Monographs

Yemen's Relapse into Tribalism

Nadia al-Sakkaf

Beyond Islamists and Autocrats Essay Series

August 2016

This essay, the seventh in a series exploring prospects for political reform throughout the Middle East, examines the multiple factors involved in the disintegration of Yemen's civil society and internal security since the Arab Spring, as well as the current grassroots efforts to rebuild a democratic structure.

In 2011, Yemen astounded the world with its surprisingly democratic response to the Arab Spring. Previously, many had believed that any political instability or uprising in the region's least developed country would result in civil war. Yet, to the contrary, political factions came together in a power-sharing agreement and took significant strides toward reform, including a National Dialogue Conference that produced a modern and ambitious draft constitution.

Today, however, the promise of the Arab Spring has become a distant memory for most Yemenis, with years of conflict leaving the country in tatters and forcing many to lower their expectations of whichever ruling authority they happen to live under. Is there yet hope for putting Yemen back together?

In this essay -- the seventh in a series exploring prospects for political reform throughout the Middle East -- Nadia al-Sakkaf, chief editor of the Yemen Times, dissects the political machinations, conflicts, and actors responsible for the disintegration of the country's civil society and internal security since the Arab Spring. She then examines various grassroots efforts to rebuild some semblance of democratic structure there, including initiatives supported by the UN and other humanitarian sectors. These domestic efforts, together with robust outside assistance and advice, could help reintegrate a society that has been torn to shreds economically, socially, and literally -- though the question remains whether Yemen's current authorities are willing and able to deal with these huge challenges.

Download other essays in this series.