

(2) The Southern Question

There are also powerful changes on the ground in the South, many of which are not fully reflected in policy discussions that focus predominantly on Sana'a or the disintegration of the Houthi-Saleh alliance. The Southern Movement, a broad grassroots coalition of actors dissatisfied with the Saleh regime's asymmetric development policies and Northern political hegemony, has presented a significant challenge to Yemen's leadership since 2007. Itself internally divided, the Southern Movement was large enough and coherent enough to create significant challenges for Yemen's National Dialogue Conference, but too fragmented to achieve many of its central objectives.

The war itself has paradoxically intensified both of these characteristics: the Houthis' advance on Aden in 2015 and the need to organize against such "Northern" aggression galvanized Southern identity and forged some new alliances, while rival leadership circles developed in different areas of the South. The UAE decision to intervene directly in southern Yemen and work with the Hadi government to combat both Houthi and AQAP has further regionalized the war. For Yemenis in the North, the primary conflict has been between Houthi-Saleh forces and the Saudi-backed coalition. In the South, it has been more targeted against AQAP and in closer coordination with UAE ground troops. As [Susanne Dahlgren](#) illustrates in her contribution to this collection, the UAE's unique role in the South accelerated the declaration of a Southern Transitional Council and the development of governing capacity as a prelude to secession. These "facts on the ground" complicate the notion that any kind of solution can be negotiated without the full participation of the South and challenge interpretations that treat the Coalition as a unitary actor.

(3) The Role of Militants

The war has also had a transformative effect on the militant landscape in Yemen, though these effects, as with so much else, are also regionalized. [Laurent Bonnefoy's](#) essay considers the impact of the war on the wider Salafi political field – its relationship to the Islah party, the formation of the new Rashad Union, responses to Houthi advances against Salafi institutions during the transitional period, and, more generally, the porous border between militant Salafis and more openly jihadi groups like AQAP in the South. Bonnefoy shows that Salafis can be mobilized to take up arms but that this is far more likely to occur when they perceive aggression along other dimensions of their identity (tribal, regional, etc.). Once mobilized to fight, however, he argues that Salafi militants have an ideological dimension that encourages them to take the fight northward, to Houthi-held territory. This is consistent with the themes of regionalism and diffusion in [Elisabeth Kendall's](#) account of AQAP during the war, as it has moved from exercising direct governance in Hadramawt by speaking to Hadrami concerns and respecting Hadrami traditions toward more systematically integrating into communities throughout the South by positioning itself as "more indigenous" than the Islamic State. The relationship between

local grievances, regional identities, and religio-political claims makes it difficult to paint militant Islamists with a single brush; the situation is further complicated by the UAE's cooperation with many Salafi militias to combat both AQAP in the South and the Houthis around Taiz.

(4) Regional Politics

As Kristian Coates Ulrichsen argues, the war in Yemen is also part of a rapidly changing set of regional dynamics. Saudi Crown Prince Mohammed bin Salman has tied his personal fortunes to the outcome of this war, and Saudi Arabia has pushed consistently via the UN process to maintain the fiction that this is primarily a war aimed at reinstalling a legitimate Yemeni president. As he works to consolidate power at home, the war in Yemen has provided a useful – but very costly – means of galvanizing domestic support. At the same time, Qatar's expulsion from the coalition last summer, Oman's persistent neutrality, and the UAE's quasi-independent policy in the South raise questions about the extent of Gulf coordination. Ulrichsen indicates that the UAE and KSA have acquired “different zones of responsibility that evolved into competing spheres of influence” in Yemen, raising uncertainty about their future role in a negotiated peace or post-war reconstruction phase.

Looking Ahead to a Postwar Yemen

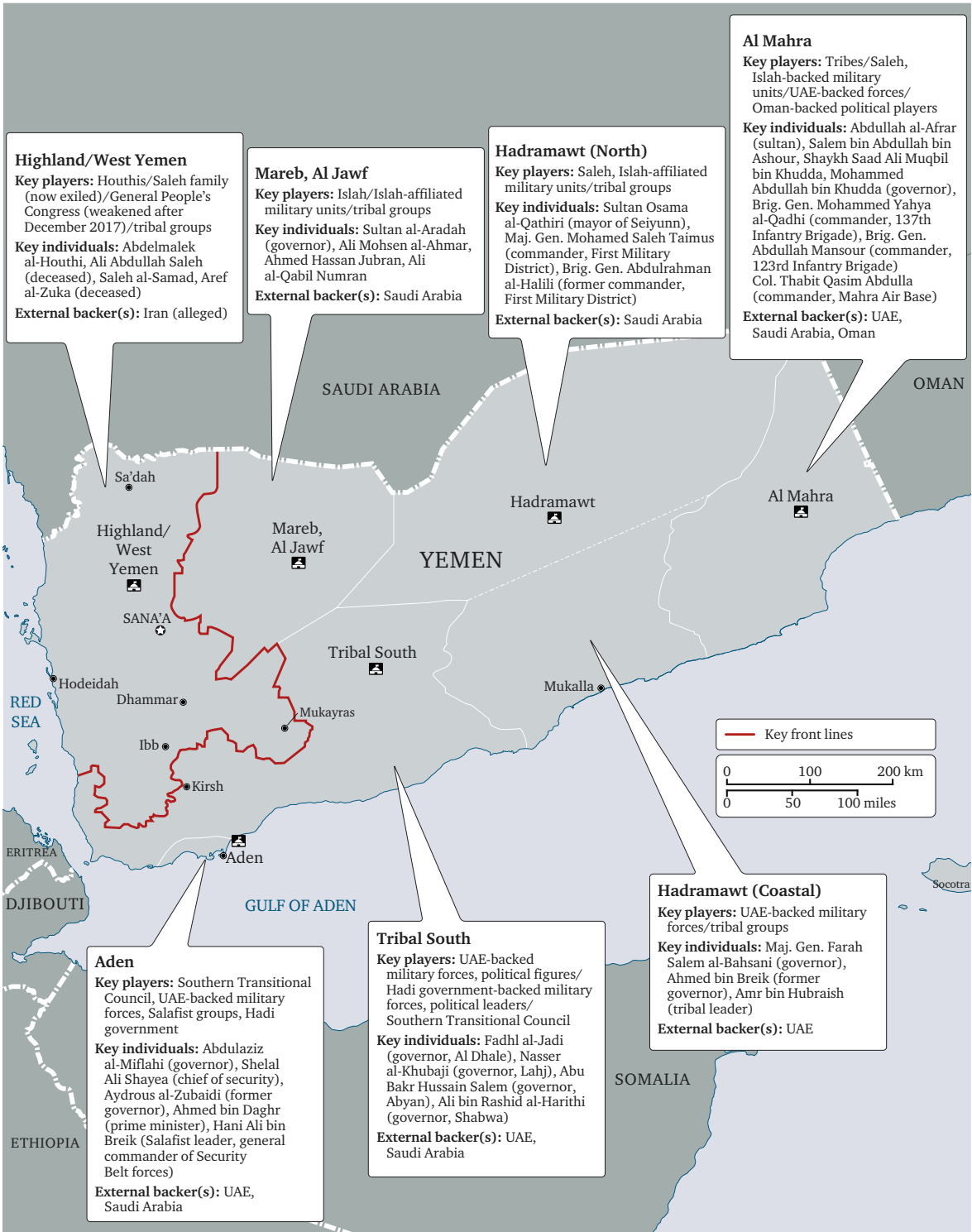
Should a negotiated end to this destructive war be achieved, it will mean that Yemenis are faced with the task of reconstructing political institutions, public infrastructure, and markets in the face of incalculable destruction. According to polling carried out by Marie-Christine Heinze and Hafez Albukhari, local communities have come to rely almost exclusively on local and self-organized forms of security provision, meaning that any single nationwide effort at security sector reform will need to contend with the weakened capacity and legitimacy of security services and decide whether or how to integrate these local security providers into the public system. Heinze and Albukhari as well as Marieke Transfeld indicate that many Yemenis have actually remained quite physically secure during the war – given the urban concentration of the war and the predominantly rural population, this makes some sense. These rural communities, however, are also cut off from most public infrastructure, as Transfeld's analysis of the disruption of the education system illustrates.

Both Ala Qasem and Ala'a Jarban argue that the effects of the war for Yemen's youth have been enormously destructive. Denied an education and meaningful access to political processes, youth – who comprise close to 70 percent of Yemen's population – are left with few options. Both raise the question of how to more meaningfully integrate youth in the peacebuilding and reconstruction process, a challenge that seems vital to any successful outcome. Silvana Toska's essays considers some of the structural barriers to the success of the youth movement in Yemen in the run-up to the war and argues that overcoming these barriers will be essential to securing the “civil state” that activists value in any post-conflict future. Dana Moss points out that the Yemeni diaspora, like other diasporic groups, is theoretically well-positioned to be a powerful source of reconstruction assistance, but that internal divisions within that diaspora and the intense surveillance it experiences in the United States and Europe, especially, have made it logistically difficult to connect diaspora capital to communities in need.

The essays in the collection are not very optimistic about an inclusive or equitable peace process or reconstruction phase. In addition to addressing the myriad fractures and fissures that developed over the course nearly three years of war (and several years of disintegration before then), the country will have to contend with the effects of what Sheila Carapico describes as “de-development.” The targeted destruction of Yemen’s infrastructure and the environmental damage wrought by the war – indeed, even the data-gathering capacity of the central government, a function essential to post-war development planning – lays ground for asymmetric patterns of dependent development in the post-war period. Comparing the targeted destruction with similar developments in Gaza and Iraq, Carapico anticipates the likelihood that Gulf investors will steer Yemen’s redevelopment in a way that will challenge the sovereignty and accountability of any future government.

This collection offers no clear path forward for policymakers. But it does draw on the depth of knowledge and detailed research conducted by an interdisciplinary group of scholars who have committed themselves to the study of Yemen and who doubtless hope that this research can help to inform policies that promote a peaceful resolution to this devastating war and an inclusive and sustainable process of rebuilding.

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Source: Salisbury, Peter. "Yemen: National Chaos, Local Order." Chatham House, December 2017, p. 10. Used with author's permission.

For an interactive version of the map from this report including contested areas, key actors, trade routes, and governance, see: <https://yemen-map.chathamhouse.org/>

Collapse of the Houthi-Saleh alliance and the future of Yemen's war

April Longley Alley, International Crisis Group

On December 4, Houthi fighters killed Yemen's former president and their erstwhile ally, Ali Abdullah Saleh. Prior to their violent divorce, Saleh's General People's Congress party (GPC) and the Houthis (a Zaydi/Shia rebel movement) were partners against the Saudi Arabia-led coalition and its allies, including the United States, who are fighting on behalf of the internationally recognized government of Abed-Rabbo Mansour Hadi. Despite nearly three years of a punishing air campaign and strategy of economic strangulation by the coalition, the Houthi-Saleh alliance remained firmly ensconced in the northern Zaydi highlands. They also controlled most of the Red Sea coastal province of Hodeidah and parts of the southern uplands (a predominantly Shafi/Sunni area in north Yemen), including Ibb and limited parts of Taiz.

But Houthi-GPC cooperation was fraught and fragile, with both groups keeping one eye on external enemies and the other on their partner. Ultimately their differences coupled with Saudi-led coalition efforts to drive a wedge between them, cracked the partnership. What happens next is unclear. The academic literature offers few insights on how rebel alliance dynamics shape civil war outcomes.¹ Yemen's case highlights the importance of this lacuna, particularly in understanding under what conditions coalition collapse encourages negotiation or war entrenchment. This paper will explore the origins, evolution and breakdown of the Houthi-Saleh partnership with an eye towards

understanding how they could shape the course of war and the prospects for peace. While difficult to predict, it is likely the violent breakdown of the alliance will deepen and prolong Yemen's regionalized civil war to the detriment of Yemen's people and regional security.

The origins of Houthi-Saleh cooperation

From its inception, the Houthi-Saleh alliance was in many ways a negative coalition, united by what they oppose, not in their prescriptive aims.² The foundation of their cooperation was in opposition to common domestic and regional enemies. Prior to the Arab Spring, the Houthis fought six rounds of conflict with the Saleh regime, which killed their leader Hussein Badr al-Deen al-Houthi in 2004 and laid waste to much of their home governorate, Saada.³ The Houthis took part in the 2011 uprising against Saleh, remaining in the protest squares even after he agreed to step down as part of a Gulf Cooperation Council (GCC) initiative that transferred power to his vice-president, Hadi; they argued that the deal did not go far enough in removing the old regime. In support of further change, the Houthis participated in a national dialogue conference (NDC), the cornerstone of a UN-sponsored transition that grew out of the GCC initiative, which gave new political constituencies like them voice, but arguably too little binding decision making authority. Throughout the transition, the Houthis kept one foot solidly outside of the

¹ Sean M. Ziegler, "In the Shadow of Rivalry: Rebel Alliances and Civil War", PhD Dissertation, Department of Political Science Duke University, 2013. Ziegler identifies a gap in the literature in bringing together studies of alliance formation with studies of intrastate conflict. He then argues that competitive rebel alliances can be both a source of strength and instability. Somewhat counterintuitively, competitive alliances between rebels may allow them to overcome traditional collective action problems like free riding, ultimately making them more successful against governments in civil wars. However, intra-alliance competition and the security dilemma within the coalition, may also lead to increased risks of relapse into violence once a civil war ends.

² See Dix, Robert H. "Why Revolutions Succeed & Fail," *Polity* 16, no. 3 (Spring 1984); and Beissinger, Mark. "The Semblance of Democratic Revolution: Coalitions in Ukraine's Orange Revolution," *American Political Science Review*. Vol. 107, Issue 3 (Aug. 2013).

³ For additional reading on the Houthis movement, including its origins, history of conflict with the Saleh regime, its component parts, and its post-2011 evolution see: Shelagh Weir, "A clash of fundamentalisms: Wahhabism in Yemen," *MERIP* 204 Vol. 27, no. 3, 1997; Crisis Group Middle East Report N°86, *Yemen: Defusing the Saada Time Bomb*, 27 May 2009; Barak A. Salmoni, Bryce Loidolt and Madeleine Wells, *Regime and Periphery in Northern Yemen: The Houthi Phenomenon*, RAND, 2010; Crisis Group Middle East Report N°154, *The Houthis from Saada to Sanaa*, 10 June 2014; Marike Brandt, *Tribes and Politics in Yemen: A History of the Houthi Conflict*, (London: 2014).

political process, retaining their weapons, honing their military strength and expanding their territorial control.⁴

From the start, both the Houthis and Saleh's GPC viewed the transition sceptically and became increasingly alienated from it over time.⁵ In particular, they shared a common resentment toward the apparent beneficiaries, the Sunni Islamist party Islah and its allies. These included Ali Mohsen al-Ahmar (a powerful decision maker in the Saleh regime for 33 years, who led the war against the Houthis, but defected to join the 2011 uprising), prominent members of the Ahmar family (no relation to Ali Mohsen) and Salafi groups.⁶ By 2013, as urban elites and international stakeholders were focused on the NDC, the Houthis began to upend the balance of power in the North, first by defeating Salafi fighters in Saada governorate in January 2014 and then by defeating a loose alliance of Salafi, Islah, Ali Mohsen and al-Ahmar combatants in Amran and other northern governorates prior entering the capital in September 2014.⁷ In these battles, disgruntled GPC members and tribesmen, many of whom were motivated by longstanding frustration with the al-Ahmar family or by animosity towards Islah, began to tacitly cooperate with the Houthis, turning the military tide against their common enemies.

The Houthis-Saleh alliance was not inevitable. Yemeni politics were fluid during 2012 to 2014, as established

power centers like Saleh's GPC sought to regain their footing and groups like the Houthis and the southern movement (Hiraak), which is dedicated to the independence of southern Yemen, tried to assert their own agendas.⁸ During the national dialogue, the Houthis flirted with a possible alliance with Hiraak, which like the Houthis complained of economic and political marginalization as well as direct state repression under the Saleh regime. Parts of the GPC leadership, mostly technocrats but also some sheikhs, considered adopting Hadi as its patron before the latter distanced himself, suspicious of anyone with close ties to the former president.⁹

When the Houthis invaded Sanaa in September 2014 on a wave of popular frustration with the Hadi government, they did so with the help of Saleh's GPC and affiliated army units. Yet not all GPC-Saleh supporters were pleased; many were critical of the Houthis' subsequent February 2015 announcement to replace the Hadi government with a "revolutionary committee." Relations between the two soured and soon turned violent, as they clashed over control of the Saleh-aligned Republican Guard base in Raymat al-Humayd in March 2015.

But the Saudi-led military intervention that same month pre-empted a potential breakup. Saudi Arabia wanted to push back against the Houthis, whom they claim are an Iranian

⁴ Crisis Group Middle East Report N°154, *The Houthis: From Saada to Sanaa*, 10 June 2014.

⁵ For the purpose of this paper, Saleh's GPC refers to the part of the GPC that did not defect to join the 2011 uprising and remained loyal to him when he entered the alliance with the Houthis, first tacitly in 2013/2014 and later formally during the war. Established in 1982, the GPC has always been an umbrella organization that contains supporters from different regions, religious backgrounds and political persuasions. Under Saleh, it was an important source of patronage distribution. In 2011, many members defected, some returning to parties more suited to their political or religious orientation, like the Yemeni Socialist party, others forming new groups, like the Justice and Build Party, and still others more closely associating with regional movements, like the Hiraak. When Saleh joined forces with the Houthis, a group of prominent GPC members, many of them technocrats, sheikhs and tribesmen who strongly opposed the Houthis and/or had close ties to Saudi Arabia, supported the Hadi government, while maintaining their GPC affiliation. Others tried not to take sides; many of them reside in Cairo.

⁶ For additional information of the variety of Salafi movements in Yemen see: Laurent Bonnefoy, *Salafism in Yemen: Transnational and Religious Identity*, (London 2011).

⁷ Widespread clashes broke out between Houthi and Salafi fighters in October 2013 around the Salafi religious institute, Dar al-Hadith in Dammaj, Saada. Dar al-Hadith had long been a point of tension in Saada and was rejected by the Houthis as a foreign implant bent on spreading Saudi-supported Salafism in a culturally Zaydi area. After enduring a punishing blockade imposed by the Houthis, the Salafis and their families were evacuated from Dar al-Hadith in January 2014 and relocated to Sanaa. That same month, the Houthis also won a battle against Salafis in Kitaf, Saada on the border with Saudi Arabia. For a chronology of battles in Saada and surrounding governorates see, Crisis Group Middle East Report N°154, *The Houthis: From Saada to Sanaa*, 10 June 2014.

⁸ For background on the southern movement see: Susanne Dahlgren, "The Snake with a Thousand Heads: The Southern Cause in Yemen," *Middle East Report*, Vol. 40, no. 256 (2010); Stephen Day, "updating Yemeni National Unity: Could Lingering Regional Divisions Bring Down the Regime?," *Middle East Journal*, Vol. 62, no. 3 (Summer 2008); Crisis Group Middle East Report N° 114, *Breaking Point? Yemen's Southern Question*, 20 October 2011.

⁹ Author interviews, GPC members in Sanaa, February, March and April 2012.

proxy, and reinstate the Hadi government. The Saudi-led military campaign targeted both Houthi and Saleh forces, arguably doing more damage to the Saleh-aligned army, which presented easily identifiable targets compared to Houthi fighters. This strengthened the Saleh-Houthi alliance in opposition to what is commonly viewed in the highlands as an existential national struggle against Saudi Arabia, rather than as a civil war, as it is viewed elsewhere in Yemen.

Yemeni critics of the Houthi-Saleh alliance contend that the nature of the partnership ran deeper. Some say that it was a highland coalition to ensure the Zaydis' historic dominance over other parts of Yemen.¹⁰ Southerners often saw it as additionally, if not primarily, an attempt by northerners to prevent the independence of southern Yemen.¹¹ The Houthis, and to a lesser extent Saleh's GPC, indeed do derive their core military strength from the Zaydi highlands, and both are staunch advocates of Yemen's territorial unity. Yet the jump to a Zaydi versus Shafai distinction breaks down in practice especially in regards to Saleh's GPC, which includes many loyalists and sympathizers from Shafai areas.

For both Saleh's GPC and the Houthi movement, scepticism of federalism is connected to economic as much as identify considerations. Both were supportive of federalism in the national dialogue but their commitment is questionable and their actions give reason for concern. Saleh obstructed genuine decentralization during his 33 years of rule, preferring to centralize resources and power in Sanaa, where he could dispense benefits to patrons. The Houthis resorted to violence in 2015 in part because they opposed a six-part federal division schema, which would have turned the highlands into a resource-poor, landlocked region.¹² The Houthis, along with Saleh-aligned military units, then marched southward on Aden, ostensibly to fight al-Qaeda, but effectively to consolidate political control. In doing so they stoked intra-Yemeni regional resentment and sparked a civil war.

Houthi-Saleh partnership: its components, evolution and breakdown

Until December 2017, Saleh's GPC and the Houthis were partners in both war and governance, but their relative contribution to each was uneven. During the course of the conflict, the military-security balance increasingly favored the Houthis, as they appointed their loyalists in the military-security apparatus and worked to build tribal and military loyalties through a combination of financial inducements, fear, and personal relationship building. Saleh and his loyalists retained influence in the security services and tribal structure but were ultimately outmaneuvered by the Houthis. The Republican Guard, the army's most qualified and well-trained component before the uprising, previously led by Saleh's son, Ahmed Ali Abdullah Saleh, today is a shadow of its former self. The GPC tried to rebuild and strengthen the Republican Guard under its leadership; but the Houthis resisted this effort, denying the GPC leadership of the organization.

In governance, the GPC was far more experienced and its relative contribution seemingly more important. In August 2016, the two sides formed a ten-person "supreme political council," split evenly between them, which functioned as the executive authority. Two months later, they formed a "national salvation government," dividing ministerial posts. Both sides chafed under the partnership, fighting over positions from the vice-minister level down. The GPC criticized the Houthis for not disbanding the "revolutionary committee," which continued to act as a shadow government, overseeing decision making within the ministries and thus exercising real power.

The issue of resource allocation also divided them. Following its corrupt rule, the GPC accused the Houthis of misusing limited resources flowing into the North. In turn, the Houthis accused the GPC of continued corruption as well as engaging in a political smear campaign against

¹⁰ Author interviews, Yemeni businessman from Taiz, March 2015; Hadi advisor, October 2015; Yemeni activist from Ibb, November 2015; Hadi government member, September 2017.

¹¹ Author interviews, Adeni politicians, June 2015.

¹² The majority of Hiraak supporters also rejected six part federalism, instead preferring a path to southern independence or a minimum two-part (north-south) federalism.

them at a time when the focus of both should have been on supporting the war effort. The Houthis appeared particularly offended by the GPC's accusations, since they were suffering the brunt of war casualties.

Prior to the collapse of the coalition, the political leaderships of both sides maintained that what bound them together – opposition to “Saudi aggression” and defence of the homeland – superseded what divided them. Some even suggested that post-war political partnership should be possible, although it was unclear what the division of power would look like.¹³ But the rank-and-file and hardliners on both sides were far less sanguine. Some argued for dissolving the political partnership and said they were ready to fight if necessary.¹⁴ From the GPC perspective, the Houthis are intolerant, religiously based zealots, with little experience in governance, who want to grab power and return Yemen to the discriminatory rule of the Zaydi Imams.¹⁵ For the Houthis, the GPC is a corrupt party of the past, whose leadership cannot be trusted and should be held accountable for crimes.¹⁶

In August 2017, tensions between the two sides reached a tipping point when the GPC staged a massive rally in Sanaa to celebrate its 35th anniversary. It brought together GPC supporters as well as Saleh critics opposed to the Houthis. Many hoped that Saleh would use his show of strength to turn the capital away from the Houthis through sit-ins by armed groups and, if need be, limited battles, or at least announce the alliance's breakup.¹⁷ Ultimately Saleh

disappointed them by taking a conciliatory approach. He praised the GPC and called up more fighters, a move that Yemenis across the political spectrum saw as a sign of his inability to oppose the Houthis.¹⁸

In retrospect, the damage to the relationship had been done. The Houthis suspected the GPC of conspiring with their enemies, particularly Saudi Arabia and the United Arab Emirates (UAE), to remove them from power. In late November, a skirmish over control of the Saleh mosque in Sanaa ignited battles between the two in the capital. On December 2, Saleh, the consummate political opportunist, did an about face, calling for turning over a new page with the Saudi coalition and for his loyalists to fight the Houthis. Initially, it looked like he could win. But by December 3, his forces were surrounded. On December 4, Houthi fighters killed him, subsequently arresting GPC supporters suspected of helping with the internal coup.

What comes next?

Saudi Arabia and its allies, including at times the U.S., worked hard to drive a wedge between the Houthis and Saleh to weaken them militarily and improve the Hadi government (and by extension Saudi Arabia's) bargaining position.¹⁹ These efforts have arguably backfired, producing, at least for now, a clear Houthi military victory in Sanaa. Looking ahead, the collapse of the Houthi-Saleh coalition is unlikely to provide a clear win for Saudi Arabia or its allies and instead is more likely to prolong and

¹³ Author interviews, two GPC leaders and a Houthi representative, Sanaa, April 2017; GPC leader and Houthi representative, September 2017.

¹⁴ Author interviews, GPC member and Houthi supporters, Sanaa, April 2017.

¹⁵ Zaydi Imams ruled north Yemen for a millennium before the 1962 republican revolution ousted them. All Zaydi Imams were hashimites, decedents of the Prophet Mohammed.

¹⁶ Author interviews, GPC members, Sanaa, November 2014; GPC member, Sanaa, February 2015; GPC member, September 2015; GPC members, Sanaa, April 2017; Houthi supporters, Sanaa, February 2015, Houthi supporter, Sanaa, April 2017.

¹⁷ Author interviews, GPC, Islah and Hiraak supporters, August 2017.

¹⁸ Author interviews, three Hadi government supporters, tribal sheikh, Houthi supporter, Houthi leader, political independent, two GPC members, September 2017.

¹⁹ This had taken a variety of forms. At the beginning of the war, Saudi Arabia gave financial and political support to GPC members who defected from Saleh's camp and fled to Riyadh to support the Hadi government. By supporting a Saudi-aligned GPC outside Yemen they appeared to be trying to cannibalize the part of the GPC aligned with the Houthis, while at the same time marginalizing Saleh, whom the Saudis distrusted and blamed for bringing the Houthis to Sanaa in the first place. This ultimately proved unsuccessful as the core of the GPC either remained with Saleh or refused to support either camp. As the war progressed, there were also several rumored attempts by the United States and Saudi Arabia to cut a deal directly with Saleh that would ensure a future for his party (and possibly his exit from the country), in return for the GPC's willingness to turn against the Houthis politically and/or militarily. Speculation around this track peaked in August 2017 and many Yemenis and analysts suspected that Saleh had struck a deal with Saudi Arabia or the UAE to that effect.

deepen the war in the North, an area that has thus far been spared the ravages of ground fighting.

A mediated settlement is a distant prospect at the moment. Before they came to blows, Houthi-Saleh competition offered a chance for Riyadh and its allies to offer a reasonable settlement, outside of the narrow parameters of UN Security Council Resolution 2216 of 2015, which essentially calls for the Houthi-Saleh surrender to the Hadi government. Given the GPC's desire to return to a political process in which its governing experience and relative political popularity would have given it an advantage, it would have likely accepted a proposal. This would have put pressure on Houthi hardliners and given would-be dealmakers within their ranks a chance to negotiate an exit. But that opportunity has been lost.

Now that the Houthis are in control, Riyadh will be less likely to accept a compromise with a group that it considers an Iranian proxy. In fact, Saudi Arabia has already hardened its stance, increasing aerial bombardments and announcing plans to support Yemenis in retaking the North from the Houthis. Riyadh is framing events as providing a military opportunity, arguing that without the cover of the GPC, the Houthis are isolated and exposed as a sectarian, Iranian project. They hope that troops loyal to Saleh will defect from the Houthis and join with anti-Houthi fighters, shifting the battle in the coalition's favor. Eager to push a military advantage, UAE-backed Yemeni forces have made some gains, most notably along the Red Sea coast, a relatively flat and hospitable terrain where the Houthis have limited popular support and pro-Saleh troops were an important part of the fight. They captured Khawkha, a city between Houthi-controlled Hodeidah to the north and UAE-controlled Mokha to the south, a victory that may have been helped by Saleh-aligned forces leaving the battlefield. The coalition is threatening to capture Hodeidah city, the North's most important port, and Yemen's third largest city, Taiz, and even Sanaa.

Threats aside, the coalition may once again be miscalculating. While Houthi-Saleh split does expose the Houthis to new vulnerabilities, especially regarding

popular support as they will likely rely more and more on repression to retain control, but these do not translate neatly into Saudi-led coalition military victories and are instead likely to expand the war in the North and increase the suffering of the population there. Some GPC fighters and political figures will defect to join the Saudi-led coalition, others will stay at home, and still others will remain with the Houthis, out of fear, resentment to the coalition bombings, and/or lack of alternatives. The Houthis remain the strongest military force on the ground, and they retain considerable popular support in the northern highlands, in no small part the result of hatred directed against the Saudi-led coalition's bombing campaign and blockade.

While coalition military gains are possible, especially in places like Hodeidah province and Taiz, this would require ground troops and a political cohesiveness on the part of anti-Houthi fighters that has thus far been lacking. Any assault on Houthi controlled territories, particularly if it is directed at Hodeidah, a vital port, will have devastating humanitarian consequences in a country already on the cusp of famine. As in the past, Houthi fighters will be the last to suffer and may even gain from further economic strangulation as they control the limited resources that make their way into the North. Moreover, the Houthis will likely continue to retaliate with missile strikes into Saudi Arabia and against coalition assets in the Red Sea, actions that raise the spectre of regional escalation beyond Yemen.

For their part, the Houthis are at the same time embattled and emboldened by their victory. On one hand, they have moved quickly to consolidate full control over Sanaa, cracking down on GPC supporters and suspected enemies, through targeted raids and detention. They claim that the internal purge will only make them stronger against external enemies. At the same time, they are sensitive to the political dangers of alienating the GPC writ large and have used conciliatory language, saying that their crackdown is directed only against those who took up arms against them. They are trying to forge a new alliance with what is left of the GPC in Sanaa, although if they do, few will believe that the GPC there has any free will. The

Houthi political leadership has also said they are ready to renew political talks to end the war, possibly an indication that they believe they are at a high water mark and would do well to negotiate from a position of strength. But it is far from clear what their bargaining positions are and not unreasonable to assume their demands have increased, making compromise more difficult.

In short, the collapse of the Houthi-Saleh coalition appears set to deepen the conflict and to complicate the prospects of a durable peace. In their actions, the Houthis are becoming more insular and oppressive; in doing so they are fuelling cycles of violence against them and alienating potential and former allies. For their part, Saudi Arabia and

its allies continue to underestimate the Houthis' military capabilities and their support base in the context of a war that is viewed by many northerners as an existential threat from both Saudi Arabia and domestic enemies. While the Houthis may ultimately not need the alliance with Saleh to continue the war, the political implications are important. Without Saleh's GPC, the Houthis are more easily labelled by their opponents as a sectarian group aligned with Iran, but more importantly from a Yemeni domestic perspective, bent on implementing an oppressive theocracy based on the rule of Zaydi Imams. These perceptions and stereotypes are reinforcing zero sum politics and making future reconciliation more difficult.



In Yemen, 2018 looks like it will be another grim year

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** This article originally appeared on The Monkey Cage blog hosted on the Washington Post, see: <https://www.washingtonpost.com/news/monkey-cage/wp/2018/01/11/heres-what-2018-may-have-in-store-for-yemen/>*

December 2017 brought some of the biggest shifts in Yemen's civil war since a Saudi-led coalition entered the conflict in March of 2015. On December 4, former president Ali Abdullah Saleh was killed by members of the Zaydi Shiite Houthi movement with whom he had been allied with until just a couple of days before. His death has led to newfound optimism in Riyadh and elsewhere that the Houthis can be defeated militarily in 2018.

Yet Saleh's death has produced fewer substantive changes in the balance of power than might have been anticipated. And the incentives for many actors involved in the war to sustain rather than end it remain high.

For the past year, Chatham House has been mapping key players on the ground in Yemen: military officers, militia leaders and politicians, along with a dwindling supply of state and non-state governance actors. We have also been building a picture of the political geography and economy of the conflict.

The aim has been to analyze how the different actors fit into what is less a "war economy" than what we call Yemen's "chaos state," and assess their incentives and disincentives for participating in a peace process. In December, we published our research, in the form of a long report and a freely available online interactive map (see: <https://yemen-map.chathamhouse.org>).

Here's what the paper and the map tell us.

1. The situation on the ground is far more complex than Houthis versus Hadi

Yemen has been divided into multiple zones of territorial control and influence that go far beyond big-picture narratives of an Iran-backed Houthi-Saleh alliance (now just the Houthis) against the rest of Yemen, united under president Abd Rabbu Mansour Hadi and backed by the Saudi-led coalition. UN negotiation efforts have also been structured around this false dichotomy.

Local groups have done the bulk of fighting against the Houthis, provided most governance outside Houthi areas and control most territory on the ground. In contrast, the Hadi government has a very light footprint. Hadi cannot visit many areas under his nominal control and his purported allies do not necessarily get along. In many cases, they have sharply divergent agendas.

For example, UAE-backed forces in Hadramawt, in eastern Yemen, have not participated in the war with the Houthis. They have mainly focused on fighting the local Al Qaeda franchise and consolidating their control over Mukalla port and its environs. Meanwhile, military units and tribal militias affiliated with former president Saleh and Islah, Yemen's main Sunni Islamist party – whose members Hadrami forces have been arresting and detaining in large numbers – control the other side of the *wadi*, or valley, that bisects Hadramawt. Many locals predict a future power struggle.

In Taiz, an odd-couple mix of UAE-backed Salafists and Nasserists, regularly clash with Saudi-funded Islahi militias. Tensions between President Hadi and the UAE – which sparked fighting around Aden airport in February 2017 – have set back the war effort in Taiz and along Yemen's west coast. While much has been made of a UAE-Islah rapprochement, in reality, anti-Houthi forces are not a coherent unit. The seeds of future conflict are being sewn across the country.

2. Many groups ostensibly fighting the Houthis have profited from the thriving war economy

The Saudis have repeatedly justified their blockade of the western port of Hodeidah by arguing it is a major entry point for smuggled materiel. But fuel, food, medicine, electronics and arms enter ports across Yemen's southern coast and over land borders with Saudi Arabia and Oman. Overland trade is worth tens, if not hundreds, of millions of dollars a month for everyone from the guys with guns at checkpoints to the top leadership on all sides. Weapons have become so widely available that the price for AK-47s and ammunition has gone *down* since the war began. Meanwhile, some groups are benefiting from the sale of oil and gas both to local and international markets.

With Saleh out of the picture, the Houthis now have a monopoly over trade in the territory they control. For the first time since their first 2004 uprising, they finally have a relatively sustainable revenue base and their military leaders are getting rich. Diplomats have yet to wrap their head around the implications of the war economy for mediation efforts. The cost of winning a war for Yemen's northern highlands would be phenomenally high in both blood and treasure. The alternative is maintaining a profitable status quo.

3. The Houthis were stronger than many had assumed, and no longer have to worry about internal threats

In 2017, insiders in Sanaa had told us the Houthis held an increasingly dominant position on the frontlines of the war and a growing stranglehold over security elsewhere.

The speed with which the Houthis dispatched Saleh and their ability to maintain the frontlines with few defections, supports this analysis. The Houthis emerged from the schism light a few soldiers, but they retain full control of an estimated 60 to 70 percent of Yemen's prewar military arsenal and no longer have to contend with an internal rival.

The Houthis will likely lose some territory in the coming weeks and months, especially if Saudi- and UAE-backed groups coordinate more closely. Already, Houthi militias have been pushed out of Bayhan district in Shabwa governorate and have lost ground to UAE-backed forces in Hodeidah. They have also lost the support of most ordinary Yemenis thanks to the brutal police state they are building that imprisons, tortures and kills its rivals. But a battle for Sanaa or Hodeidah would likely be bloody and destructive, pushing Yemen's humanitarian crisis – already the worst in the world – into a new, even more catastrophic, phase.

The Saudi-led coalition reportedly believes a military victory – which they would cast as a symbolic win against Iran – can be achieved in 2018, but what that “victory” might look like remains an open question. The best Riyadh can hope for is a series of destructive battles followed by years of messy insurgency and counterinsurgency in Yemen's northern highlands.

With UN mediation efforts stalled since 2016 and the peace process in need of major restructuring following Saleh's death, it is hard to be optimistic for Yemen. Barring a major diplomatic breakthrough, another grim year likely waits in store.



Popular revolution advances towards state building in Southern Yemen

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In the shadow of the war, a popular revolution flourishes in southern Yemen that de facto has separated the area from the capital of Sana'a. As the Yemeni state is incapacitated by war and two separate claims for rule, one in Sana'a (the Houthi movement) and the other in Aden (with the internationally recognized president Hadi, actually sitting in Riyadh), an independent state is in the making in the lands that once formed the People's Democratic Republic of Yemen (PDRY). The re-establishment of the PDRY state is part of the demands that the Southern Movement, locally called *hirak*, has raised for a decade. This structurally loose civil society initiative has managed to gather the entire nation to support the call for independence. Still, it is not clear yet how the re-establishment of the independent southern state will take place.

Locally called a revolution, *thawra*, the southern uprising comes from southern sentiment of marginality following unification of the two Yemens in 1990. The years of unity with North Yemen have proved difficult for southerners who have seen the country they built ruined by incompetent rule and discrimination. Among the most lamented issues is quality education that southerners consider was recognizable in the schools during the PDRY. After unification, schools were run with a curriculum from Sana'a that provides weak qualifications and misrepresents the history of the south. During the 1990s, most of the qualified teachers left schools in protest. While the PDRY called upon women to build the society alongside men, after unity, women's agenda was marginalized and activists were sidelined and replaced by female technocrats with family ties to men in power.

Enthusiasm on regained sovereignty takes place in the middle of power cuts, hunger and ubiquitous violence. While fighting in the southern capital Aden ended in July 2015 after the local Popular Resistance and army loyal to Hadi pushed the Houthi-Saleh advance out of the city, many feel that the war is not over. The presence of the Hadi regime in the city has brought mismanagement, insecurity and corruption.¹ It is not only with Sana'a that people here want to separate, but with the Hadi regime. According to many southerners, the bloodshed caused by the Hadi regime since the start of the popular uprising in 2007 cannot be easily washed away or forgotten. In Aden, the 2013 to 2014 civil disobedience campaign showed how widely spread anger was across the former capital. Schools, shops, and most government offices kept closed to show support to the southern demands. This was met by tanks and snipers that Hadi regime sent to the streets to face unarmed young boys.² Throughout the South, pictures of "martyrs," people killed in peaceful demonstrations, have long since replaced commercial billboards and pictures of the despised president. Hadi's sacking of the popular governor of Aden Aidrus al-Zubaydi in April 2017 launched a political process that actually separated the south from Hadi's control.

Following his dismissal, Al-Zubaydi and a cabinet member fired by Hadi at the same time, Hani Bin Burayk established the Southern Transitional Council (STC), a de facto government of the southern governorates. Thus the southern call for independence took a major step forward. According to the "Aden Historical Declaration" of May 4, 2017, the council is endowed to represent the eight

¹ The Aden governor who Hadi appointed after sacking STC leader al-Zubaydi resigned less than six months in office in November 2017 accusing in a letter to Hadi, prime minister Bin Daghr of being the source of top level corruption, see <https://www.adennews.net/yemen/aden/19719/> عاجل - محافظ عدن: المخالفين يقدم استقالته (Urgent: Governor of Aden Abd al-Aziz Al-Muflahi formally resigns from his post and accuses Ben Daghr to lead a corruption gang (text of resignation, November 16, 2017, accessed on November 20, 2017).

² See Dahlgren, Susanne 2015, A Poor People's Revolution. The Southern Movement Heads towards Independence from Yemen, Middle East Report 273, <http://www.merip.org/mer/mer273/poor-peoples-revolution>

southern governorates in issues of national concern and to lead the area towards establishment of a “democratic, federal state.”³ Clearly STC is not just a new hirak branch, but a regime with its own “ministries.” This move served as a catalyst that provided a long-sought leadership to “South Arabia,” as the state-to-be is called, and managed for the first time since 2007, to unify all the southern governorates under one body. Building a regional administration followed, starting from the eastern governorates of al-Mahra and Hadramaut.

In the street and in social media the establishment has been widely celebrated. During my almost four decades of scholarly involvement, first with PDRY and then with unified Yemen, this is the first time I have witnessed people truly enthusiastic about future. Among southern intellectuals, though, disbelief is the common mode of existence. Southerners tried to secede already in 1994 following an inter-Yemeni war that ended the honeymoon of 1990 unification. Avoiding a similar mistake is on the agenda now as the STC approaches full sovereignty.

Traditional elites, professionals and activists

The 24-member steering committee of the Southern Transitional Council consists of new and old political forces, familiar from southern modern era politics since the late colonial times. Present are men who come from the traditional elites, namely, the *sada*, or descendants of pre-independence rulers.⁴ While some members are referred to as “activists,” they might share similar roots. New elites are present as five of Hadi’s cabinet ministers and a number of acting governors have taken positions. The three women are professionals by their own merit, reflecting the PDRY era ethos of women’s empowerment. All the three women have prominent positions in the “ministries” (called departments) that work under the steering committee, such

as the Culture and Information Department led by Muna Bashraheel, an activist member of the family who have published the leading opposition newspaper, al-Ayyam. Here we see another old-transformed-new elite family. Young people, the driving force of civil society activism, form a minority, making the steering committee more closely resemble modern era southern political history than current civil society activism.

What does it mean that pre-colonial traditional elites are so strongly present in STC? I find it useful to compare STC to the coalition that emerged during the previous north-south war in 1994. That war was fought by armies loyal to the two state leaders that formed unified Yemen, namely Ali Abdullah Saleh and Ali Salim al-Bidh of the ruling southern Yemen Socialist Party. The latter sought alliance with pre-independence forces largely excluded during the PDRY but which became disillusioned with unity the same way as YSP. One of the most prominent leaders of the “Democratic Republic of Yemen” the state that was announced during the war, was Abd al-Rahman al-Jifri, the longtime leader of the League of the Sons of Yemen party, a small opposition party during the PDRY operating from Sana’a, which tried to gather support in particular in Hadramaut after unity.⁵ During the war, al-Bidh sought support for secession from the political elites of that governorate.

Involving Hadramaut to join the other southern areas in the independence project has been a key problem for the movement. Therefore, it should be no surprise that Hadramis clearly dominate the STC leading bodies. Some of the traditional Hadrami families are present as representatives of Aden, too. Hadramis who take pride in their oil wealth and prominence in Gulf economies have been looking for separate political solutions from other southern areas.⁶ Saudi Arabian economy is largely run by Hadrami business families, making the Saudi

³ <http://en.southerntransitionalcouncil.net/news/7815> (accessed on November 22, 2017).

⁴ Sada, plural of sayyid, means a descendant of the Propher Muhammad’s family who in Yemen traditionally have claimed a special elite position.

⁵ On the 1994 war, see The Yemeni War of 1994. Causes and Consequences. Ed. Jamal S. Al-Suwaidi. The Emirates Center for Strategic Studies and Research 2014.

⁶ The Saudi-influenced news site al-araby immediately rejected the STC and brought forward voices of those Hadramis who support an independent Hadramaut, see <https://www.alaraby.co.uk/politics/2017/5/16/المجلس-الانتقالي-الجنوبي-في-اليمن-عقبة-وجودية-في-حضرمت> (The Southern Transitional Council: Existential obstacles in Hadramaut), accessed on November 15, 2017).

lobby influential among Hadramis, too. A Hadrami independence or annexation to Saudi Arabia has gained some momentum fueled by Saudi Arabia's longtime aspiration to build two pipelines through the governorate to the sea. However, most Yemenis remain opposed to Saudi influence coming on politics. Furthermore, many southerners, specifically Maharis in the far east, who have long sought equality, abhor the prospect of Hadrami hegemony. In STC, this problem is not yet solved, even though, superficially, the council works harmoniously. The recent lengthy visit by al-Zubaydi, the leader of STC to Hadramaut tells the same story. Still, this is not the first time a ruler of southern part of Arabia has had problems with Hadramaut. During British colonial times, the two Hadrami sultanates, Kathiri State and Qu'aiti State refused to join the Federation of South Arabia that the British formed with the mission to unify its colony Aden with the two protectorates.

The STC reflects the kind of political spectrum that I have come to know throughout my decades of scholarly engagement with the south. Today, this tolerant, cosmopolitan openness is discussed under the label civil state (*al-dawla al-madaniyya*), but has long been a trademark of southern intellectual life, which includes politically oriented Salafists and women. The legacy of *tahrir al-mar'a* (women's emancipation) policies was a hallmark of the PDRY era set aside after unity, until its revival by the southern uprising after 2007. Politically, the unification of old and new southern elites in the STC means that not only Sana'ati elites (current and past) but also the party that ruled the south during the PDRY, the Yemen Socialist Party, have been largely excluded. YSP has isolated itself by being divided over the southern question, with the Aden-based section supporting hirak and STC and the Sana'a-based segment joining Hadi regime to promote the unity agenda. However, in the National Assembly that STC formed in November 30, 2017 to reflect all regions of the south, socialist party activists are involved.⁷ These include people who until recently

embraced the unity agenda but who now have severed all ties with the Hadi regime.

Revolution on the ground

Hirak was established in the summer of 2007 by army officers sacked from the national army following the 1994 war, who were then joined by unemployed youth. The movement spread rapidly in western parts of the south and started to gather people in mass rallies, later called *milliyuniyya*, at its best with hundreds of thousands of people gathering in the official parade square in Aden. Prominent men in western governorates of the south established a number of groups affiliated with hirak. Similar to most NGOs in Yemen, these organizations were often nothing more than small groupings with no membership outside the founding patrimonial family. Simultaneously, different community based activities started to mushroom, often one-person initiatives aimed at mending the problems the inadequate and corrupt administration left unsolved. All these reflected a political awakening among young people as well as women's re-entry into politics after years of self-imposed seclusion in the privacy of the home to protest to the unfavorable atmosphere for women in society. Activities affiliated with hirak also include intellectuals forming clubs for political discussion and to safeguard historical buildings.⁸ Hirak became a loose network of activities unified under the demands of ending marginalization of the south, compensation for those whose property had been looted, and re-establishment of southern independence. These grievances are commonly called Southern Cause, *al-qadhiyya al-janubiyya*. The Southern Cause is all about criticizing corruption, bad rule and the exclusion of southerners from the army and, largely, from public office. The cause objects to the idea that one must join the ruling People's General Congress party to get things done.

Starting in 2011, local residents in all quarters of Aden have established "revolution squares" in neighborhoods

⁷ See <http://www.almashhadalaraby.com/news/14920> for a list of names of the 303-member National Assembly, (accessed on December 1, 2017).

⁸ <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=bCXY1wsROkc>

for public meetings and demonstrations. During the height of such activities, before the current war started, all districts of Aden had such a square, some even had two, gathering residents to what I have called “street corner universities.”⁹ The usual pattern was to call upon residents – including men and women from all fields of life – to a weekly political meeting before the sunset with speakers. For young people, these were moments when they could hear, some for the first time, about history of their city and about life before the power cuts came and running water became a rarity. In the square, sunset marked a joint moment of prayer to be followed by a demonstration along the neighborhood roads. Religious men joined as well, not only as speakers but also by establishing a council of *fuqaha* (Islamic legal scholars) in 2013 to review all present laws from the perspective of southern understanding of Islamic law *shari’a*. This and the joint prayer in the squares tells about the tactic that hiraq has adopted to avoid being labelled as “un-Islamic” the way PDRY was attacked from neighboring countries. The new independent trade union movement is active in shop floor, and the teachers’ union is one of the most militant. It unifies voluntarily retired teachers (as protest to Sana’a’s education policies) with those currently in office and among other tasks, prepares an education reform for the new state. While the flag of “South Arabia” is the same as PDRY flag, a musician and a poet from Hadramaut have composed a new southern national anthem.¹⁰

Functioning as a “new social movement,” meaning a movement without a hierarchical structure, leadership or a manifesto, hiraq has been extremely successful as a source of inspiration among people united behind the Southern Cause. Within only ten years, it has managed to inspire a truly popular revolution. I see southern activism as a similar grassroots initiative as Gustavo Esteva and Madhu Suri Prakash (1998) describe the Mexican Zapatista movement. In declining to take part in the “transition

process” following the deposing of Ali Abdullah Saleh and carried out in Sana’a in the National Dialogue Conference during 2013 to 2014, the Southern Movement, similar to the Zapatista movement, refused to “come to power,” that is, join the disappointing participatory realities of the country. Like the Zapatistas, it builds people’s power and local governance in the remotest countryside (see Esteva 1999: 153–4).¹¹ Southern activism makes use of both virtual and physical space in rewriting local spaces of living and meaning-making. STC is a step towards the traditional social movement, with its political statements and structure that largely resembles a state leadership. While hiraq has inspired local governance on the ground, STC aims at taking over state functions.

A referendum among southern governorates has long been discussed among hiraki activists, and the STC has embraced the idea on its agenda. Throughout the years as the re-establishment of independence has been discussed, participants have tried to recognize and avoid past mistakes, including when sections of society were excluded in 1967 and when a hasty attempt to secede failed in 1994. In the light of recent independence referendums in Catalonia and Kurdistan, referendum is a sensitive issue here too. The “international community” generally discourages any attempts to split nation states, and Yemen is no exception. However, one should remember that these other two independence movements never had an independent state, while the South had one 27 years ago. Southerners have compared the current Republic of Yemen to the United Arab Republic that Egypt and Syria formed in 1958, and which was dissolved in 1961 after Syria left. Al-Zubaydi has commented on the referendum issue, indicating that institution building comes first before a referendum can be held.

Still, many southerners disappointed in Hadi regime’s inability to provide electricity and running water remain

⁹ Dahlgren, Susanne 2016, Making Intimate “Civilpolitics” in Southern Revolution Squares, in *Freedom without Permission. Bodies and Space in the Arab Revolutions*. Eds. Frances S. Hasso and Zakia Salime. Duke University Press.

¹⁰ See, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=qYokbIdAINA>

¹¹ Esteva, Gustavo, ‘The Zapatistas and people’s power’, *Capital & Class* 68 (1999), pp. 153–82.
Esteva, Gustavo and Madhu Suri Prakash, ‘Beyond development, what?’, *Development in Practice* 8/3 (1998), pp. 280–96.

waiting for the STC to prove its capacity to function as an administration. Critical hirakis point out al-Zubaydi's close ties with United Arab Emirates and ask if the entire STC is set up by the foreign country to serve its own purposes and not southerners' concerns. Such people insist in continuing the revolution that challenges corrupt politicians, incapable administrators, and political leaders. The southern uprising is not only hirak or STC; it is a popular revolution. The war, called the latest "North-South war," has only strengthened the will to leave Sana'a. The southern uprising is the real success story among the 2011 Arab Spring revolutions in that, despite being violently suppressed, it has gained strength and today poses a real political challenge to the state power.

United Arab Emirates and the South

Saudi Arabia entered the Yemeni civil war with a coalition, in which the United Arab Emirates has played the biggest role on the ground. While publicly both stand behind Hadi, Emiratis have trained a "national" army of southerners and invested in large development projects throughout the south. Disagreement between the coalition partners has been visible and occasionally erupted in fighting such as over the control of Aden airport.¹² It is clear that the Emirati role in the south is remarkable, and even the Saudis have accused it for acting as an occupation force. In addition to training the army, Emiratis have established detention centers strongly criticized by human rights organizations.¹³ STC leader al-Zubaydi became famous after the war for participating with UAE forces in clearing Aden of jihadists. Since the establishment of STC, al-Zubaydi has regularly visited Abu Dhabi, and speculation has emerged that the Emirati royal house supports southern independence.

While the Emirati agenda in the Yemeni war has occasionally differed from the Saudi one, it would be

too optimistic for southern separatists to believe that the UAE actually endorses southern independence. Instead, the UAE has its own agenda, which the stability that STC promotes in the south suits well. What is the Emirati agenda then? Some link the Yemen campaign to Emirati attempts to control maritime trade and its recent emergence as port operator in key oil route seaports in Africa and the Arabian Peninsula.¹⁴ While its interest is partly commercial, it is also the question of safeguarding oil routes from a possible Iranian blockage or global terrorism. This is in line with the ten-year-old Saudi campaign to diversify its maritime oil routes that, with the pipeline demand, includes a claim to Yemeni territory, too. The United States has since long pressured GCC countries to prepare for a possible Iranian closure of Hormuz.

Another key element of Emirati policies is its joint campaign with Saudi Arabia against the Muslim Brotherhood, of which the Qatar boycott forms a part. Still, one more perspective could be added here. The GCC countries have recently experienced reforms aimed at preparing for the after-oil period against a background of declining Gulf economies. But the economy is not the only prerogative that sparks changed strategies. UAE has been active in the fight over leadership of the Sunni world, too, that the rise of the Islamic state and the re-empowerment of al-Qaeda resurfaced. In Islamic scholarly terms, the campaign is sometimes referred to as *madhabiyya*. The word comes from the book *al-lā Madhabiyya* written by the famous late Syrian scholar Shaykh Muhammad Sa'id Ramadhan al-Buti, translated into English as "Abandoning the madhhabs is the most dangerous bid'ah threatening the Islamic shari'a" (Damascus 2009) where the scholar criticizes Salafis and other "non-madhabs." The point anyhow is that one should follow an established scholarship and not a self-declared cyber-mufti. Interestingly, KSA fits in as a "Hanbali state." In Yemen, the Emirati targets are jihadi groups and Salafists as well

¹² <http://arabi21.com/story/1002181/> 27.4.2017 (UAE security protecting Aden Airport arrest a commander of Hadi's guards, accessed on September 3, 2017).

¹³ <https://www.hrw.org/news/2017/06/22/yemen-uae-backs-abusive-local-forces>, accessed on September 2, 2017.

¹⁴ <https://www.economist.com/news/middle-east-and-africa/21720319-driven-energetic-crown-price-uae-building-bases-far-beyond-its-little-sparta> (The Gulf's "little Sparta." The Ambiguous United Arab Emirates, accessed on December 12, 2017).

as the Islah party, home of Yemeni Brotherhood, which they, together with STC leaders, accuse of standing behind al-Qaeda. The Qatar boycott was also connected to the campaign against the Muslim Brotherhood for leadership of the Sunni world. STC leaders were among the first to join the Qatar boycott. Out of the main political forces in Yemen, STC is clearly on the Emirati side in its mission to fight the Brotherhood, while Hadi has the burden of the key Islah politician, vice president Ali Muhsin al-Ahmar. While the accusations on who stands behind Al-Qaeda varies in time, the point here is to suggest one more perspective (and not to question the others) in looking at the Emirati agenda in Yemen and to show that it has different goals both from the Saudi ones in supporting STC, and from the latter, in having a regional mission.

Spoiling the unique natural heritage of Soqatra Island?

While Emirati investment on reconstruction in the South has been largely celebrated among local populations, in the isolated island of Soqatra in the Indian Ocean, it clearly has crossed a line, raising popular anger. Iranian backed news sites (i.e. yemenpress.org) claim that Hadi leased Soqatra to the UAE for 99 years, which both deny. Still, today only Emirati airplanes fly to the island and telecommunications are run from Abu Dhabi. An Emirati military camp is operative, the “Zayed Residential City” is under construction,¹⁵ and plans for “tourist revival” are underway. Emirati-based hotels have reserved large areas on the beaches and erected fences for future hotel development.¹⁶ Soqatra has a unique natural habitat and since 2008 has been a UNESCO world heritage site. This Galapagos-of-the-east is the only place in the world to

find certain rare species, such as the dragon blood tree. Soqatra is not the only island where the coalition has taken a foothold. In the mouth of Bab al-Mandab, the strait that connects Indian Ocean to Red Sea, Perim island has been made a coalition military base. However, the Emirati interest in Soqatra seems to go beyond the need to secure the sea route from enemy operations. Land property has been offered to any Emirati or expatriate national who has participated in “investment tours” flown directly from Abu Dhabi to the island.¹⁷ As al-Zubaydi denies the allegations of Emirati occupation of Soqatra, and the local authorities cooperate with the UAE they are faced with a dilemma. While they are grateful to hospitals, schools, and other developments in their island following the devastating 2015 storm, the GCC-style development of erasing the past has raised popular anger, too.¹⁸

State-building from the periphery

In the chaos of war and absence of a state power, the South already has seceded. While the STC has chosen its “president,” “cabinet” and “parliament,” all ready to embrace national functions, it is the people in neighborhoods and villages who have taken over power. Among these people, the flag to be raised is the “South Arabian” flag, not the Yemeni flag. Popular Committees have been set up to take care of local safety, activists work to resolve power cuts, and teachers without a salary keep running the schools. In a similar manner, this has happened in the northern cities of Marib and Taiz, which have built their own institutions, again separate from the capital. What is happening in the shadow of war is state-building from the periphery that fully disregards the power struggle in Sana’a.

¹⁵ <https://www.alaraby.co.uk/english/society/2017/1/9/emiratis-build-zayed-residential-city-in-yemens-socotra-island>, accessed on December 12, 2017.

¹⁶ Claims of Emirati occupation of Soqatra have been demented in UAE media, see <https://www.thenational.ae/opinion/uae-offers-a-helping-hand-to-the-island-of-socotra-1.6185>

¹⁷ Personal communication with a person who participated in one such trip.

¹⁸ <https://www.alaraby.co.uk/english/indepth/2017/5/17/has-the-uae-colonised-yemens-socotra-island-paradise>, accessed on December 12, 2017.

Sunni Islamist dynamics in context of war: What happened to al-Islah and the Salafis?

Laurent Bonnefoy, Sciences Po/CERI

While the revolutionary process of 2011 in Yemen had given high expectations to Sunni Islamists, the object of this short article is to examine what these hopes have become after almost three years of conflict. It aims to analyze, in particular, the way the current war has tipped equilibriums. The Sunni Islamist field structured around the three competing branches of Jihadism, Salafism, and the Muslim Brotherhood which have distinct trajectories, means and projects was transformed, largely in favor of the two former and much to the expense of the latter represented by al-Islah. Through such dynamics, the paper (which voluntarily only very briefly touches upon Jihadi groups, leaving much of their analysis to Elisabeth Kendall in this volume) also intends to provide a mapping of contemporary Salafism in Yemen, highlighting how violence has changed the way its activists, militants and leaders interact with other groups, favoring a militarization process.

Al-Islah as the post-Saleh kingmaker

Following the revolutionary uprising of 2011, the post-Saleh period had seemingly been characterized by the political centrality of al-Islah. Established in 1990, representing an alliance between Muslim Brothers and conservative tribal sheikhs, this party had been widely seen as the new “Yemen Spring” kingmaker during 2012 to 2013. Al-Islah had participated directly to the revolutionary uprising, granting it numbers and resources, and then had allegedly captured – or hijacked it, according to some of its adversaries – the uprisings to its own advantage. Yet, following the fall of President Ali Abdallah Saleh after almost a year of peaceful demonstrations, Islahi leaders appeared to be somehow unwilling to actually take the lead, leaving others in the frontline of the transitional institutions. They supported Abderabuh Mansur Hadi as the sole presidential candidate in the February 2012 plebiscite and joined the national unity government with

only limited demands – far from what their mobilizing capacity could have suggested. No “*ikhwanization* (Brotherization)” of the Yemeni state happened, contrary to what some, like the Houthis and certain liberals, claimed. Islahi leaders continuously wanted to appear as the ones who played according to the new institutional rules and abided by the revolutionary project of a “civil state.” During the National Dialogue Conference they seemingly supported a form of consensus. At the time, the party’s strategy was more similar to that of Ennahda in Tunisia than the Muslim Brotherhood in Egypt.

In parallel, the period that followed the demise of Saleh (through the so-called Gulf Initiative that set the transitional agenda and granted the ex-president immunity from prosecution) was marked by new developments in the Yemeni Salafi field. Two main trends emerged from 2011 to the start of the current war in 2015.

Salafis willingly engaged in politics after the revolution

The first trend was the politicization of a segment of Salafism through the establishment of an explicitly Salafi party, the Rashad Union in early 2012. This step represented a significant development for a movement which, since its founding in the 1980s by Muqbil al-Wadi’i (d. 2001), had rejected political parties and even participation as a whole. The Salafi movement in Yemen had until now staunchly claimed to stay away from politics only to focus on issues of creed. Debates had unfolded during the 1990s and 2000s, but the so-called apolitical line had prevailed, leaving the majority of Salafis reluctant to engage politically. During the first weeks of the 2011 uprising, Salafi leaders had thus condemned demonstrations, advocating loyalty to the state in the name of the unity of the Islamic community and of the preservation from chaos (*fitna*).

The revolution, however, changed this. As the “new kid in town” in an otherwise stable political field (no other significant parties emerged and new figures of leadership were surprisingly scarce, despite the demands of the revolutionaries and initiatives like that of the Justice and Development Party), the Rashad Union drew public and media attention. Much like the Nur Party in Egypt, it was expected to become a powerful alternative to al-Islah should elections be organized. Rashad projected itself as a moderate force, distinct from al-Islah, which was portrayed as a remnant of the old regime. Rashad stressed the fact its project complied with democratic standards, and that it was only an update and adaptation of the Salafi religious project as formulated by Muqbil al-Wadi'i to a new Yemeni context, where political pluralism could be a reality and assist in the spread of the Salafi creed and religious doctrine.

The crisis of apolitical Salafis

The second trend was linked to the crisis of the so-called apolitical Salafis from the Dar al-Hadith institute in Dammaj (50km south of the border with Saudi Arabia). During the revolutionary uprising, the pro-Saleh stance of their leaders, in particular Yahya al-Hajuri who had taken control of the institute in 2001 after the death of Muqbil al-Wadi'i had evidently weakened these apolitical Salafis, who were portrayed as disconnected from popular demands. The new inter-Salafi competition coming from al-Rashad amplified this dynamic, as the Dammaj branch was seen as unable to address contemporary political issues and stuck in a seemingly apolitical stance that rejected political participation but ended up endorsing the status-quo.

At the global level, the apolitical Salafis' capacity to mobilize was also jeopardized by specific doctrinal and institutional feuds with prominent Saudi clerics – al-Hajuri holding an uncompromising line that made him critical of all fellow clerics who engaged in charity work and thus increasingly marginalized. More significantly, in late 2013, the armed blockade that the Houthis (whom the Salafis portrayed as a Shia rebellion) organized around the Salafis' institute in Dammaj left apolitical Salafis disorganized and humiliated. The forced closure of Dammaj and displacement of its

students after weeks of fighting and dozens of casualties had allegedly been approved by the central Yemeni government and the army. In January 2014, this gesture apparently served to appease the Houthis, as they were then gaining political and military momentum, and pressured the transition government to cleanse “their” Saada governorate of Salafi presence. While the Salafis' new condition generated some sympathy within broad Sunni Islamist circles and fostered solidarity for the approximately 3,000 students and families who had been displaced and settled in camps outside of Dammaj, the marginalization of that current of Salafism was profound. In order to protect itself from a similar fate, Muhammad al-Imam, the other prominent Salafi figure in Yemen, who also had refused the revolutionary process, found an agreement with the Houthis based on a form of non-aggression pact that, three years into the war, still holds. His institute near Dhamar remained active despite Houthi scrutiny.

Al-Islah marginalized by the war

The war further reshuffled cards within a competitive Sunni Islamist field in which Muslim Brothers, Jihadis, and Salafis had, to a large extent, taken different political options since 2011 (even though, as with all ideal-types, the border between each group was not systematically clear as “radical” figures of the Muslim Brotherhood like Abdulmajid al-Zindani and Abdullah al-Sa'tar illustrate). Al-Islah's rise to institutional power was brutally interrupted by the Houthis' expansion during the second half of 2014. The Yemeni branch of the Muslim Brotherhood was, after the Salafis of Dammaj, the primary target of the Houthis and of their alliance with Saleh. The fall of Amran in July 2014 and then of the capital two months later shattered al-Islah: it lost its military might, and its tribal, financial, and institutional bases. Most of its leaders either fled or were arrested. During the transition phase, al-Islah had also increasingly been at odds with the Southern movement, consequently losing much of its popularity and the option to find retreat to the South as the Houthis advanced.

While al-Islah as a party supported operation “Decisive Storm” launched by the Saudi led coalition headed in

March 2015, its activists and tribal allies only received limited retributions from Gulf leaders who were reinforcing patronage relations with Yemeni political actors in the framework of the war. The April 2016 nomination of one of its traditional allies, General Ali Muhsin, to the vice-presidency failed to counter Islah's marginalization. Indeed, Islahis were not the ones who benefited the most from financial or military support by the coalition. Much to the contrary, they were sidelined (if not in certain instances repressed), in particular by the Emiratis who, encouraged other actors in the South, including Salafis active on the military front and had a specific ideological impetus to fight the Houthis. Al-Islah was further sidelined when the 2017 regional crisis pitted its perceived ally Qatar against coalition members Saudi Arabia and the United Arab Emirates. Ali Abdullah Saleh's death in December 2017 following his political U-turn and sudden support to the coalition against the Houthis left the Saudi and Emirati leadership in search of new allies on the field. Senior princes from both countries agreed to jointly discuss with leaders from al-Islah, highlighting potential for a comeback of the Muslim Brotherhood. However, manifestations on the ground of such a development remained uncertain.

A militarization of Salafism

Salafi militias rose to prominence throughout 2016, not only on the military fronts but also within institutions allegedly loyal to President Hadi. Such a trend is however proving problematic as it is based on the militarization of Salafism and implies a possible merger with jihadi movements.

Among the new significant Salafi actors, many had combatted the Houthis during their siege on Dammaj in late 2013. They consequently could portray themselves as the most clairvoyant of all political forces, as they had not sought compromise with the Houthis and had aptly exposed what they described as a Shiite sectarian offensive. Salafi militiaman Abu al-Abbas in Tazeh was among the most significant and has gradually been able to sideline Islahi fighters who in the first months of 2015 had played an important role locally to fight the Houthis. The rise of

Abu al-Abbas consequently occurred at the expense of al-Islah, even generating targeted assassinations of Muslim Brotherhood figures by Salafi militants in Tazeh.

Former students of Dammaj also included Basam al-Mihdar in Abyan and Hani Bin Burayk from Aden, who both gained influence in the pro-Hadi military apparatus. Hani Bin Burayk joined the government in January 2016 as the minister of state in charge of security in Aden before being sacked by President Hadi in April 2017 for being too openly in favor of Southern independence. He nevertheless remained on the Emirati payroll, fostering tensions within the regional coalition. Much like other Salafi clerics who had moved from an apolitical stance in times of peace to an armed engagement in the context of war, Bin Burayk was accused of favoring the development of a continuum in which militants of al-Qaeda and potentially ISIS could be integrated. The Rashad Union's leaders also took part in the trend, many of them fighting locally on the Baydha front, in the center of the country, ending the peaceful politicization project they had envisioned in 2012. The Salafis' legitimization of armed violence blurred the border between jihadism and other Sunni Islamists groups.

The development of Salafism since the start of the war can be explained in part because its doctrine has a comparative advantage on the battle field. It has consequently been open for instrumentalization by regional powers which are on the one hand eager to fight the Houthis (even if this fosters sectarian conflict) and on the other unwilling to support Muslim Brothers. Indeed, when compared to other political or territory-based mobilizations, Salafis share an ideological incentive that encourages them to fight the Houthis in the latter's own territory, something that militias built on a tribal identity and the Southern movement (both of which operate primarily within a limited territory) have up to now been largely unable to achieve.

Interestingly, the blurring of categories both within the Salafi field and in the broader Sunni Islamist spectrum could not conceal more complex trajectories. The militarization of Salafism in Yemen appeared all the more likely in contexts where this trend overlapped with

other objectives or identities. In other words, the Salafi ideology was not always sufficient in itself to trigger armed militancy against the Houthis and often needed to be articulated with another identity: support for the Southern movement in most instances. Inversely, Salafi leaders with a Zaydi background and whose families or tribes were not at direct odds with the Houthis, or were even a potential target of coalition airstrikes, appeared less inclined to engage militarily or even support military action. Such was the case of Yahya al-Hajuri. After being expelled by the Houthis from Dammaj in January 2014 and calling for mobilization against them, the Salafi leader grew increasingly discreet. Contrary to what could have been expected (and what, according to media accounts, the Saudi government asked him to do), his relocation in Saudi Arabia coincided with a focus on strictly religious matters, not endorsing operation “Decisive Storm.” His own northern and Zaydi origins likely played a role in such a counter-intuitive stance.

Beyond these exceptions, the “salafization” of combatants on the so-called pro-Hadi side and in the Southern Movement remains a deep trend fueled both by internal dynamics as well as regional incentives. Emirati and Saudi governments, who claim to be fighting Islamist movements and are unlikely to wish to see Yemen become a hub for jihadi groups, do not always appear to be fully aware of what they are doing in this country or whom they are supporting. By funding then repressing Salafi groups, they are sending decidedly mixed signals. Some decision makers within the UAE and Saudi Arabia undoubtedly support Salafis in Yemen because of what they see as a lack of alternatives, especially given their aversion of Muslim Brothers and Qatar. Yet others may well be acting knowingly, supporting movements that develop a sectarian reading of the conflict and a most conservative project. Whatever the reasons, this trend is likely to come at a high price, much like in Syria and earlier in Afghanistan. Mending Yemen after the militarization of Salafism, the sidelining of al-Islah, and the blurring of the borders between Sunni Islamist ideal-types will surely be a daunting task.



Impact of the Yemen war on militant jihad

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Introduction

This memo analyzes the impact of the Yemen war on militant jihadist groups in Yemen, which we generally understand via the categories al-Qaeda in the Arabian Peninsula (AQAP), which has been the dominant jihad group in Yemen, and the Islamic State in Yemen (ISY), which has failed to gain significant traction. It also briefly interrogates the nature, impact, and prospects of the current counter-terrorism agenda of the United Arab Emirates (UAE) and the United States. The war can broadly be summarized as having empowered militant jihad during 2015 to 2016 as well as encouraging the development of serious organized crime networks around the smuggling of weapons and drugs. However, this has been followed, during 2017, by signs of splintering inside jihadist groups as they assess and potentially argue over their priorities and responses to increasing pressure from counter-terrorism offensives. The challenges faced by jihadists include maintaining a minimum base of tribal support or at least neutrality, deciding when to go to ground and when to stay and fight, running essential training and leadership programs in a hunted environment, and managing their apparently increasing turn to criminality to ensure their survival and supply lines. Signs of jihadist spats and leadership rifts, together with a general fluidity in allegiance among the foot soldiers, may mean that it is time to recalibrate our thinking about Yemen's jihadists away from the simple binary categorization of AQAP and ISY.

The empowerment of al-Qaeda in the Arabian Peninsula 2015-16

AQAP's influence peaked after a Saudi-led coalition of nine Sunni Muslim countries, supported by the US and UK, intervened militarily in Yemen to restore the internationally recognized government of President Hadi in March 2015. The security and governance vacuum created by the war allowed AQAP to resurge in the eastern

governorate of Hadramawt. As the coalition campaign began, AQAP was able to swell both its numbers and its war chest by staging a massive jailbreak, seizing military hardware, and robbing the central bank. By April 2015, it had established a de facto state, which it ran out of Hadramawt's coastal capital of Mukalla in collaboration with newly formed local governance structures for added credibility. This continued for an entire year until UAE Special Forces, with help from the US, forced it to withdraw in April 2016.

AQAP took advantage of the war to expand its influence, entrench its position and fuel its recruitment drive using a number of parallel strategies that were at once practical, tactical and ideological. It is important to note that populations in Yemen's east, particularly in tribal areas, are well armed and would be difficult to terrorize into submission. The key to AQAP's success was not direct recruitment; even at its peak, its core fighters likely numbered no more than 4,000. Rather, AQAP worked to secure buy-in from key city and tribal leaders and to win passive toleration from local populations. As coalition bombs rained down on civilian as well as Houthi military targets in Yemen's west, AQAP's territory looked like a haven of stability and security. AQAP territories also enjoyed easy access to fuel and food imported along Yemen's porous eastern coastline in contrast to the Saudi naval blockade crippling Yemen's western ports.

Unlike IS, AQAP explicitly decided on a strategically gradualist approach to governance. It revised its dictatorial governance style of 2011-12 – when it had declared short-lived Islamic emirates in parts of Abyan and Shabwa. This time, it took care to strike a local power-sharing deal with the so-called Hadrami People's Council. This was a newly formed administrative unit that AQAP ideologue Khalid Batarfi claimed arose organically and independently of any political party or foreign entity. AQAP could thus share the glory when things went well but also the blame if they

went badly. AQAP courted local populations by rebranding itself as *'Abna' Hadramawt'* (the Sons of Hadramawt) and fronting an impressive program of community development projects. During 2016, 56 percent of tweets from AQAP's governance Twitter feed were about its hands-on development activities. By contrast, only three percent were about the implementation of the harsh *hudud* punishments of Islamic Law. This apparent laxity earned AQAP the contempt of Islamic State. After three separate provinces of Islamic State in Syria and Iraq released videos specifically criticizing AQAP's weak implementation of Islamic Law, AQAP released a full length feature film, which it screened publicly in towns along the east Yemen coast as well as releasing online. *Hurras al-Shariah* (The Guardians of Islamic Law, December 2015) reaffirmed AQAP's commitment to global jihad and contextualized its seemingly light touch as part of a smart long-term strategy aimed at full Islamic rule.

AQAP was able to finance its activities through oil imports and smuggling operations along Yemen's porous eastern coastline. Ironically, AQAP actually benefited from the Saudi naval blockade, which was focused on the west of Yemen, since this gave it a virtual monopoly over imports and generated an estimated USD 2 million per day. AQAP also imposed windfall taxes on local companies with the stated aim of improving services for local people.

AQAP was careful not to alienate tribes and local populations in areas under its influence. It achieved this through nurturing kinship ties, both through marriage and by attempting to recruit from a cross section of tribes. On occasions when innocent tribesmen were accidentally killed in operations designed to target the Yemeni military, AQAP published formal apologies and negotiated with the relevant tribes to pay blood money. AQAP was also mindful to invoke and praise the glorious history and courage of various tribes in several statements, videos, poems, and *anashid* (anthems). This helped to frame their contemporary jihad as a continuation of the warlike prowess of their forefathers who fought independence battles against British colonialists in the 1960s; they too, the film asserts, were doing jihad. But perhaps most helpfully to

AQAP, the eruption of war in 2015 gave it the opportunity to align itself with war effort against the Houthis, whom it had long deemed infidel allies of Iran. AQAP recast southerners' historical fears of a takeover by northerners as a sectarian battle of Sunnis versus Shi'ites. Disputes that were essentially political were reframed as religious and endowed with a narrative of apocalyptic jihad.

The high civilian death toll inflicted by the Saudi-led coalition (i.e. not just by the Houthis) gave AQAP the opportunity to pose as the good guy, claiming to play by respected rules of engagement. Shortly after the UN temporarily blacklisted Saudi Arabia for killing children in May 2016, AQAP issued a statement promising not to target women or children, not even those of its enemies. It has likewise exploited US drone strikes, air strikes, and raids. Several AQAP videos feature interviews with grieving villagers pasted alongside footage touting global jihad. Following US Navy Seal raids in 2017 that killed villagers, AQAP issued statements designed to plug into tribal anger, positioning itself as the conduit for revenge. In March 2016, AQAP even held a "Festival of Martyrs of the American Bombing" in Hadramawt, which included a competition for schoolboys to design anti-US and anti-drone posters. This kind of youth outreach nurtures the next generation of angry young men for potential recruitment. Thus, US military action, while yielding short-term wins, can also generate long-term cycles of violence inasmuch as it enables AQAP both to position its jihad as justifiable revenge and to frame local misfortune as part of a global battle between believers and infidels.

The relative failure of Islamic State in Yemen 2015-16

Meanwhile, Islamic State (IS) had announced its expansion into Yemen on November 13, 2014 following Caliph Abu Bakr al-Baghdadi's acceptance of an oath of allegiance sworn to him by "Yemen's mujahidin" in an audio recording. However, despite some early defections from AQAP, the self-proclamation of various IS provinces around Yemen and several headline-grabbing attacks in 2015 and 2016, IS could not compete with AQAP.

On the contrary, the arrival of IS onto the world stage actually worked to AQAP's advantage in two major ways. First, until 2016, it redirected international attention away from both al-Qaeda and Yemen to Iraq and Syria. Second, the excessive brutality of IS made AQAP look more reasonable. AQAP criticized IS's indiscriminate bombings in Yemen, such as the double bombing of Friday prayers in Sana'a on March 30, 2015 in which nearly 500 people were either killed or injured. AQAP pledged that, unlike IS, it would not target "mosques, markets and crowded places." In parallel, it apologized for its own previous excesses, such as the storming of a military hospital in Sana'a in 2013 and the beheading of 14 soldiers in Hadramawt in 2014, which it implicitly blamed on the negative influence of IS propaganda.

There are several reasons for the Islamic State's inability to gain traction in Yemen. Unlike AQAP, IS produced little narrative that was culturally specific to Yemen aside from virulent disparagement of the Houthis as infidel agents of "Rejectionist" (read, Shi'ite) Iran. Nor did IS engage in AQAP-style community development projects in Yemen, despite its early efforts in this regard in Syria and Iraq. Pro-AQAP wires on the messaging application Telegram have taken pride in AQAP's readiness to engage tribes, support community projects, and work in conjunction with local structures. Conversely, some ISY fighters have defected back to AQAP and lambasted the former's overbearing, bulldozer tactics. Hence ISY has never succeeded in holding territory and is now largely confined to a single front in the Qayfa region of al-Bayda' governorate. While some operations further afield continue to be attributed to and claimed by IS, particularly around Aden, these often appear politically motivated and so well-coordinated that it is hard not to suspect the helping hand of Saleh prior to his death in December 2017 or his Republican Guard.

Where next for militant jihad in Yemen?

During the latter half of 2017, both AQAP and ISY were severely dented by the UAE/US counter-terrorism campaign. Although AQAP withdrew from Mukalla rather than being militarily defeated, the subsequent crackdown

is having an effect, aided by the recruitment of Security Belt and various southern elite forces. The jihadists have been depleted through both death and desertion, while some of their erstwhile tribal allies now prefer to fight with the new UAE-supported militias in exchange for a salary. This pressure on AQAP has been evidenced during 2017 by several formal AQAP statements and sermons warning local tribesmen that they will be targeted if they enlist with UAE-supported militias and urging jihadists to stand firm. It is also significant that AQAP has switched its targeting focus from the Houthis to the UAE-supported forces. During the first six months of 2017, only 25 percent of AQAP operations targeted UAE-supported forces. This rose to 51 percent during July through November 2017.

Nevertheless, the UAE-led campaign carries risks. AQAP is latching onto and stoking popular concerns about UAE's imperialist agenda and heavy-handed implementation. First, various tribes in Yemen's east (Mahra and Shabwa in particular) believe that UAE recruitment serves a political agenda in that it appears to favor those who support southern separatism. Second, while UAE-supported militias have fought AQAP, they have also helped to consolidate UAE influence over key ports and oil and gas producing areas. This raises suspicions that UAE involvement in southern Yemen is also motivated by long-term commercial interests. For example, the US-UAE counter-terror campaign launched in August focused on Shabwa, yet prior to August, only one of 169 AQAP operations during 2017 was in Shabwa. Shabwa is, however, the location of Yemen's only gas terminal. Third, anger at serious reports of imam assassinations, arbitrary arrests, and human rights violations in over 20 "secret" prisons led by UAE-supported forces risks sparking a broader backlash.

As AQAP calculates how to respond to developments, cracks have started to appear, with disagreements centering around corruption and leadership style. In October 2017, Ansar al-Shari'a in Taizz issued a statement declaring that its sharia court no longer acted for AQAP. The court's judge, Abu al-Bara' al-Ibbi, is currently authoring a series entitled, "Reasons for the Setback"

(2017-ongoing), in which he analyzes various ills that have beset the jihad movement. The series argues for the need to persist with active jihad, rather lying low, and complains of a loss of religious underpinning. Young Yemeni jihadists are described as “more hooked on anthems (*anashid*) than Qur’an” and, in one release, “the setback” is explicitly blamed on corrupt leadership and criminality. There appears to be evidence of a similar gravitation from “pure” jihad to criminal activity beyond Yemen’s western battlefronts. According to interviews conducted by this author on the ground during August 2017, both AQAP and regional government officials are inextricably entwined with organized crime networks in Yemen’s east profiting from the lucrative smuggling trade fueled by the booming war economy.

ISY is also under pressure. Its principal remaining core in al-Bayda’ was severely hampered in October 2017 when the US bombed its two training camps. While ISY media published an infographic vowing to prepare new camps, cracks have started to appear. In early November, a pro-ISY Telegram wire ridiculed a statement purporting to

be from ISY in Taiz, dismissing them as a gang of rebels and commenting that “everyone knows there is no official existence there of the Islamic State...” It is possible that ISY will gradually blend into AQAP, given the latter’s stronger roots in Yemen and the fact that their mutual objectives have become better aligned. Indeed, in November, AQAP Telegram wires celebrated the defection of “many brothers” from ISY. And AQAP supporters’ wires were quick to praise ISY’s coordinated mass-casualty attack in Aden on 5 November since it avenged UAE actions, although they did not praise or mention ISY directly.

Whether these early signs of decentralization inside Yemen’s jihad groups persist depends on how the war develops. If Saleh’s son is brought to power, if the South secedes and the transition is badly managed, if certain regions feel discriminated against or if investment in development and education and gainful employment fails to materialize, then the various jihadist splinters may find common cause again, and – more importantly – bring with them disillusioned sectors of the population.



Endgames for Saudi Arabia and the United Arab Emirates in Yemen

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When Saudi Arabia and the United Arab Emirates (UAE) launched *Operation Decisive Storm* at the head of a largely Gulf-led coalition on March 26, 2015, it is likely that few in Riyadh or Abu Dhabi anticipated a campaign that would last for years with no political or military victory in sight. The Gulf-led intervention in Yemen – which was renamed *Operation Restoring Hope* on April 22, 2015 – has reshaped domestic configurations of power in Saudi Arabia and the UAE around a hyper-hawkish axis that appears set to overshadow aspects of Gulf politics for years to come. Developments in Yemen and, since June 2017, the standoff with Qatar have come to symbolize the shift of the two crown princes, Mohammed bin Salman Al Saud and Mohammed bin Zayed Al Nahyan, away from the coalitional balancing of factions that long underpinned royal/ruling family governance in Saudi Arabia and the UAE. And yet both Yemen and Qatar have raised broader questions for regional and international partners and adversaries alike as they come to terms with a far more unpredictable and volatile policymaking landscape in both countries, and as the conflict in Yemen appears set to become more chaotic – at least in the short-term – after the death of former President Ali Abdullah Saleh on December 4, 2017.

Operations *Decisive Storm* and *Restoring Hope* underscored key Gulf capitals' frustration with the regional policy trajectory of the Obama administration and conviction that their interests were best secured by acting unilaterally or, at best, as a bloc, rather than relying on the United States to take the lead. This was most palpable in Riyadh and Abu Dhabi, where officials did not share the Obama administration's willingness – real or perceived – to engage with Iran or Islamists, particularly after the shock of the Arab Spring political upheaval had subsided. Qatar's bold – yet ultimately ill-fated – attempt to support the uprisings and sympathize with Islamist groups affiliated with the

Muslim Brotherhood also pushed their counterparts in Riyadh and Abu Dhabi to more assertively defend and counter their own regional interests. Saudi Arabia and the UAE stepped in immediately to assist General Abdel Fattah el-Sisi in Egypt after President Mohammed Morsi was toppled in July 2013 and ramped up diplomatic pressure on Qatar to ensure that Doha could never again pose a threat to the political order in Arab states.

The death of King Abdullah of Saudi Arabia on January 23, 2015 came less than a day after Houthi fighters – who had taken control of the Yemeni capital of Sana'a in September 2014 – pressured President Abd Rabbu Mansur Hadi and his government to resign and placed Hadi under house arrest. Yemen therefore presented a foreign policy priority for the new king, Salman, from the very start of his reign, as the intricate network of Saudi influence and factional balancing, built up for decades by the King's late brother Sultan, appeared on the verge of collapse. Worse still, from a Saudi perspective, the prospect of the extension of Houthi control over all of Yemen threatened to provide – in their view – Iran with an unprecedented foothold on the Arabian Peninsula. This shifting Saudi threat perception intersected with the rise to prominence of 29-year-old Prince Mohammed bin Salman Al Saud as Minister of Defense and unofficial gatekeeper to his father.¹

Developments in Saudi Arabia aligned with an unfolding pattern of change in the UAE, where the tug-of-war for policy influence between Abu Dhabi and Dubai was settled in favor of Abu Dhabi after the twin shocks of the 2008 financial crisis and the 2011 Arab uprisings. In 2009, officials in Abu Dhabi extended two tranches of \$10 billion each to ease the burgeoning debt crisis that briefly threatened financial panic in Dubai. Whereas the first “bailout” came in the purchase of bonds by the Abu Dhabi-located UAE Central Bank, the second package took the

¹ Mark Mazzetti and Ben Hubbard, 'Rise of Saudi Prince Shatters Decades of Royal Tradition,' New York Times, October 15, 2016.

form of a direct loan by two Abu Dhabi-owned banks to Dubai. While the sudden renaming of the tallest building in the world from its original Burj Dubai to Burj Khalifa (on the day of its opening in January 2010) was the most visible manifestation of Abu Dhabi's newfound leverage over Dubai, the eight years since have seen Dubai and its ruler fall behind the leadership in Abu Dhabi as Crown Prince Mohammed bin Zayed al Nahyan pushed a far more assertive regional role for the UAE in the wake of the 2011 Arab uprisings.²

Within Abu Dhabi itself (and, by extension, at the federal level in the UAE), the decade between the 2004 death of UAE founding father Sheikh Zayed bin Sultan Al Nahyan and the Yemen intervention has also witnessed a significant shift in power. Although Zayed's eldest son, Khalifa bin Zayed, succeeded his father as president of the UAE and ruler of Abu Dhabi, Sheikh Khalifa suffered a debilitating stroke in January 2014 and has been absent from public life since then, aside from one heavily-stage-managed reappearance in June 2017. Power in Abu Dhabi has instead been wielded by the Crown Prince, Mohammed bin Zayed, who has constructed a security state apparatus characterized by a hardline and zero-tolerance approach to threat prevention. Just as Saudi's King Salman has greatly empowered his son, Mohammed bin Zayed has rapidly promoted his own progeny, Khalid bin Mohammed, through the ranks of state security, entrusting him with the "Islamist file" and appointing him head of National Security in 2016.³

Leaked emails from UAE Ambassador to the United States Yusuf al-Otaiba indicate that officials in Abu Dhabi threw their wholehearted support behind Mohammed bin Salman after he became Defense Minister in January 2015. As well as perceiving Mohammed bin Salman as the best

(perhaps final) hope for undertaking economic and social change in Saudi Arabia, Mohammed bin Zayed reportedly developed a strong personal relationship with Mohammed bin Salman. Mohammed bin Zayed is said to have regarded Mohammed bin Salman as a younger version of himself, with a similar "can-do" mentality and penchant for seeing the bigger picture, especially on key political, economic, and security issues facing Saudi Arabia and the UAE. These trend-lines converged in Yemen in March 2015, when Saudi and Emirati forces spearheaded coalition operations, albeit in different zones of responsibility that evolved into competing spheres of influence.⁴

Although neither the Saudis nor the Emiratis have yet split from the coalition, signs of tension have emerged periodically. The two combatants face very different perceived and actual threats that range from border security and territorial incursions for Saudi Arabia to the region-wide campaign to crush Islamist groups in the case of Abu Dhabi. This has produced distinct alignments with local forces on the ground, with the Saudis backing President Hadi and the Emiratis supporting various factions and militias in southern Yemen that reject Hadi's leadership.⁵ On occasion, these differences have come to the surface, as during a March 2017 firefight between a battalion of Sudanese soldiers belonging to the Saudi-led coalition and an Emirati-backed militia over control of Aden international airport.⁶

Several factors complicate the move toward an endgame in Yemen for the Gulf-led coalition, which, in practice, denotes the power-brokers in the Crown Princes' courts in Riyadh and Abu Dhabi. On a broader level, neither the Saudis nor the Emiratis have identified a political or military staging-point that would enable them to declare victory and withdraw without risking a loss of face,

² Kristian Coates Ulrichsen, 'Transformations in UAE Foreign Policy,' Al Jazeera Center for Studies, June 8, 2017.

³ Caline Malek, 'Sheikh Khalid bin Mohammed Appointed Head of National Security,' The National, February 15, 2016.

⁴ Ryan Grim, 'Leaked Emails: Saudi Power behind the Throne "Wants Out of Yemen",' The Intercept, August 14, 2017.

⁵ Faisal Edroos, 'UAE on the Verge of Splitting Yemen in Two,' Al Jazeera Online, October 20, 2017.

⁶ 'Sudan and the UAE Battle for Control of Yemen Airport,' Middle East Monitor, March 7, 2017.

particularly after nearly three years of high casualties and expenditure on the conflict.⁷ Policymakers in Abu Dhabi appear to have concluded in 2016 that their military objectives in southern Yemen had been met, with the recapture of Aden and Mukalla by UAE and Emirati-backed forces.⁸ *De facto* Emirati control of both coastal cities in southern Yemen is viewed in Abu Dhabi as part of a wider geopolitical arc of UAE influence spanning both sides of the strategic Bab al-Mandab corridor and extending into the Mediterranean with heavy investment in Benghazi in Libya.⁹ This includes an airbase at Assab in Eritrea (which acts as the launchpad for UAE airstrikes in Yemen) and a planned 25-year lease of a naval base at Berbera in Somaliland, as well as growing commercial interests in Puntland in Somalia, all key prongs of the UAE's muscular interregional approach toward countering terrorism, piracy, and Islamist and Iranian influence.¹⁰

In Saudi Arabia, Mohammed bin Salman cannot simply declare mission accomplished in Yemen, as Mohammed bin Zayed appeared briefly to do in June 2016 before reversing course. As the Yemen campaign has unfolded, Mohammed bin Salman has steadily accrued power and responsibility to a degree unprecedented in the modern history of Saudi Arabia, being promoted twice, to Deputy Crown Prince in April 2015 and to Crown Prince in June 2017. However, the Crown Prince appears to have lost his initial enthusiasm for the conflict amid fears the ongoing stalemate – to say nothing of the cost of the military operations and the train-and-equip program for the Yemeni armed forces and assorted tribal militias – has become a liability. Estimates of the cost of the campaign vary widely but are believed to exceed \$66 million per

day, part of a record \$50.8 billion earmarked for defense spending in the 2017 budget, together with an additional \$49 billion in unidentified budget support mechanisms for emerging expenditure requirements in 2016 alone.¹¹ At a time when the Saudi budget is heavily in deficit and austerity measures have met with a public backlash that caused several to be reversed, such heavy spending could potentially trigger discontent with the Crown Prince and his policies.

Ruling circles in Riyadh and in Abu Dhabi are in a bind. Saudi officials cannot commit the level of ground forces needed to at least have a chance of forcing a decisive military outcome in Yemen, as potential casualty levels would be too costly, to say nothing of likely operational inadequacies. Their counterparts in Abu Dhabi acknowledge that, while their military objectives in southern Yemen have been met, they cannot abandon the Saudi-led coalition for fear of the damage it could inflict domestically on the Saudi Crown Prince in whom they have invested so much political support. The humanitarian catastrophe in Yemen and absence of a clear or credible exit strategy has the potential to sap international confidence in Saudi Arabia and the UAE just as they embark on a formal military and political partnership that likely will increase further their regional assertiveness.¹² While the mercurial nature of the Donald J. Trump presidency in the U.S. may dilute scrutiny of Saudi and Emirati policies, their management of the Yemen campaign casts significant doubt on the extent to which either country can hope to become a producer – rather than consumer – of regional security.

⁷ 'Rising Death Toll in Yemen Raises Tough Domestic Questions for Abu Dhabi,' Gulf States News, Volume 40, Issue 1022, September 22, 2016, p.1.

⁸ 'UAE: "War is Over" for Emirati Troops in Yemen,' Al Jazeera Online, June 16, 2016.

⁹ Alex Mello and Michael Knights, 'West of Suez for the United Arab Emirates,' War on the Rocks, September 2, 2016. <https://warontherocks.com/2016/09/west-of-suez-for-the-united-arab-emirates/>

¹⁰ 'The Ambitious United Arab Emirates: the Gulf's "Little Sparta",' The Economist, April 6, 2017.

¹¹ 'Quantifying a "Taboo" Subject: Saudi Arabia Counts the Cost of Yemen War,' Gulf States News, Volume 40, Issue 1025, November 3, 2016, pp.4-5.

¹² Patrick Wintour, 'UAE Announces New Saudi Alliance That Could Reshape Gulf Relations,' The Guardian, December 5, 2017.

Yemen's war as seen from the local level

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Seen from the outside, it looks as if Yemen's war has plunged the entire country into chaos and suffering. For those unable to follow events in Yemen on a daily, if not hourly, basis, as some of us do, the pictures coming to us through the media portray a war-torn country where warfare and chaos have reached even its most distant corner. And indeed, the suffering is real and the humanitarian situation is as devastating as the media make us believe. The blockade of the most important port in Yemen, al-Hudayda, as well as the airport in Sana'a for civilian flights by the Saudi-led coalition (SLC); the appropriation and diversion of humanitarian deliveries by the Houthis; the dire economic situation due to which more than 55 percent of Yemenis have lost their jobs since the beginning of the war; the non-payment of salaries and the sky-rocketing of prices for staple food supplies are only some of the factors that have resulted in the fact that more than 75 percent of Yemenis today have to rely on humanitarian aid. Coupled with an outbreak of cholera and other preventable diseases and a health system that has all but broken down, the situation in Yemen can certainly be described as catastrophic.

At the same time, however, the war experience differs greatly for people on the local level. While there are areas where the humanitarian situation is extremely dire and economic worries are widespread, this is less the case in other areas. Likewise, there are regions in Yemen that have seen continued fighting and / or bombardment since the beginning of the war in September 2014 / March 2015,

whereas other regions have experienced no direct fighting at all. Similarly, the type of security threats and the actors involved vary significantly across region. Indeed, there are areas in Yemen where "the war," as such, is considered to be over even though the security situation continues to be dire; whereas people in other areas have lost all hope that they may ever see a return of something resembling a normal life again. This paper aims to show how varied and complex the effects of the ongoing war are experienced on the local level, placing a specific focus on the security situation. To this effect, we use data gathered by the Yemen Polling Center (YPC) in February and March of this year.¹

Issues of greatest concern

According to this survey's findings, the issue of poverty and living conditions ranked highest among people's concerns, with 58 percent of respondents nationwide mentioning this issue. Issues relating to the war ranked second, with 14 percent of respondents nationwide mentioning "the continuation of the war and the general situation in the country" as their greatest concern, 4 percent mentioning the "bad security" situation and 6 percent ranking "air strikes and the siege" of the SLC as the greatest concern for their personal life.² But if we take a closer look at responses from the different governorates of Yemen, we can see that in some areas of Yemen, particularly in the northern parts of the country, security concerns took precedence over those pertaining to living conditions. The governorates of Amran, al-Mahweet, and al-Jawf stick out in particular as

¹ This survey targeted 4,000 respondents (50 percent women) nationwide (except Sa'da and Soqatra) and was funded by the European Union. YPC implements its surveys through face-to-face interviews, with women only being interviewed by women and with all enumerators coming from the region they are implementing the questionnaires in (guaranteeing they speak and understand the local dialect and have the necessary networks to mitigate local risks to their security). Target areas are selected on the basis of a simple random sample among 146,000 population units in Yemen according to governorate population size. Each unit gets ten interviews (5 men, 5 women). The survey reflects the rural/urban population distribution in Yemen, with 68 percent of interviews having been implemented in rural areas. Hafez Albukari is the President of YPC; Marie-Christine Heinze acted as consultant to YPC in the framework of this research.

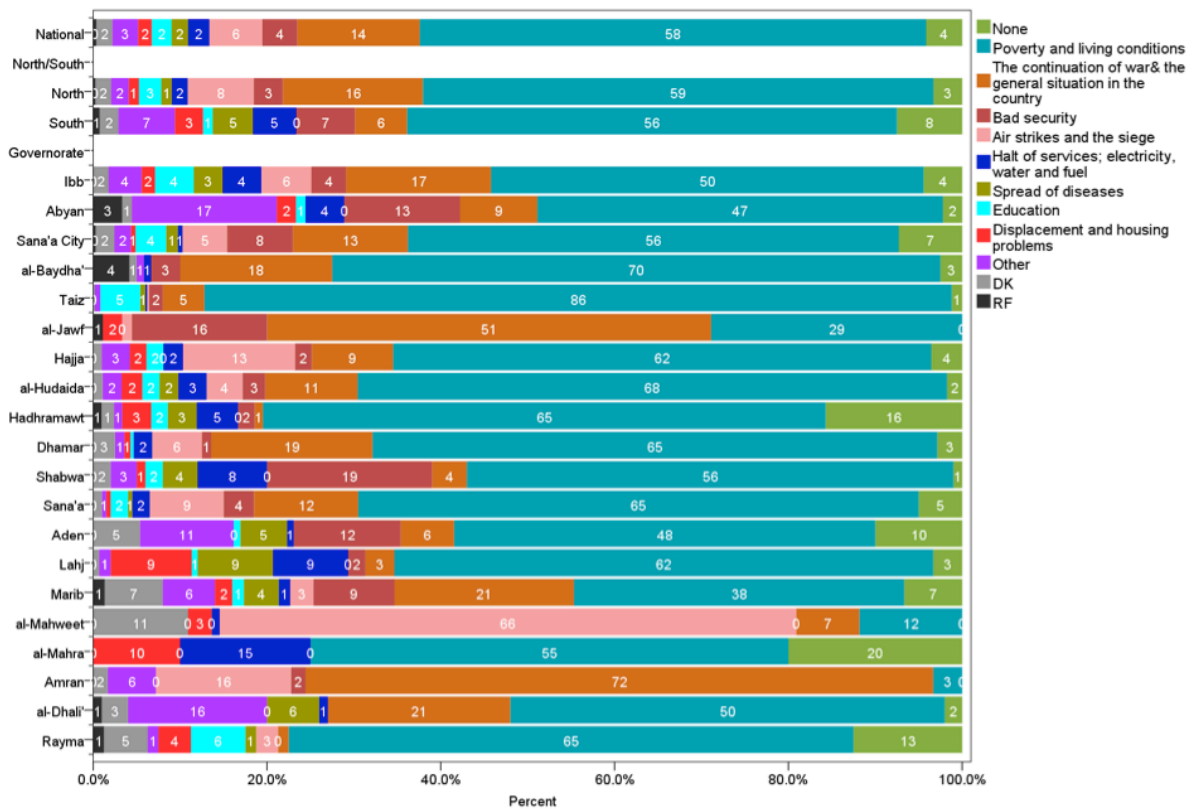
² At this point in time (February/March 2017), the cholera epidemic that spread rapidly throughout Yemen in the course of 2017 was only at its very beginning so few people, and mainly respondents in the South which had encountered other diseases such as Dengue Fever in the course of the war, were worried about the spread of disease.

more than 60 percent of respondents mentioned issues pertaining to the war and the security situation as being the one issue of greatest concern for them: All three are governorates generally considered to be under Houthi control. All three, but particularly Amran and al-Mahweet, had seen continuous airstrikes since the SLC first intervened in the conflict in Yemen. Al-Jawf, moreover, had an active war front between pro- and anti-Houthi forces, which saw extremely brutal fighting over the course of the conflict;³ whereas, Amran has seen regular violent incidents and extremely tight control enforced by the Houthis over a governorate where they are not particularly popular. In other governorates, too, particularly those that have seen a distinct amount of fighting and airstrikes, security concerns weigh heavily on people’s minds even if living conditions take precedence.

Security perspectives and threats

Interestingly, the above findings did not necessarily correlate with the responses we received to our question about feelings of personal safety. In al-Mahweet, for example, where the issue of security took strong precedence over the issue of living conditions and where 66 percent of the respondents had said that airstrikes were the issue of greatest concern to them, 64 percent of respondents said that they felt always or mostly safe and another 29 percent said they felt neither safe nor unsafe. Indeed, al-Mawheet has some of the most positive responses on this question if compared to other governorates with only 5 percent stating they felt mostly or always unsafe. In al-Jawf and Amran, feelings of personal insecurity were higher than in al-Mahweet,

Chart 1: For your personal life, what issue is of greatest concern to you? (DK = don’t know; RF = refused to answer)



³ For an excellent map of the current war fronts in Yemen, see Salisbury 2017: 22.

but still relatively low, when correlated with above findings on issues of greatest concern. How can this best be explained? Of course, we can always only speculate about the reasons why people respond in a certain way in a quantitative survey. To be able to know for sure, we would have to follow up with qualitative research. But for the case of al-Mahweet, for example, we may speculate that the concern regarding airstrikes arose from two sources: Either respondents had relatives working at or living close by military facilities that were a regular target of airstrikes; and / or they were influenced by the media under the control of the Houthis/Saleh alliance, which regularly reported on the threats arising from the “external (i.e. by the SLC) aggression against Yemen.” Many people in al-Mahweet are said to have been supporters of former President Ali Abdallah Saleh (who was killed by his previous allies, the Houthis, at the beginning of December 2017 after breaking away from the alliance) and were possibly particularly influenced by the discourse disseminated by media affiliated with the former president. In their personal lives, however, respondents felt quite safe.

If we move away from the detailed look at the various governorates for a moment and focus on the nation-wide perspectives on personal security, what is particularly striking is the fact that in a country that had been at war for more than two years at the time our survey was conducted, almost 60 percent of respondents nationwide said they felt always or mostly safe, while only 20 percent of respondents stated that they felt always or mostly unsafe. This can be explained as follows: As mentioned in the introduction to this paper, there are parts of Yemen which have seen little or no fighting at all in the course of this war, such as al-Mahra and Hadramawt, the two most eastern governorates of Yemen⁴; and Dhamar, where tribal leaders and others managed to keep their areas neutral in the face of Houthi control, thus largely preventing active warfare there. This does not mean, of course, that people haven't experienced their share of insecurity, but rather

that the impact of the war has been limited. In other areas, the war was limited to certain locations or fronts, where the people interviewed in the course of this survey did not necessarily live. In Taiz, for example, which is the governorate with the largest population in Yemen, a total of 500 questionnaires were implemented. Only 90 of these were implemented in Taiz City, however, which has seen continued brutal fighting since early 2015, whereas the rest of the interviews were conducted in the rural areas of the governorate, not all of which had been affected by fighting or where fighting had already subsided at the time the survey was conducted.⁵ Moreover, in other areas, the war was largely considered to be over. This is the case in Aden, for example, which saw intense and brutal fighting in 2015, but where residents considered themselves to be living in a post-war era in early 2017, even if the security situation was still unstable (see also Heinze & Baabad 2017).

When asked about the three biggest security threats in their area, the number of responses also varied from governorate to governorate, testifying to the diversity of experiences of insecurity throughout the country. While 33 percent of respondents nationwide said that there was no direct threat to the security situation in their area – most prominently so in al-Mahra (85 percent), Dhamar (70 percent), Sana'a (60 percent) and Lahj (59 percent) – two thirds of respondents identified a range of threats that varied greatly throughout the country. Air strikes, as discussed above, were particularly mentioned in Amran (57 percent), al-Mahweet (44 percent) and Hajja (41 percent); the Houthis were mentioned as a major threat in Taiz (25 percent) where they have been leading a brutal war in Taiz City since early 2015, but also in al-Jawf (12 percent) and Ma'rib (9 percent) both of which have seen active war fronts between the Houthis and anti-Houthi fighters since 2015; and terrorist organizations such as al-Qa'ida in the Arabian Peninsula (AQAP) and the so called 'Islamic State' (IS) were mentioned particularly in Abyan (34 percent), al-Baydha' (14 percent) and Shabwa

⁴ As we have pointed out elsewhere (Heinze & Albukari 2017: 41 fn. 2), however, only twenty interviews were implemented in the sparsely populated governorate of al-Mahra and all of these in the coastal area. People living inland may have greater security concerns.

⁵ A map detailing all locations where YPC implemented questionnaires for this survey can be accessed via this link: http://www.yemenpolling.org/resources/Perceptions_of_the_Yemeni_public_on_living_conditions_and_security-related_issues.html (19.12.2017).

Chart 2: On a scale from 1 to 5 in which '1' means 'always very unsafe' and '5' means 'always very safe', how safe do you personally feel? (DK = don't know; RF = refused to answer)

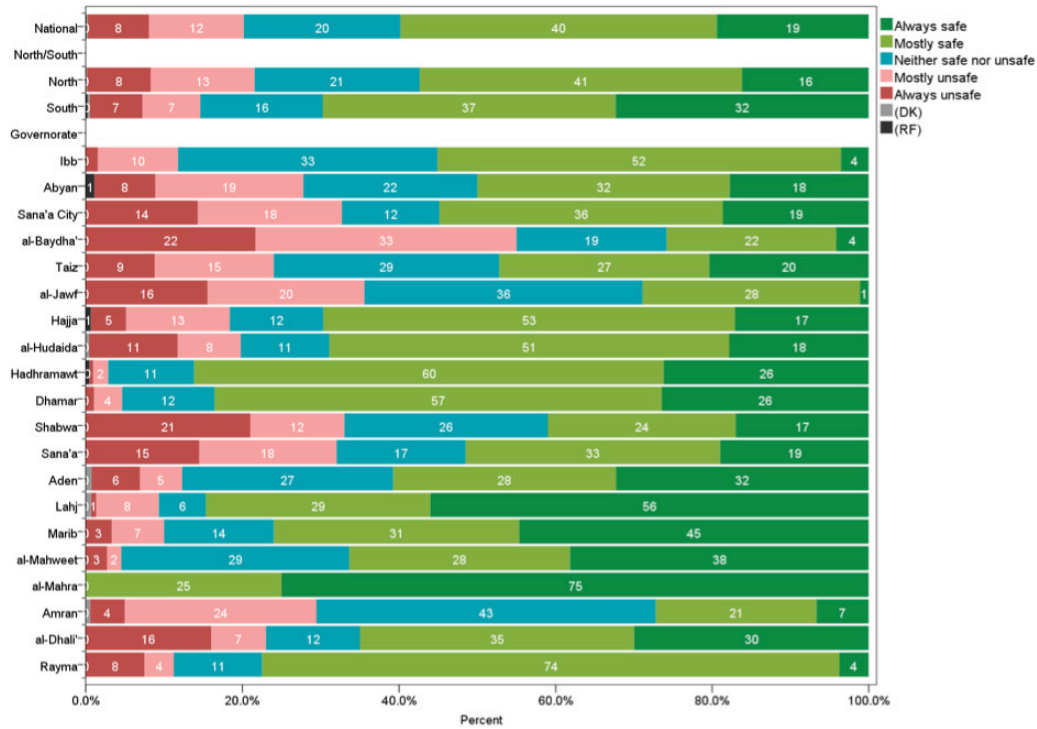
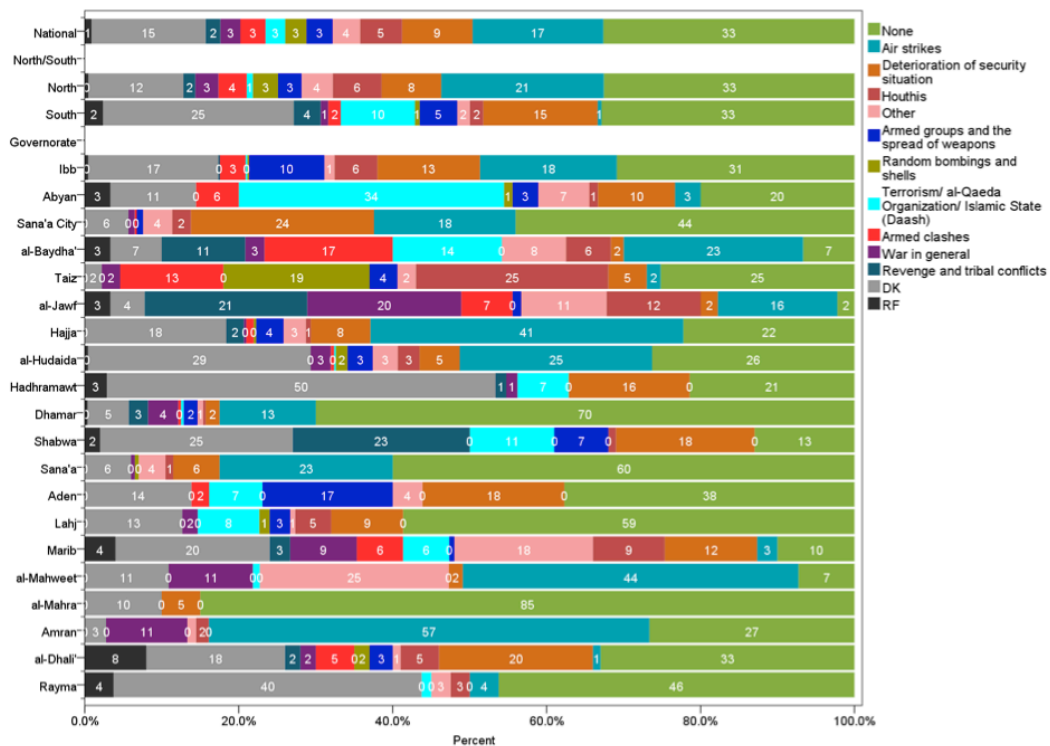


Chart 3: In your opinion, what are the three biggest security threats in your area? (open question, code 3 answers) First answer (DK = don't know; RF = refused to answer)



(11 percent). Abyan has been one of the strongholds of AQAP over the course of the past years and particularly so after members of AQAP agreed to leave al-Mukalla (Hadramawt), which they had controlled since 2015, after tribal negotiations. As we have shown elsewhere (Heinze & Albukari 2017: 43-45), these security threats are addressed by a great variety of different actors, many of which (but not all) are both security providers and insecurity actors. Accordingly, the dynamics in each region and each governorate have their own internal logic that shapes ordinary citizens' lives (see also Salisbury 2017).

Conclusion

Yemenis throughout the country have had very different war experiences over the course of the past years and continue to do so. The various threats to personal well-being, whether due to difficult living conditions, security threats, diseases etc., and the sources they attribute to these circumstances influence their outlook on the current political situation and the actors that shape it. Accordingly, these actors are politically legitimized or delegitimized by their actions and the circumstances they create for people on the ground. Any new attempt at peace talks as well as any intervention by the international community in Yemen must recognize this plurality of war experiences, threat perceptions and actors on the ground.

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Yemen's education system at a tipping point: Youth between their future and present survival¹

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The war that has tormented Yemen for over two years is putting 4.5 Yemeni children and youth at risk of being completely deprived of an education. Next to the deteriorating security, the destitute economic situation is currently putting enormous stress on the country's already weak educational system. Nearly half of the country's population is under the age of 18.² Their future is immediately intertwined with the future of Yemen. On the one hand, the lack of education leads to the militarization of communities. On the other hand, without a proper education, Yemen's new generations will not be able to shoulder the future burden of reconstructing the economy and state that are currently being destroyed, see Carapico in this collection. Problems contributing to the deterioration of education in Yemen are not entirely new, but rather exacerbated by the ongoing war. In fact, the war reverses all progress that has been made in Yemen in terms of the quality and quantity of education provision.

Prewar challenges to Yemen's education system

A modern education system was established in the Arab Republic of Yemen, as well as the People's Democratic Republic of Yemen in the 1960s. The universities of Sana'a and Aden were established in the 1970s. When the two states unified in 1990, measures were taken to unify the two education systems. Since the 1990s, the education systems particularly expanded, with, for instance, five

additional universities founded in Dhamar, Mukalla, al-Hudeidah, Taiz, and Ibb. In northern Yemen, the Muslim Brotherhood influenced the educational system through appointments to the ministry of education. When the Islamist Islah party was established in 1990 after the unification of north and south Yemen, eventually forming a coalition government with the ruling General People's Congress (GPC) immediately, it used a parallel system of religious schools across the country to Islamize society in formerly socialist southern Yemen.³ The relatively high education expenditure in the late 1990s can also be understood in the context of Yemeni patronage politics; teachers and academics were appointed to public institutions based on their affiliation with the GPC and political standing.⁴ Generally, schools and universities were also used as a means to recruit young party members.

Nevertheless, Yemen was still able to make progress since the 1990s. The youth literacy rate (15 to 24 year olds) increased from 82.8 percent in 1994 to 97.6 percent in 2015 for males and from 35.4 to 82.8 for females.⁵ Despite this progress, Yemen still struggles with a gender disparity, as well as an urban-rural divide, with lower enrollment rates and fewer schools in rural areas. According to a survey of 1500 Yemenis between the age of 15 and 25 implemented by the Yemen Polling Center in July 2017, 21 percent of those females who had to quit their training did so because of the long distances they must travel. It is

¹ This paper contains data collected through a survey conducted by the Yemen Polling Center among youth between the ages of 15 and 25 in May 2017, part of which will be published in the report, "Coming of Age in a Fragmented State: Everyday Struggles and Perspectives of Yemeni Youth."

² See UNICEF (2017) Yemen: At a Glance. https://www.unicef.org/infobycountry/yemen_statistics.html, checked on December 7, 2017.

³ Bonnefoy, Laurent (2010) Yemen. In *Guide to Islamist Movements Volume 2*, Barry Rubin (Ed.) p. 424.

⁴ Phillips, Sarah (2008) Yemen's Democracy experiment in Regional Perspective: Patronage and Pluralized Authoritarianism, p. 192. For education expenditures see Yuki, Takako (2003) Distribution of public education spending for the poor: The case of Yemen. In *Asia Pacific Education Review 4/2*, pp 129-139, p. 130. In 2012, the unity government under President Hadi proposed a bill that would allow the appointment of university faculty on the basis of merit and seniority. The rejection on part of the GPC reform initiative led to a boycott of the Joint Meeting Party of parliamentary sessions, see YPC (2013) Evaluating Parliament Performance (November 2011-January 2013). Available online: [http://www.yemenpolling.org/advocacy/upfiles/YPCPublications_Evaluating-Parliament-Performance-\(November-2011--January-2013\).pdf](http://www.yemenpolling.org/advocacy/upfiles/YPCPublications_Evaluating-Parliament-Performance-(November-2011--January-2013).pdf), checked on December 7, 2017, p. 25.

⁵ UIS (2013): Adult and Youth literacy. National, regional and global trends, 1985-2015. Available online: <http://unesdoc.unesco.org/images/0021/002174/217409e.pdf>, checked on 21/11/2017, p. 39.

particularly difficult to encourage teachers to go into the rural areas.⁶ A lack of teachers in general, and qualified teachers specifically, results not only in overcrowded classes but also in poor quality education. Schools also often lack the most rudimentary infrastructure and resources, including libraries, bathrooms, proper furniture, or school books. For instance, only 61 percent of the females have a girls' bathroom at their school, with 96 percent finding it necessary to have one. This compares to 63 percent of the males having a boys' bathroom and 92 percent stating that there should be one. Only 34 percent have access to a library at their school with most of these being in urban areas.

The effects of war on the education system

The war that Yemen is engulfed in has devastated the country's already fragile education system. When the Saudi-led coalition first militarily intervened in Yemen in March 2015, 3,600 schools across the country initially closed, adding 1.8 million students to the 1.6 million school-aged children out of school. When schools reopened in November 2015, the doors of 1,600 schools remained shuttered. According to UNICEF estimates, 1000 of these schools were damaged and 184 were used as shelter for people displaced by violence.⁷ Some of the destroyed schools were replaced with makeshift schools, they are often outdoors or have rudimentary infrastructure only. While there have been 52 reported attacks on schools by parties of the conflict, forcing students out of school, the general increase of violence also prevents some families from sending their kids off to school. Of the youth between 15 and 25 years old, 26 percent spend more time at home as a consequence of the war. In the northern governorates, airstrikes by the Arab alliance threaten the personal security of the respondents

the most (27 percent). In the southern governorates, the spread of robbery, kidnapping, and assassinations are reported as the greatest threat (23 percent) to young people between 15 and 25.

The one factor that currently puts the most stress on the educational system is the salary crisis. Yemeni children and youth were set to begin the new school year on September 30, 2017, but 12,240 of the 15,826 schools in Yemen remained empty, as teachers laid down their work to protest unpaid salaries.⁸ Since the takeover of the capital Sana'a and its various financial institutions, the payment of the public sector wage bill had been a point of conflict between the two warring parties, the Houthis-Saleh alliance and the internationally recognized government headed by President Abed Rabbo Mansour Hadi. This has led to 166,443 teachers not having received their salaries in over a year.⁹ The Central Bank, now responsible for paying salaries, remained as neutral as it could since the outset of the Saudi-led military intervention in March 2015 and subsequent escalation of violence throughout the country, as it continued to pay public servants as well as military personnel on both sides of the front. The public sector wage bill, already bloated with ghost workers still on the books from the patronage politics during former President Saleh's reign, continued to swell as Houthis added individuals to the military's payroll in an attempt to integrate their fighters into the state institution. The Houthis also retained a part of the salaries as a "war tax." With the most heavily populated areas under the control of the Houthis, as well as the actual public sector salary lists being in ministries under control of this non-state actor, the Hadi government saw itself at a disadvantaged position and in September 2016 moved the central bank to Aden. As a result, paying public servants' salaries has become ever more difficult, with teachers in the north not receiving

⁶ <https://www.brookings.edu/wp-content/uploads/2016/06/01-education-yemen-yuki-kameyama.pdf> p. 14.

⁷ UNICEF (2017): Falling Through the Cracks: The Children of Yemen. Available Online: https://www.unicef.org/videoaudio/PDFs/Yemen_2_Years_-_children_falling_through_the_cracks_FINAL.pdf, checked on December 7, 2017, p. 9.

⁸ Shukri, Muhammad (2017) Yemen's unpaid teachers strike as education crisis deepens. BBC News. Available online: <http://www.bbc.com/news/world-middle-east-41510350>, checked on December 7, 2017.

⁹ Shukri, Muhammad (2017) Yemen's unpaid teachers strike as education crisis deepens. BBC News. Available online: <http://www.bbc.com/news/world-middle-east-41510350>, checked on December 7, 2017.

their salaries at all and those in southern governorates receiving irregular or low salaries.

It is not just teachers who are lacking their salaries, but a total of 1.2 million Yemenis on the public sector wage bill, who are now struggling to provide for their households, which in Yemen includes on average 7 people. This, in addition to the increased prices of basic commodities, including food, water, and fuel, puts families under severe pressure. 43 percent said that their “families are suffering a lot from the increase of prices for food, medicine and fuel,” while 9 percent said their families were not able to buy these items. Consequently, many young Yemenis drop out of school because their parents cannot afford the costs. At present, 42 percent of the 15-25 year olds are enrolled in school or university, with 35 percent having dropped out before receiving a secondary degree. Often the youths that are taken out of school are expected to contribute to their families’ financially.

Youth labor in the context of war

Currently, 10 percent of the young Yemenis between the age of 15 and 25 generate an income with which they can support their families: 2 percent are employed fulltime and 8 percent are working as day laborers. With government salaries not being paid and the deterioration of the economy, youth see few to no job opportunities in the current situation and feel marginalized within their communities. The few opportunities that are mentioned by youth to exist are in agriculture, self-employment in construction or transportation, as well as selling of Qat. Many youth believe they should contribute to their families through establishing small projects; however, they often lack financial resources to do so. One interviewee stated that to help their families youth should perform any jobs, regardless of whether they are appropriate. Unfortunately,

this circumstance not only led to an increase of child labor, but also created fertile ground for the recruitment of underage Yemeni boys to the military and militias. Abdulrahman, a 26 years old from al-Hodeidah stated: “There are many stories but most of them are generally about the inability of the heads of the households to provide the basic needs for education such as notebooks and other tools and costs. In many cases, sons stop going to school and work on the streets, looking for a living either from begging or working on Qat markets. I personally know many children who are supposed to be in school but they dropped out and join militias.” According to UNICEF, in the past two years 1572 boys were recruited and used in the conflict, which increased from 850 in the last year.¹⁰ Against the backdrop of the education crisis, the Minister of Youth and Sports of the Houthi-Saleh government in Sana’a suggested on October 21, 2017 on Facebook that schools could be closed and schoolchildren and teachers sent to reinforce Houthi fighters.¹¹ While many of the boys are motivated by the salaries they receive, many families perceive the fighting on the side of either of the conflict parties as a national duty. Consequently, many also join the ranks of the fighters for ideological reasons.

Girls are seen to be unable to contribute to families financially. This becomes clear in the survey results, with only 1 percent being part-time employed and 2 percent unemployed but looking for a job, only 2 percent of the females between 15 and 25 are or would consider becoming part of the workforce. For that reason, girls and young women are at risk to be married off in exchange for a dowry to support the families financially. More than two thirds of girls are married off underage.¹² This increased from 50 percent before the conflict escalated in 2015. Girls in Yemen are generally at high risk of being taken out of school early; a circumstance that is further exacerbated by the war. They are expected to learn household tasks and

¹⁰ UNICEF (2017): Falling Through the Cracks: The Children of Yemen. Available Online: https://www.unicef.org/videoaudio/PDFs/Yemen_2_Years_-_children_falling_through_the_cracks_FINAL.pdf, checked on December 7, 2017, p. 2.

¹¹ The New Arab (2017) Houthi minister tells Yemen school kids to drop pens and pick up rifles. Available online <https://www.alaraby.co.uk/english/news/2017/10/21/houthi-minister-tells-yemen-schoolchildren-to-take-up-arms>, checked December 7, 2017.

¹² UNICEF (2017): Falling Through the Cracks: The Children of Yemen. Available Online: https://www.unicef.org/videoaudio/PDFs/Yemen_2_Years_-_children_falling_through_the_cracks_FINAL.pdf, checked on December 7, 2017, p. 2.

are involved in the fetching of water and other resources. Of the females surveyed, 19 percent are illiterate and have not received a formal education, while 18 percent have not received any education higher than elementary level. The levels of education among males, in contrast, is much higher. Only 3 percent have not received a formal education and are illiterate, and 12 percent did not receive an education higher than elementary school. However, on a positive note, the percentages of the young women who do pursue university education is only slightly lower than the percentages of males.

Communities in Yemen are aware of the importance of education for the future development of youth and the country. The value of education is acknowledged by 43 percent youth, who believe that education at least somewhat prepares them for a good future, while 8 percent claim it does not prepare them at all. Although many teachers have not received their salaries in over a year, schools have been able to continue their operations, often due to the engagement of parent councils, civil society organizations, or the private sector. For example, on October 27, 2017, the chairman of a Yemeni company in the tourism sector announced that it would pay the salaries

of 86 teachers and principals in an area around Taiz until state salaries would resume. In other cases, parent councils collected money from parents within the communities in order to keep schools operating. The education system has the potential to counter these trends, but any solutions to the crisis are currently only to be found on the community level. The lack of opportunities for young people within their communities also results in sentiments of despair and depression. Therefore, to counteract the radicalization of communities, thwart early marriage, and give Yemen's young generation the opportunity for a better future, the international community must support the educational system and enable Yemen's children and youth to attend classes. The present engagement of civil society, as well as international organizations in the field of education is a useful starting point. The importance of education for youth development as well as for the prospective rebuilding of the state must also be reinforced within the communities. Local structures that assist schools, such as parent councils, must be supported, not only in regards to the question of how school operations can be sustained, but also with regards to how communities can ensure the safety of children and youth in school.



Gasping for hope: Yemeni youth struggle for their future

Ala Qasem, Resonate! Yemen

Yemen has been inflicted with poverty and instability for decades. One generation after another saw their dreams crushed and ambitions shattered. Those growing up in Yemen today have been made to believe that the “good times” were when the unemployment rate was higher than that of other nations during their financial crises and when poverty plagued more than half the population. If you ask most young Yemenis today about the period before the current conflict, they will without hesitation speak longingly about the better days that have come to pass.

Since the start of the conflict, the private sector, the largest employer in the country, started to close down. By November 2015, 26 percent of all firms in Yemen had shut their doors, the majority of which suffered physical damage. Out of these, 58 percent were run by young people aged 35 and under. Companies that have remained open throughout the conflict have had to lay off a large portion of their staff just to stay afloat. In fact, more than two thirds of small and medium enterprises had to let go around half of their work force.¹ These were the same employers that prevented Yemen’s overall unemployment rate from reaching past 13 percent in 2013, although for Yemenis in the 18-24 age bracket this rate was 24.5 percent² – about the same rate that hit the United States in 1933, when unemployment its peak during the Great Depression.

Since the end of 2015, the effects of the conflict did not wane; on the contrary, economic conditions have worsened. The Yemeni riyal has continued to devalue, dropping from 215 YR to the dollar to around 435 as of this writing. This downward movement in the currency rate is expected to continue in the coming period.

To make matters worse, both the de facto and the internationally recognized governments, which employ around 1.2 million civilian and military staff, have failed to pay consistently the salaries of these employees for over a year now, with some exceptions across sectors and governorates. These 1.2 million employees are estimated to support 6.9 million dependents, altogether accounting for almost a third of the population.

The decline of Yemen’s political parties

In the past, when faced with more moderate economic hardships, young Yemenis would exploit what little political space they had to protest their conditions and demand corrective actions, however small these might be. Their political activism helped them release some of the stress of their daily pressures, and whatever gains they realized helped sustain their hopes that they could stand a chance of starting a family and securing a dignified life.

Although the political space increased during the 2012-2014 transitional period, political parties were still lagging behind. In a study I conducted in 2013 about the barriers facing youth engagement in political decision-making, young members of political parties complained of how undemocratic their institutions had become.³ What the young party members were asking of their leadership was rather modest: “just apply internal [party] regulations and employ the terms of these regulations.” Hold general assemblies and party elections at their designated times, was their message.

As flawed as they were, these political parties still played a role in challenging the regime. Since the start

¹ *Rapid Business Survey: Impact of the Yemen Crisis on Private Sector Activity* (Rep.). (2015, November 16). Retrieved November 2, 2017, from UNDP website: <http://www.ye.undp.org/content/dam/yemen/PovRed/Docs/UNDP%20SMEPS%20Rapid%20Business%20Survey.pdf>.

² *Yemen Labour Force Survey 2013-14* (Publication No. 9789221304043; 9789221304050). (2015). Retrieved November 2, 2017, from International Labour Organization website: http://www.ilo.org/wcmsp5/groups/public/---arabstates/---ro-beirut/documents/publication/wcms_419016.pdf.

³ Qasem, A. (2013, December). *Five barriers to youth engagement, decision-making, and leadership in Yemen’s political parties* [PDF]. SaferWorld.

of the conflict, however, the elites within these parties have decided, instead, to derail the monitoring and accountability functions of their parties. This is partly because some of these elites have become part of the ruling circle and partly because they wanted to please the military hardliners on both sides and the regional powers who saw such activities as counterproductive to the war effort.

This in effect emboldened both the de facto and the legitimate governments to operate without adhering to the most basic of accountability measures. It has been more than two-and-a-half years since the start of the conflict and the internationally recognized government still does not even have an emergency budget. Institutions such as the Central Organization for Control and Auditing, the High Tender Board, the High Authority for Tender and Auctions Control, and the Supreme National Authority for Combatting Corruption were all suspended.

The changing face of civil society in Yemen

The other breathing space that existed for young Yemenis to express their grievances and to attempt to effect change was civil society organizations (CSOs).⁴ Yemen had a long tradition of civic activism that could be traced as far back as the 1950s.⁵ Civil society evolved since the second half of the 20th century, serving different functions based on the prevailing socioeconomic conditions. At times, CSOs served an economic agenda, as was the case in the 1970s and 80s with the development of the co-operative movements. Through the 1990s and the 2000s, several wars changed the landscape in Yemen. Civil society organizations responded by giving visibility to the human rights violations that were taking place. The oppressed had a space to tell and document their stories. The third wave of civil society activism came in the wake of the Arab Spring in 2011, when many organizations focused their efforts on promoting participative democracy. Citizen

engagement in policy development and decision-making were the key terms of the day.

As with other spaces for expression and self-fulfillment, the current conflict choked CSOs in Yemen. The only kind of civil society organizations that flourished during the war were those focused on humanitarian relief. Operating a human rights organization or one focused on social accountability meant exposing oneself to sinister criticism that at times would escalate to accusations of treachery and physical harm. CSOs were readily labeled and classified depending on where they operated from and who their funders were, rather than on their reach or the objectives of their programs. Mobility became a risk. Staff could not easily move between cities, partly because of the physical dangers encountered on the road, such as land mines and destroyed roads and bridges, and partly because of an increased identity targeting practices of the warring parties. For instance, employees from Taiz find it hard to access areas in the high north and parts of the south because of where they come from. Operational costs have increased due to the lack of basic services and inflation. Donors have not helped in this regard, as funds are predominantly being channeled to humanitarian relief efforts that are necessary but are not alone sufficient for the stability of the country.

What choices remain for Yemen's youth?

The erosion of the concept of a central state and the emergence of local autonomy over revenue collection and decision making, coupled with the entrenched belief among the youth that decentralization is the only way forward presents another potential source of concern. Decentralization has not always brought accountability and fended off corruption. In fact, research has shown that increased local autonomy accompanied by decreased interaction between national and sub-national levels

⁴ I am consciously eliminating political parties from the civil society categorization to make the distinction of the political space created by political parties and other civil society organizations, especially since most political parties have recently become part of the ruling regime.

⁵ Book review Civil Society in Yemen: A Political Economy of Activism in Modern Arabia. (n.d.). Retrieved November 03, 2017, from <http://al-bab.com/book-review-civil-society-yemen-political-economy-activism-modern-arabia>.

increases the opportunities for corruption, as corruptible decision-makers become closer to potential bribe-payers.⁶ The presence of monitoring activities, as measured by the degree of the freedom of the press, in decentralized forms of governance actually decreases corruption.⁷

In a country like Yemen where civil society in its peak in 2013 had only 19 percent of its organizations focus on local issues and where aid funding was directed mainly to Sana'a-based organizations,⁸ the political space for local society is very limited. With access to more than 60 million weapons, and corruption potentially getting local, it would be only a matter of time before these frustrated youth start to use violence to change their realities. If the political infrastructure for decentralization is not established early on, the international community would likely be contributing to the instability in various local communities by directly providing funding to local authorities.

Under these economic and political conditions, the prospects for young Yemenis are rather bleak. Behavioral science teaches us that humans are present-biased, which propels them to discount the future heavily in favor of immediate gain. For young Yemenis, the future appears extremely vague to say the least; so it is only natural that they base their decisions on surviving the present without accounting for the consequences of their actions. The choice they currently face appears straightforward: either

stay at home and wait for death to get to you in the form of cholera, dengue fever, or starvation, or carry a gun and go meet it head on. And maybe, just maybe, you could survive it and make a living out of it.

So, what needs to be done about it?

Well, plenty. The international community can instill hope that young Yemenis are desperately grasping for. It can create the possibility of a better future, one that can be added to the calculus of the young Yemeni trying to balance every day survival with planning for his or her future. It can invest in economic and political development projects, rather than restrict its funding to humanitarian relief. It must demand and support accountability by all parties receiving its development funding. It should exert genuine efforts to reach out to young Yemenis and ask for their input on development projects. This should not be an exercise in checking off boxes, the type of effort that was exerted after the Arab Spring to satisfy bureaucratic requests. Finally, the situation in Yemen, like in many other conflict-ridden countries, is complex. The international community should not come equipped with grandiose long-term plans that are rendered ineffective a few months after they have been drafted. Development efforts should be experimental and agile. The security, health, and financial situation is changing rapidly and requires adequately responsive programming.

⁶ Neudorfer, B., & Neudorfer, N. S. (2014, August 12). Decentralization and Political Corruption: Disaggregating Regional Authority | Publius: The Journal of Federalism | Oxford Academic. Retrieved November 05, 2017, from <https://academic.oup.com/publius/article-abstract/45/1/24/1888884>.

⁷ Lessmann, C., & Markwardt, G. (2009, December 08). One Size Fits All? Decentralization, Corruption, and the Monitoring of Bureaucrats. Retrieved November 05, 2017, from <http://www.sciencedirect.com/science/article/pii/S0305750X09001946>.

⁸ Al-Eryani, A. (2013, December). *Civil Society Organizations (CSOs) in Yemen: Achievements and Challenges* (Publication). Retrieved November 7, 2017, from Yemen Polling Center website: <http://www.yemenpolling.org/advocacy/upfiles/ypc-publications1190.pdf>.

Supporting and failing Yemen's transition: Critical perspectives on development agencies

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Introduction

National dialogue conferences (NDC) are one of many important tools to facilitate political transitions after regime change. External actors are often involved in a variety of roles to support such processes of transition. Before its failure, Yemen's transition and National Dialogue Conference (NDC) was seen as one of the most successful examples for other Arab Spring countries to follow (Kronenfeld and Guzansky 2014). The presence of the international community in Yemen's transitional period was strong and represented primarily by the Gulf Cooperation Council (GCC), the United Nations (UN), the United States (US), the European Union (EU), and development agencies and international financial institutions such as the Islamic Development Bank (IDB), the World Bank (WB), and the International Monetary Fund (IMF); these parties were present under an encompassing group which was co-chaired by the United Kingdom (UK), Saudi Arabia, and Yemen (NDC 2016; Government of UK 2017).

Yemen's NDC was at the core of the transitional process that all these actors aimed to support. However, the National Dialogue Conference and transitional period were officially declared unsuccessful after the Houthis, a religious-political group from the north of Yemen, in alliance with former president Ali Abdullah Saleh, conducted a coup d'état in Sana'a following popular protests against the government's decision to comply with the conditions to lift fuel subsidies in order to receive a critical IMF loan. This coup led to an internal armed conflict among political factions and the Saudi-led military intervention, resulting in some 10,000 deaths over 50,000 injuries, and widespread famine and cholera outbreaks in what has been categorized as the world's worst humanitarian crisis (Almosawa et al. 2017).

While there are many reasons for the failure of the fragile NDC and transitional process, development agencies bear some responsibility because of their unsuccessful attempt to support the transition. Some of the reasons for the failure of Yemen's NDC were attributed to the empty representation, public disconnect, and the unrealistically short time and limited scope of the conference (Gaston 2014; SupportYemen 2017; Elayah et al. 2016). It is important to note that this is not to say that international development agencies are the reason behind the failure of Yemen's national dialogue; such a statement will be an oversimplification of a much more complicated situation. However, by being negligent of the complex political reality, the IMF's loan conditions, which were supported by the Friends of Yemen group, were a contributing factor in opening up political opportunities that led to the collapse of the process (IMF 2017).

It is almost certain that these development agencies and international financial institutions will resurface as central actors in any future dialogues in Yemen, and in peacebuilding efforts in the postwar context. Therefore, it is crucial for any future postwar dialogue and development efforts in Yemen to contend with the failures of the past. The questions remain: How and why did development agencies contribute to the failure of the transition process? What can these organizations learn from their failure in Yemen? And how might they, conversely, use these lessons to positively support future transitions?

This paper argues that the IMF's loan, through its conditionality, acted as the deathblow to the transitional process in Yemen. This failing intervention on the part of the IMF was the result of two factors: 1. a weak understanding of the rising tensions in Yemeni politics during the transition, and 2. an inadequate understanding of the dangers of the conditionality of fuel subsidy reforms during political transitions. Pointedly, for the first

argument, the IMF neglected the rising tensions between the Saleh and the Houthis alliance on one side and the NDC and the coalition government on the other side. Saleh and the Houthis perceived the transition as a threat to their power. The second argument has to do with the IMF's vision on fuel subsidy reforms through previously conducted research. The IMF relied on research findings that conclude that fuel subsidy reforms are necessary during economic restructuring, despite any political and social undesirability or short-term consequences, such as the increase in food and fuel prices (Arze del Granado et al 2012; Coady et al. 2015). The IMF's understanding of fuel subsidy reforms does not consider the imminent dangers that such conditionality can have during critical political transitions in conflict-prone contexts. The way that such economic interventions destabilize a country's political situation and create political opportunity to end the transition, leading to more violence, needs to be considered seriously by the IMF and other development agencies.

Political tensions were on the rise during the transitional period precisely because of the shift of powers and harmful interventions by development entities. The discussions around the proposal for a transitional justice law was seen as a threat by Saleh and his party as calls to remove immunity were brought to the table. Military restructuring and the removal of Saleh's family members from leadership positions were also seen as major threat to Saleh's interests and future. On the other side, the Islah Party (Yemen's version of the Muslim Brotherhood) was getting more powerful and closer to president Hadi through several appointments of Islah members in ministerial positions, to which the Houthis objected (Worldview Stratfor 2017). The military branch of the Islah party had already clashed with the military branch of the Houthis in several areas in the North as the Houthis were attempting expansion, which also led the Houthis to perceive this power shift as a political threat. This shared feeling of common danger and loss of power due to the transitional process led the Houthis and Saleh to create a coalition that was looking for justifications to rebel against the transitional process and the NDC. This justification was provided when the IMF offered a critical loan of \$553 million to the Yemeni

government with the condition – among others – of lifting fuel subsidies (IMF 2017). Fearing possible unrest that would affect the political efforts to successfully conclude the NDC, the Yemeni government was hesitant at first to accept the conditions; however, facing an increasing international pressure and the government's failure to find alternatives, the government decided to end its fuel subsidy program in July 2014 (Al-Batati 2014a; Al-Batati 2014b).

The decision had an immediate impact on Yemenis, as food prices rose drastically (Ghobari 2014). The Houthis, who were already showing discontent with the transitional process and Western influence, profited instantaneously from the decision by calling on the public to join a Houthi-led demonstration against this decision and against foreign intervention (Al-Haj 2014; Al-Batati 2014b). Popular discontent was on the rise because of immediate effects of the IMF's loan conditions and was thus available to be recruited by the Houthis for their political aims (Al-Batati 2014b; Ghobari 2014). Tens of thousands joined the protests in the capital, and one protester was killed as the government cracked down on the public displays of discontent (Al-Batati 2014b). The Houthis saw the government reaction as the final loss of legitimacy for a government that, as they claimed, was incapable of providing basic services and was controlled by foreign interests (Al-Batati 2014b; Ghobari 2014). Soon enough, in September 2014, the Houthi militias, aligned with military forces loyal to former president Saleh, took over the capital in a coup d'état and declared the end of the transitional process (BBC 2017).

IMF's position on fuel subsidy reforms

It is worth asking on what grounds the IMF conceptualized and justified its intervention in Yemen's transition, presented in the form of a \$550 million loan conditional on the immediate lifting of fuel subsidies by the Yemeni state (IMF 2017). This section analyzes the IMF's position on fuel subsidies based on two IMF working papers that match the IMF's justification in Yemen, which conclude three main points. First, the IMF finds fuel subsidies harmful and should be avoided at all costs; second, the

IMF supposes that lifting fuel subsidies is undesirable by governments due to the immediate impact on fuel and food prices; third, the IMF believes that short-term public unrest and protests are passable and acceptable in comparison to the long-term benefits resulting from fuel subsidy reforms (Arze del Granado et al 2012; Coady et al. 2015). Examining how this position was implemented during the IMF's intervention in Yemen, it becomes clear that the IMF's vision does not take into account contextual factors and misses how short-term problematic political effects can be fatal in conflict-prone countries. The following is an analysis of two IMF working reports in 2012 and 2015, on which the IMF relies heavily to justify fuel subsidy reforms.

a. Fuel subsidies are harmful:

In a 2012 study, Arze del Granado, Coady and Gillingham (2012) conducted a cross-country analysis for the IMF of 20 countries from Africa, Asia, the Middle East, and Latin America. It is noteworthy that a similar study was conducted by the IMF in 2006 on a smaller number of countries with similar conclusions. The study finds that fuel subsidies are "inefficient, inequitable, and fiscally costly" (2241). It was clear that fuel subsidies were hurting the Yemeni economy as they were weighing heavily on the government's budget (Al-Haj 2014; Ghobari 2014). The IMF recommended lifting fuel subsidies to strengthen the worsening Yemeni economy by balancing the government's budget and cutting down on its spending (IMF 2017). This way of measuring the benefits of subsidy reforms might make sense from an economic understanding and might be beneficial in a context that is more stable than Yemen; however, subsidy reform comes with political effects, a fact that the IMF's research seems to realize but seriously underestimate.

b. Reforms are undesirable by governments:

Despite the inefficiency of fuel subsidies, the IMF's working papers find that "developing country governments often find subsidy reform politically difficult" (2241). The authors continue to attribute the public backlash to two factors. The first being

that people often have a lack of confidence in the government's intention to use the budget savings wisely and distribute it in a way that benefits the greater population (2240). The second factor is that, in the short-term, fuel subsidy reforms can increase poverty and cause greater harm to the welfare of low-income populations (2240). As a recommendation for future policies, this study suggests that, "Reform strategies that address these two constraints are therefore more likely to succeed" (2240). However, the warning of how politically difficult these reforms can be does not go beyond this superficial analysis and does not evaluate different political effects in conflict-prone contexts.

This research shows that the IMF has an understanding that governments prefer to avoid lifting fuel subsidies and causing sharp increases in fuel costs out of fear of public backlash. Indeed, the IMF is aware of the dire political impact that such interventions can have in developing countries. However, these limited concerns only superficially touch the political implication of subsidy reforms and fails to consider the serious immediate effects they can have in conflict-prone countries.

c. Short-term unrest is acceptable:

In a follow-up study in 2015, Coady et al. (2015) include a more substantial number of countries by to reach the same conclusion about reforming fuel subsidies: it is more efficient to avoid fuel subsidies (Arze del Granado et al. 2012). What the two reports have in common is suggesting a form of a payoff matrix, in which the best result comes from enduring the short-term political effects of fuel subsidy reforms in order to benefit from the long-term equalities these reforms can generate (Coady et al. 2015; Arze del Granado et al. 2012). The IMF's awareness of short-term political effects is dangerous because it underestimates their power. The reports view short-term effects as passable or survivable protests (Arze del Granado et al. 2012, 2244). What the research seems to overlook is that short-term consequences are not the same in every context and are not always passable. In conflict-prone countries undergoing political transitions, such as Yemen, short-

term consequences can be lethal to political processes. In the Yemeni case, short-term political effects lead to political actors conducting a coup d'état, countrywide chaos, and what the UN classifies as the world's worst humanitarian crisis (Almosawa et al. 2017).

The 2015 study was conducted after the IMF's failed attempt to aid the transition in Yemen in 2014, which shows a limited learning process from lessons of the past. The IMF underestimated how its intervention could lead to opening political opportunities for rivals in Yemen to rebel against the transitional process. There were many warnings by the Yemeni government and Yemeni economic and strategic experts of the dire consequences that fuel subsidy reforms could have on the political process. The IMF's intervention ignored these warnings, because it justified its conditional loan based on research that does not consider short-term political effect seriously. This is not to argue that fuel subsidy reforms are bad or that they are not capable of creating economic equalities in developing countries. However, these studies fail to consider the differences between the implementation of such reforms in relatively stable developing countries vis-à-vis conflict-prone countries that are undergoing fragile "make it or break it" transitional processes.

Conclusion and final thoughts

This paper examined interventions by the IMF (supported by other international political and development actors through the umbrella of the Friends of Yemen group) that were taken with the intention of supporting Yemen's transitional process (World Bank 2017). Despite having relied on studies that show such strategies can have a negative immediate political impact, the IMF made lifting fuel subsidies an immediate and inflexible condition for the Yemeni government to obtain a critical loan. The IMF neglected the political reality obvious to many Yemenis, wherein political actors were looking for opportunities to drive the transitional process to fail. Undeniably, this intervention by the IMF created more harm than good when the Houthi-Saleh alliance used the short-term

effects of subsidy reforms as a justification to throw off the transitional process and take power. This shift in power led to the ongoing military and humanitarian crisis in the country. As this paper demonstrates, the IMF loan and its conditionality were a critical contributing factor in ending the transitional process.

There is no doubt that the IMF and other development and international financial actors will continue to resurface in Yemen through humanitarian efforts and post-war dialogue efforts. The ideal degree of integration of development actors in a post-war context is a difficult question to answer, but any future support efforts will have to contend with the failure of the last. Future interventions must be more sensitive to the political realities, gain the public's trust, and consider both short-term and long-term impacts and needs more seriously. In a post-war context, the IMF and other development actors should expect a considerable pushback from Yemenis who feel the international community has failed them. Any future attempt to support local processes should consider local voices, warnings, and expertise more seriously and offer more flexibility to avoid any immediate short-term negative political effects.

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The rise and fall and necessity of Yemen's youth movements

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The Yemeni revolution, perhaps more so than other uprisings in the Middle East, was initially driven by students and unemployed graduates, generally under the age of 30 and not affiliated with any political parties or groups. Unlike the other uprisings, representatives of Yemeni youth continued to play an active – if not ultimately influential – role after President Saleh's removal was ushered in by the Gulf Cooperation Council (GCC) Initiative. From the early days of the uprising, members of the “Independent Youth” sent representatives to the National Dialogue, continued protesting in the streets, established political parties, and created effective local social movements. However, faced with entrenched political elites that maintained control over structures of power and their own lack of coherent structure, leadership, and resources, the youth movement fractured and many influential individuals were coopted into existing parties and networks. By 2014, this fracturing and cooptation had shrunk civil society and opposition space in Yemen to pre-2011 levels. After the Houthi takeover of Sana'a and the ensuing Saudi led war against the Houthi-Saleh coalition, many youth activists joined different sides of the conflict, not least because of disappointment with the outcome of the revolution and their own movement. Neither the stunning early success, nor the ultimate “failure” of the youth movements to achieve their goals was inevitable, but the latter was more predictable and remains relevant: the ability to overcome some of the problems of the broader movement will likely determine Yemen's chance for a civic state.

How unified were the Yemen youth during the uprisings?

The Arab uprisings and the role of youth in them were described with much excitement at their early stages.

The fact that the faces of many of these revolutions were young, unaffiliated individuals asking for good governance, democracy, rights, and overall progressive objectives were sufficient to legitimize their actions. What counts as youth, however, is not a strictly a demographic category, and this has implications for the nature of the movement. In Yemen, while the revolution was indeed started by groups often considered as “youth” – the 18-30 year olds – within a few weeks, more experienced activists in their thirties and forties joined the “Independent Youth.”¹ This doesn't simply stretch the meaning of youth to mean a “metaphorical social youth,” as defined by political and social demands rather than demography, but it also stretches the concept of independence, including a vast array of individuals, many of whom are not as independent as the original group that gave the movement its name.² This has proven to be both a strength and a weakness. When the uprising needed numbers the most, a large base of individuals from all groups and regions of Yemen was clearly the most effective. However, when consensus, leadership, structure, resources, and coherence were necessary, a broad-based coalition of individuals with different political affiliations or inclinations was a significant obstacle.³

Social movements theory has long established that for a movement to be successful, it must fulfill the following criteria: moral resources such as legitimacy and solidarity, cultural resources that resonate with the population, human resources such as leadership and expertise, organizational resources including defined and intentional internal structures within the movement, and material resources such as financial and physical capital.⁴ While the Independent Youth possessed the first two requirements,

¹ Nearly 50 percent of the Independent Youth were above 31 years old. See Mareike Transfeld, “The Youth Movement and Its Activists,” *Yemen Polling Center*, Policy Brief December, 2013.

² For this definition of youth, see S. Philbrick Yadav, “Antecedents of the revolution: intersectional networks and post-partisanship in Yemen.” *Studies in Ethnicity and Nationalism*. 11(3) 558.

³ Interview with Ibrahim Al Mothana, Sana'a, August 2012.

⁴ See for example Mc Adam, Tarrow, and Tilly, *Dynamics of Contention*, Cambridge University Press, 2011.

in fact it was the only group in the square that did so, it entirely lacked organizational resources and, unsurprising given the suddenness of events, material resources. Most importantly, while human capital was available, many of the participating individuals were sympathetic, if not affiliated, with various existing political parties. According to a survey by the Yemen polling center, 77 percent of youth activists said that they were politically active prior to 2011, and the vast majority of them were active *within political parties*.⁵ According to activist and chairperson of Muwatana Organization for Human Rights Radhya Almutawakel, “there were many independent youth in the square, but the majority of them were Islah, or Houthi, or something else first. There was less unity beneath the surface than it seemed.”⁶ There is nothing inherently problematic with this fact, but in the absence of a more coherent internal structure, the eventual unity of the movement and its very future was a difficult goal from the very start.

Youth organization, co-optation, and exclusion

Nevertheless, the stunning achievements of the youth movement must be emphasized. Within two months of the uprising, the various youth groups established the Coordination Council for Yemeni Revolutionary Youth (CCYRC).⁷ They conducted daily meetings with all the independent youth groups in the square, as well as some groups affiliated with the Joint Meeting Parties (JMP), and articulated a concise, 13-point document, describing their vision for the future of Yemen.⁸ This was early evidence of the ability of the CCYRC to bring together groups of various ideological orientations.⁹ The participation of Yemen’s formal opposition parties immediately after

raised fears of the possibility of hijacking the revolution, as they perceived the Muslim Brotherhood had done in Egypt. Additionally, because the GCC countries and other international actors were looking for formal and coherent partners on the ground, the youth groups were kept out of the GCC-brokered deal. Most felt that the revolution was indeed hijacked, and the result of the GCC deal was perceived simply as a “game of musical chairs” played by the same old elites.¹⁰ The signing of the GCC deal irreversibly splintered the CCYRC. While some groups decided to participate in the process and saw compromise as necessary, a minority choose to continue street protests, others went back to their old political affiliations, and many became apathetic.¹¹

The potential for continued youth protests, and a realization of the role of youth in mobilization, led to the invitation of a delegation of 40 independent youth to the National Dialogue Conference (NDC). At the NDC, youth both functioned as a more coherent political force with leadership positions in many working groups throughout the duration of the conference, and many were further co-opted by various parties. Of note here are members of Al Watan party, established during Change Square protests in 2011 and formally registered in January 2014. Al Watan represented many of the goals of the early activists and described itself as a centrist, civil party.¹² Al Watan had 8 out of the 40 youth representatives in the NDC and wielded an outsized influence at the conference. While most of the 32 youth representatives were committed to party lines, even if formally independent, al Watan stood aside from all existing political parties. Hence, when members of al Watan started getting closer to President Hadi’s circles, they compromised their image as non-

⁵ Mareike Transfeld, “The Youth Movement and Its Activists,” *Yemen Polling Center*, Policy Brief December, 2013

⁶ Interview with author, December 3, 2017.

⁷ Atiaf Z. Alwazir, “Yemen’s enduring resistance: youth between politics and informal mobilization,” *Mediterranean Politics*, 21(1), 2016, p. 173

⁸ Interview with Rafat Al Akhali, August 2017, Sana’a.

⁹ Atiaf Alwazir, “Yemen’s Independent Youth and their Role in the National Dialogue Conference: Triggering a Change in Political Culture, Comments, 23, August, 2013. (Berlin: Stiftung Wissenschaft und Politik(SWP)

¹⁰ International Crisis Group, Yemen: Enduring conflicts, threatened transitions. *Middle East Report* 125, July 2012.

¹¹ Interview with Ibrahim Al Mothana, August 2012, Sana’a

¹² Interview with Husam al-Sharjabi, August 2012, Sana’a

partisan mediators.¹³ One of the most prominent al Watan leaders, Husam al-Sharjabi, was invited and accepted to join Hadi's government, and two others – Rafat Al-Akhali and Gabool al-Mutawakkel – were offered posts in the 2014 government reshuffling.¹⁴ While its reputation suffered, after the Houthi takeover of Sana'a in 2014 some al Watan members went into exile, and the party effectively ceased to exist.

How youth movements evolved and dissolved

Compared to other uprisings, Yemeni youth had a relatively larger role both in the uprisings but especially what followed afterward. Perhaps because the uprising in Yemen was a more drawn-out affair than other Arab countries, youth groups had more of a chance to try various coalitions and ways of participating in the new political sphere. In addition to new political parties, activists took their knowledge and experience of the square to their home regions for more specific, issue-oriented, movements. Of note here is the Marib Cause (al-Qadiyya al-Ma'ribiyya).¹⁵ This was a bona-fide social movement, composed of volunteers but with a clearer goal – focused on improving the condition of their local communities – and more formal structure than the broader youth movement in Change Square. Members of the movement engaged in rallies, tribal gatherings, sit-ins, and blocking oil trucks to raise awareness of the poverty of the region.¹⁶ These protests were sustained and effective enough that, by January 2014, President Hadi met with representatives of the cause and established a committee that would address their concerns. Members of the Marib Cause felt that the committee was unduly dominated by JMP representatives, but the Houthis took over Sana'a and reconfigured

government institutions before it could achieve anything. Many members of the Marib Cause demobilized, while others joined the Houthis whom they saw as fighting for similar goals against the central government.¹⁷

Similar fate awaited members of two other movements – Shiba and al-Jawf – as well as other, less formal, ones.¹⁸ There are many factors for this fracturing and even collapse of many of these movements. For one, these movements lacked both structure and resources. To finance their actions, many had to fall back to old networks, many of which went against the goals of the movement. There was also revolutionary fatigue, given the fact that political elites failed to fulfill the movements' demands even when they took note of them. Finally, lack of employment and increasing poverty further pushed youth activists to two opposite actions: demobilization or taking up arms. The ensuing war and insecurity ensures that no effective mobilization of youth will take place as long as it continues.

To be sure, protests and mobilization have not entirely died out. Both in Taiz and Marib youth groups have organized protests against the war, albeit of a much smaller scale than previous ones.¹⁹ The nature of mobilization, however, has mostly switched toward the two things that are most immediately needed (and feasible): providing volunteer humanitarian assistance and documenting crimes on all sides of the conflict.²⁰ Nongovernmental organizations that report on human rights abuses and that were formed after the war – such as *Muwatana* and *Wujud* – have attempted to overcome some of the problems of early mobilization by creating organizations comprised of a more formal structure and ensuring that activists working with them are completely independent as political inclinations could

¹³ Interview with Radhya Almutawakel, December 3, 2017.

¹⁴ Rafat al-Akhali accepted the position, while Gabool al-Mutawakkel declined.

¹⁵ Nadwa al-Dawsari, "Marib Youth and Political transition in Yemen," *Atlantic Council*, accessed 29 November 2017.

¹⁶ *Ibid.*

¹⁷ Alwazir, 2016, p. 179

¹⁸ Interview with Radhya Almutawakel, December 3, 2017

¹⁹ Sultan, Maged (2017) Taiz youth: Between conflict and political participation. Middle East Centre Blog (08 Jun 2017). Blog Entry. Available at: <http://eprints.lse.ac.uk/83200/>

²⁰ Interview with Radhya Almutawakel, December 3, 2017; Email interview with Nadwa Dawsari, November 23, 2017.

hinder accurate reporting on the conflict. So far, Muwatana has been effective in highlighting abuses in areas where no other observers can go.

Looking to the post-war future

Like many events during the Arab Uprising, Change Square not only completely altered youth politics in Yemen and introduced new actors, but it also reinforced old problems, most notably the idea that independent political actors could be co-opted into existing parties. It is perhaps inevitable that in the turmoil that followed the GCC-brokered deal many youth would turn back to their old political affiliations. In the last two decades of ex-President Saleh's rule, any position of relevance in the country – including government employment at the lowest level – was given as part of patronage politics: there was more to lose by independence than by strategic political affiliation. Many of these affiliations have hardened as a result of the war, while others irrevocably broken as a result of disappointment with the behavior of each side. Thus, a “true” independent and broad youth movement may be a harder goal that it seems at first. However, the fact that many were willing to bracket their political affiliations – albeit temporarily – during Change Square protests is one of the most important outcomes of that period.

When the war eventually ends, the country will be left with political elites that have been involved in committing serious crimes against their own people. The question of what role youth activists played in the uprisings, where they succeeded and where they failed is not merely academic: the future of a civic state in Yemen depends on the possibility of them overcoming both their own internal issues, and becoming coherent enough to withstand pressure existing elites. While some of the youth groups lost legitimacy due to alliances and co-optation during the uprising and afterward, as an abstract category, youth movements and their potential transformation are still widely seen as the only legitimate future for Yemen. As social movement scholars have debated for decades, the fulfillment of the movement's goals will depend on its ability to establish formal organizations with clear aim and leadership, and ability to use established networks without becoming a part of them. And perhaps there is one potentially progressive outcome that has arisen out of the disastrous war: as the need to oppose completely delegitimized political actors becomes ever greater, a window of opportunity for alternatives forces may open.



A diaspora denied: Impediments to Yemeni mobilization for relief and reconstruction at home

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Yemenis abroad have long channeled resources to their families at home, and their remittances in the current war have provided a lifeline to many Yemenis trapped in hellish conditions.¹ But beyond sending cash to kin, diasporas who pool resources can help home-country populations ravaged by violence, hunger, and disease by providing emergency supplies and rebuilding vital infrastructure. Existing studies argue that diaspora can play an important role in relief and reconstruction in their war-torn homelands for several reasons. First, diaspora members use their cross-border network ties as conduits for channeling aid across borders. Second, emigrants who have escaped authoritarian states and settled in democracies gain “voice” and opportunities to mobilize their communities and lobby for support.² Third, times of extreme crisis like the one facing Yemen today invoke a sense of collective solidarity and corresponding motivations among diasporas to mobilize for their compatriots at home.

My research on Yemeni mobilization in the United States and Great Britain, however, finds that these communities hardly resemble the long-distance interventionists depicted in prior studies.³ Instead, I have found that the Yemeni diaspora has only rarely engaged in collective efforts to channel aid homeward or to advocate for relief in the current war. The two organizations in the U.S. that I know of, for example, depend on overworked volunteers – including women juggling competing responsibilities of work, schooling, and family – and donations coming at a mere trickle. Given the scale of suffering on the ground, these efforts are both vital and admirable; however, they represent only a tiny fraction of what the diaspora *could* contribute under different circumstances. So what is keeping the diaspora from mobilizing en masse to fund relief and reconstruction? I find that three broad obstacles deter the mobilization potential of Yemeni activists and community members: 1) violence by fighting forces in

Yemen; 2) repressive threats in their host-countries; and 3) intra-community division and mistrust. Below, I elaborate on these obstacles and explain why barriers are likely to persist even as needs in Yemen grow increasingly dire by the day.

Violent repression at home

Many scholars assume that diaspora resources flow freely from the developed world to under-resourced states because of the existence of network ties.⁴ However, this assumption overlooks barriers to aid flows and cross-border linkages imposed by warring parties. In Yemen, relief has been hampered by the efforts of internal and external antagonists to win the war through mass violence, including a siege-and-starve campaign spearheaded by Saudi Arabia. Activists from U.S. and Britain attested in interviews with me in 2012 that transferring humanitarian supplies homeward was hugely difficult *before* the war due to Yemen’s weak infrastructure and corruption. Now, the blockade, diversion, and appropriation of aid by warring factions has made the transfer of supplies such as hospital equipment and food largely impossible. Though unfolding in blatant violation of international law, belligerent-imposed blockades on all sides are succeeding in isolating needy populations from their transnational networks of support. Tragically, this situation is unlikely to change unless countries like the U.S. and the U.K. exert strong political pressure on states such as Saudi Arabia to allow outside aid to be delivered.

These obstacles are also occurring in tandem with mass violence and the imposition of hostile conditions for aid work inside of Yemen. Activists, organizers, and critics of competing powers have fled or been killed and imprisoned. And though many truly heroic Yemenis are continuing to serve their communities against all odds, the decimation of Yemen’s civil society means that those abroad largely

lack the requisite partnerships with Yemeni activists on the ground who could receive and distribute donations. Without these partnerships, the diaspora's resources will remain abroad when they are most needed at home.

Scrutiny and surveillance in the host-country

Diasporas are thought to be well advantaged to mobilize after settling in democratic states and gaining the requisite rights for collective action. Yet researchers often overlook how political conditions in diasporas' places-of-residence restrict their collective action potential. In the U.S. in particular, diasporas' cross-border ties are used as evidence of their supposed threats to national security and so-called inability to assimilate into American society.⁵ The September 11 attacks also created chilling effects on Yemeni transnational activism, particularly in well-resourced communities such as those in New York City. When I interviewed Yemeni activists there in 2012, organizers noted that their fellow community members were nervous about remitting aid to the 2011 revolution for fear that humanitarian donations would be mistaken as support for terrorism. Members of the diaspora know all too well that even those Yemenis with U.S. citizenship can have their lives and livelihoods destroyed over these accusations in the post-9/11 security climate.

The election of Donald Trump in 2016 has since exacerbated fears and the sense of threat facing the Yemeni diaspora, and justifiably so. The community has been targeted by the Trump administration's attempts to impose a "Muslim Ban" and block certain national groups from entering the U.S. Many have also been cut off from their loved ones due to a de facto travel ban that currently prevents Yemenis from obtaining visas. Escalated surveillance of and discrimination against the diaspora will continue to deter their mobilization for relief at home so as long as Yemenis, and even Yemeni-American citizens, are wrongfully treated as a fifth column in the war against Islamist extremism. In all, the political freedoms gained by diasporas for home-country mobilization are far from guaranteed. As the domestic rights of minority groups are curtailed in the name of fighting terrorism abroad, so too

will Yemenis' collective abilities and willingness to resource relief efforts across borders be depressed in tandem.

Intra-community conflicts

Researchers have cast diasporas as "long-distance nationalists"⁶ with the solidarity needed to work collectively for political causes at home, but this assumption presumes that diasporas have shared interests and identities based on common national origins. On the contrary, diasporas are, in fact, heterogeneous groups containing multiple identities and competing political views, and the Yemeni diaspora is no exception. To that end, intra-community diversity stemming from regional, religious, and political divides has led to tensions within the diaspora that have depressed collective action. During the Arab Spring revolutions of 2011, for example, conflicts surged between the South Yemeni diaspora supportive of secession and pro-unity Yemenis abroad. Activists on each side accused the other of attempting to coopt the revolution for their own purposes. As the community clashed over who had the right to speak for the home-country, activists reported being slandered by their fellow diaspora members and faced significant challenges in raising funds for charity.

Intra-community conflicts continue to dampen the diaspora's response to the war today because aid is far from a politically neutral issue. Currently, Yemenis abroad appear to agree that the humanitarian crisis needs to be addressed at once. Yet the question of *how* remains highly divisive and is deterring a collective response. Some in the diaspora support Saudi-led intervention because they view it as the only way to rid Yemen of a brutal Houthi occupation. Others point to Saudi and UAE war crimes as indicative of the need to cease international intervention immediately. Meanwhile, South Yemenis hold a range of views on both local and foreign factions, particularly as the UAE backs leaders of the secession movement. Because the war is exacerbating ethnic, religious, and regional divides, many in the diaspora are concerned about where humanitarian aid is being channeled and to whom. As I discovered in interviews with diaspora activists in the aftermath of the Arab Spring, aid that is not going to a

diaspora member's particular home-region or hometown is often seen as biased in favor of advantaged populations and is therefore unworthy of support. In all, Yemeni communities remain deeply divided about who has the right to speak and mobilize for the relief effort and where aid should be directed. These divides continue to render relief a contentious issue.

The future of relief and reconstruction for the diaspora

As Yemen endures an unfathomable degree of suffering, it is clear that help from the diaspora is badly needed. Yet the obstacles that currently stand in their way are significant and are unlikely to change unless outside states and international institutions act decisively to end the war itself. And while it is too soon to tell what Yemen's future will hold, the diaspora's potential to help rebuild their homeland in the future is primed to face a similar set of challenges. If the country comes to be divided by Gulf powers in a neo-colonial fashion, all external aid will be regulated by highly repressive regimes and damage any future efforts to distribute resources in a fair and transparent fashion. If Yemeni immigrants' host-country governments continue to treat the diaspora as a fifth column in the War on Terror and do not provide guidelines on how to channel relief homeward in a protected fashion, the community will remain deterred from pooling money for charitable and civic initiatives at home. And so long as the Yemeni community remains divided, activists will continue to face significant challenges in raising funds for collective causes. All of these challenges persist in a context in which the Yemeni community remains under threat and subjected to travel bans by the Trump administration. As such, both the war at home and discrimination abroad are working in tandem to deprive the diaspora from channeling life-saving resources to the neediest population in the world.

The Yemeni case also has implications for the study of diaspora politics, transnational activism, and post-war reconstruction. Most importantly, scholars should take into account the fact that diasporas are not the omnipotent interventionists that many assume. Despite the fact that diaspora communities are often socially and economically

advantaged when compared to their counterparts at home, such advantages do not in-and-of-themselves render these groups potent sources of support. Instead, diasporas are entangled in a complex set of conditions largely outside their control; for Yemenis, overlapping sets of hostile conditions are trapping their resources abroad. While some volunteers and activists are continuing to fight tooth and nail to move aid into Yemen, this work remains exceptionally difficult. Under these circumstances, diaspora mobilization for relief and reconstruction has and will continue to be hindered, despite Yemen's ever-growing need for aid.

(Endnotes)

- 1 According to the World Bank, these remittances have increased drastically during the war, amounting to approximately 3.35 billion dollars in 2016 alone. See <<https://data.worldbank.org/indicator/BX.TRF.PWKR.CD.DT?locations=YE>>.
 - 2 Hirschman, Albert. 1978. "Exit, Voice, and the State." *World Politics* 31: 90–107.
 - 3 Anderson, Benedict. 1998. *The Spectre of Comparisons: Nationalism, Southeast Asia, and the World*. New York: Verso.
 - 4 See Faist (2000) and Waldinger (2015) for their overview and critiques of this perspective.
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- 5 Nagel, C.R. 2002. "Geopolitics by Another Name: Immigration and the Politics of Assimilation." *Political Geography* 21: 971-987.
 - 6 Anderson 1998.

War and De-Development

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After late March 2015 when the Kingdom of Saudi Arabia, the United Arab Emirates (UAE), and some coalition partners deployed advanced, expensive American and British weapons against its impoverished neighbor, Yemen, man-made disaster ensued. Humanitarian and human rights organizations have documented starvation, massive homelessness, casualties, and probable war crimes. The research presented here focuses on the specifically economic repercussions of thirty months of Saudi-led, U.S.-backed aerial bombardment and air-and-naval blockades that disabled productive capabilities, trade, public services, a fragile ecology, and even the ability to collect reliable data. While deposed presidents clinging to power and militias from the Houthis to al-Qaeda have imposed gruesome, gratuitous human suffering, the disproportionate firepower of warplanes and warships has not only killed more people directly but also inflicted unmeasured damage to economies and ecologies. This is acute de-development.

Scholars of Africa, Latin America, and other post-colonial milieus have analyzed similar-sounding circumstances of under-development and dependent development. Under-development implies the extraction of raw materials, agricultural produce, labor, or other assets from a peripheral zone to centers of capital accumulation. Dependent development refers to the ways external control over key sectors like commerce, industry, banking, farming, or tourism constrain economic independence and prosperity. Both concepts, associated with the *dependista* school, reference appropriation and profit-taking: a net transfer of material or monetary benefits from poor zones to rich enclaves. Middle East scholars Sara Roy and Ali Kadri each introduced the notion of de-development to contextualize circumstances in Gaza, Iraq, and other war-torn territories under assault and siege, where resources and the means of production are demolished rather than expropriated. This brief analyzes how the notion of de-development, which Kadri also calls developmental

descent, applies to the asymmetric (and unprovoked) Saudi-Emirati assault on Yemen. Deflation, capital stock depreciation, and ecosystem degradation are serious consequences.

How de-development damaged data gathering and knowledge production abilities

The demise of data-gathering mechanisms, never well-developed in Yemen, is symptomatic. As Kadri observed, wartime de-development destroys the means of information production. Casualty figures, notably, are inconsistent and unreliable. Yemen's Ministry of Health enumerated about 10,000 fatalities as of October 2016, including both civilians and combatants. That figure was still being widely cited a year later, notwithstanding a sharp increase in lethal bombing raids in 2017. One factor in the data deficit is that foreign expert consultants to Yemeni ministries evacuated in early 2015. International journalists have complained of a "media blackout" imposed when Saudi Arabia took control of air traffic control and airspace, forcing all incoming flights to land in the Kingdom for inspection before entering Yemen. Saudi authorities barred news correspondents from planes carrying United Nations personnel. A small group of Yemeni and international journalists working inside the country and abroad as volunteers, without funding, have tracked airstrikes by date, place, and target through an initiative called the Yemen Data Project (YDP).

The World Bank has documented this data deficit as well as a sharp economic contraction in the formal economy. Attempting to generate economic indicators for 2015 and 2016, the Bank's economists declared that statistical data was no longer available, forcing them to estimate precipitous declines: GDP -40 percent overall; and for 2015 alone exports -66 percent, imports -43 percent, industry -38 percent, fixed capital investment -84 percent; and so forth. Only debt increased, by an estimated 67 percent. The

value of the Yemeni riyal plummeted, taking purchasing power with it.

In addition to bombing and closing major airports, the Saudi-led coalition deliberately and indefinitely deactivated major seaports serving the heavily populated northern parts of the country under Houthi-Saleh control with an air-and-sea blockade. Airstrikes crippled the main Red Sea port of al-Hudaydah, and Saudi-Emirati naval inspectors refused importation of replacement cranes used for offloading cargo, along with most other shipments. The overall embargo – ostensibly to prevent weapons smuggling from Iran to the Houthi rebels – reduced the flow of food, fuel, medicines, and other essential supplies, according to international relief organizations. Prices for imported goods skyrocketed. In late 2017, after a Yemeni missile reportedly hit the Saudi capital, the coalition retaliated with collective punishment, tightening the vise by completely closing all airports, seaports, and land crossings, including entry points in the south ostensibly under control of the pro-Saudi government-in-exile. Beleaguered, under-funded, and overwhelmed Yemeni and international humanitarian workers presaged catastrophe.

The intentional manufacturing of economic and humanitarian disaster

Food insecurity, like the cholera epidemic that began in October 2016, is manufactured, not the result of underlying factors such as drought. The YDP tracked bombardment of roads, bridges, gas stations, and food production facilities – from potato chip factories to agricultural extension centers. Using YDP data and Ministry of Agriculture information, anthropologist Martha Mundy graphed, mapped, and analyzed the purposeful targeting of agricultural and food production sites, concluding that hunger and the decimation of farm communities are not a side effect but rather an intended consequence of the military campaign.

As the International Crisis Group explained, hunger, food insecurity, and malnutrition stemmed from difficulties of both supply and demand. The stranglehold on imports

imposed by the Saudi-led trade embargo restricted food supplies, but did not cause famine as conventionally understood; most markets have adequate stocks. The more severe problem, according to this analysis, was demand. For two main reasons, households couldn't afford food at inflated prices. First, up to three million displaced persons, especially in the already-poor Tihama region along the Red Sea coast, lost even their meager livelihoods. Secondly, because of shrinking government revenues, a liquidity crisis, and suspension of central bank functions in most locations, after August 2016, civil servants no longer received their salaries – and once their savings were spent, their purchasing power evaporated. A complex story in itself, as analyzed by the Sana'a Center for Strategic Studies, the central bank's insolvency deepened de-development, as an estimated two-thirds of formally employed adults – including teachers, health professionals, sanitation workers, and bureaucrats, overall the majority of women in the labor force – sold assets, spent savings, and found themselves destitute.

In combination, these factors distorted an already moribund, least-developed economy. Legitimate importers, traders, and truckers in much of the country went out of business. Smugglers, black marketeers, and other “merchants of war” with a financial interest in death and destruction flourished. Government revenues shrank, but private militias charged “taxes” at ad hoc checkpoints, especially along key, burgeoning smuggling routes from Oman, the UAE, and southern ports managed by Emirati forces. Beyond the catastrophically negative growth rates estimated by the World Bank, such trends signified critical de-development. Making matters even worse, most foreign banks cut business credit lines because of trouble processing transactions and ensuring repayment. Professional and business classes sank into poverty along with workers, the peasantry, and small traders. In the midst of such hardship, as Peter Salisbury (and some Yemenis active on social media) explain, in parts of the country some entrepreneurial individuals and communal initiatives have managed to rig informal banking to transfer remittances and set up solar-panel workarounds for the absence of electricity.

Environmental devastation of war

In the current era of global climate change, the U.S. military, many pundits, and some scholars ponder how drought and other weather events exacerbate social strife and military conflict. It is also important to consider the environmental impact of armed combat, as Johan Galtung observed more than three decades ago, and others are attempting to measure and assess. Chemical and nuclear weapons (not yet recorded in Yemen) inflict the most conspicuous ecological damage, but conventional warfare also inflicts twofold harms. First, destruction of what Sowers, Weinthal, and Zawahri call “environmental infrastructures” upsets economic activities, public health and ecological balance. The YDP list of water-related targets ranges from a desalinization plant to wells, reservoirs, and storage tanks; other attacks on buildings, farms, markets, factories, and homes almost certainly ruptured pipes and cisterns, too. As the sanitation system disintegrates, public health deteriorates. With skeletons of burned-out vehicles and debris from collapsed buildings strewn about, fuel for garbage removal trucks scarce, and a hiatus in government employee salaries, trash accumulates. Untreated sewage floods streets and farms. Incapacitation of sewage treatment plants, the electricity grid, and water delivery systems spreads cholera bacteria, diphtheria, and other water-borne diarrheal diseases. Damage to seawater desalinization facilities and other water treatment installations forces people to tap alternative, unsafe sources. Beyond risks to public health, water shortages (and/or inflated costs for water), heaps of garbage, and putrid odors hurt shopkeepers, restaurants and other businesses, especially in the major cities, exacerbating a vicious cycle of declining incomes and deepening economic contraction.

Secondly, military activity pollutes the air and the biosphere. Fighter planes emit more reactive, toxic gases and particles than commercial airliners. Their fuel consumption is so voracious that the United States provides the Royal Saudi Air Force in-flight refueling to sustain its bombing raids. While quantitative scientific evidence is elusive, common sense indicates that the

carbon footprint of hundreds of sorties a week for more than a hundred weeks is substantial. Offensive high explosive munitions, like the air-to-surface Hellfire missile, a 100-pound “tank-buster,” and a range of other pyrotechnic devices produce sonic or subsonic blasts that endanger livestock as well as terrestrial and aquatic wildlife. Both gravity-driven bombs and fuel-powered missiles leave craters, disturb water tables, and spread shrapnel and contaminants. Disruptions to terraces or irrigation trenches can cause spillover erosion across a wide ecosystem, further injuring landscapes and farms. In addition, as Omar Dewachi observed in Iraq, contamination by cement dust from collapsed buildings and heavy metals from munitions have dire consequences for public health and air quality.

Lastly, mass population displacement itself poses environmental hazards. Large influxes of people into the barren northern Tihama or the arid region around Marib, for instance, taxes already desiccated aquifers. Families without proper housing could contaminate soil and water. Livestock are either abandoned or relocate with owners to a place where they too drink and defecate as well as graze. Mountain terraces and lowland water harvesting channels require annual maintenance; prolonged absences have probably already contributed to significant erosion with both environmental and economic consequences. Faced with skyrocketing fuel prices, displaced and/or impoverished families burn plastic bags and other trash for cooking-fires. The cumulative negative effects of all these factors will likely stretch far into the future.

While Saudi Arabia directs its carbon wealth to de-develop what used to be the breadbasket of the Arabian Peninsula, many observers, including some members of the U.S. Congress and the U.K Parliament, note that this catastrophic war profits American and British weapons exporters. In that sense, the *dependista* school could point to the enrichment of the capitalist core – the military-industrial complex – at the expense of the wretched of the earth.

Some World Bank economists, Emirati investors, and overseas Yemeni businessmen enthusiastically predict

post-war reconstruction, growth, modernization, and new business opportunities. Indeed, when warfare shatters any economy, cessation of hostilities heralds a construction boom measured in new jobs and GDP growth. Nonetheless, several considerations temper our optimism. Ecological damage is widespread and likely irreparable. Moreover, Gulf tycoons could dominate future investments in shipping, tourism, oil pipelines, even large-scale agriculture; if so, they will syphon profits in a classic dependent-development scenario. Finally, shattered or stunted bodies and minds may never entirely recover. If there is a glimmer of hope, it is in local and community entrepreneurship.

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