



Beyond Islamists & Autocrats

Yemen's Relapse into Tribalism

■ NADIA AL-SAKKAF

IN 2011, Yemen astounded the world with its surprisingly democratic response to the Arab Spring. Because it is the least developed country in the region, with a staggeringly high illiteracy rate and an average of three weapons per person, many had believed that any political instability or uprising in Yemen would result in civil war. Yet, to the contrary, political factions came together in a power-sharing agreement known as the Gulf Cooperation Council (GCC) initiative, signing an implementation mechanism on November 23, 2011.¹ This political agreement, orchestrated by the UN and sanctioned by Saudi Arabia, obliged then-president Ali Abdullah Saleh to hand power over to his deputy, Abdu Rabu Mansour Hadi. It also required Saleh's party, the General People's

Congress (GPC), to divide government positions equally with the opposition coalition. Although eleven months of deaths and disturbance had elapsed between the start of the uprisings in January 2011 and the signing of the deal, Yemenis and outside observers alike believed the country had saved itself from imminent crisis.

Post-initiative, Yemen took significant strides toward reforming its democracy and creating a civic state: a ten-month National Dialogue Conference (NDC) began in March 2013 and concluded in January 2014 with a very modern and ambitious draft constitution.² The most important feature of this new draft was that it transformed Yemen into a federal state of decentralized autonomous regions, thought to be the best way to address the grievances of various political factions, bolster the economy, and keep the country in one piece. However, it appears the NDC came too late.

Continuing unrest, coupled with internal and external political scheming, rendered these goals much more complicated than had been envisioned. The NDC was not taken seriously by many of the political factions,

1. Tobias Thiel, "Yemen's Arab Spring: From Youth Revolution to Fragile Political Transition," in Nicholas Kitchen (ed.), *After the Arab Spring: Power Shift in the Middle East?* (IDEAS Special Reports, London School of Economics, 2012), http://eprints.lse.ac.uk/43465/1/After%20the%20Arab%20Spring_Yemen%E2%80%99s%20Arab%20Spring%28Isero%29.pdf.

2. Katherine Zimmerman, *Yemen's Pivotal Moment* (Critical Threats Project, American Enterprise Institute, 2014), http://www.criticalthreats.org/sites/default/files/pdf_upload/analysis/Zimmerman_Yemen_Pivotal_Moment_February_2014.pdf.

particularly the GPC, and a coup d'état took place a mere nine months later in September 2014, dragging the country into a vicious civil war. This turn of events took Yemenis as well as observers by surprise, and the situation today is even more disheartening. Despite several efforts to establish a truce, the nation is still embroiled in armed conflict initiated by the Houthis and later joined by a Saudi-led coalition of more than fifteen nations, including the United States. In effect, the country has regressed fifty years, destroying any vestiges of a civic state, and the resultant misery and death has rent the social fabric and fragmented the Yemeni community as never before.

To put the situation in perspective, a Red Cross press release stated that the damage inflicted in Yemen in the five months after coalition airstrikes began in March 2015 was equivalent to that which took place in Syria during five years of war.³ According to the April 4, 2016, UN Humanitarian Bulletin, one in ten Yemenis has been displaced by the conflict, and the documented death toll has exceeded 6,400, with approximately six times that number in injuries.⁴

PSEUDO-DEMOCRACY AMID POLITICAL INSTABILITY

Prior to the Arab Spring, Yemen had a weak democratic system with regular elections, a parliament, an upper house—the Shura Council—and relatively strong political pluralism. A robust political opposition was led primarily by the conservative Islah Party, regarded as the Yemeni version of the Muslim Brotherhood. This opposition bloc, called the Joint Meeting Parties (JMP),⁵

was created in 2002 in response to the unwavering, and many times illegal, domination by the ruling GPC over the country's politics and assets. The JMP included the Yemeni Socialist Party, the Nasserite Party, and two smaller parties.

Beyond party politics, Yemen had also witnessed growth in organized political activities; in fact, it was one of the first countries in which protestors took to the street to demand change—much earlier than in Tunisia or Egypt.⁶ Beginning in 2007, almost every Tuesday saw a gathering in Freedom Square (the area between the parliament and cabinet buildings) to protest issues ranging from early marriage to corruption in the military. These demonstrations were often steered by Tawakkol Karman, who four years later would lead Yemen's version of the Arab Spring and win the Nobel Peace Prize for her role in peaceful protest and peace building. Since 2000, the growth of Yemeni civil society had achieved significant momentum in quantity and quality, partly credited to donor-led programs such as UN agencies, World Bank, and foreign ministries of Western countries that included training and funding for development and political projects. By June 2014, the number of registered civil society organizations reached 8,300.⁷ In short, despite its tribal structure and low ranking in the UN Human Development Index, Yemen was attempting to establish itself as a forward-thinking society on civil rights and related issues. Saleh had marketed himself to the Western world, particularly Washington,

[gate.net/publication/233014149_The_Joint_Meeting_Parties_and_the_Politics_of_Opposition_in_Yemen](http://www.gate.net/publication/233014149_The_Joint_Meeting_Parties_and_the_Politics_of_Opposition_in_Yemen).

3. Louise Loveluck, "Yemen 'Already Looks like Syria after Five Years of War,'" *Telegraph*, August 19, 2015, <http://www.telegraph.co.uk/news/worldnews/middleeast/yemen/11813169/Yemen-already-looks-like-Syria-after-five-years-of-war.html>.
4. <http://reliefweb.int/sites/reliefweb.int/files/resources/Yemen%20HB%20Issue%2010%20Issued%20on%2004%20April%202016%20Eng.pdf>.
5. Vincent Durac, "The Joint Meeting Parties and the Politics of Opposition in Yemen," *British Journal of Middle Eastern Studies* 38, no. 3 (2011), pp. 343–365, <https://www.research>

6. Most reports on Yemen's civil society activity ignore this fact because the country's protests were neither momentous nor well documented. Yet some published reports indicate this fact, such as the U.S. State Department's 2007 Country Reports on Human Rights Practices for 2007, <http://www.state.gov/j/drl/rls/hrrpt/2007/100610.htm>, and the Sada blog run by the Carnegie Endowment for International Peace (e.g., see Nadia al-Sakkaf, "The Politicization of Yemen's Youth Revolution," April 27, 2011, <http://carneгиеendowment.org/sada/?fa=43735>).
7. Nadia al-Sakkaf, "The Tragedy of Yemen's Civil Society," *Fikra Forum*, February 19, 2016, <http://fikraforum.org/?p=8657>.

as a modern leader who believed in civil liberties and whose main concern was fighting terrorism. Yemen was usually one of the first countries to sign treaties and conventions toward this end—whether on human rights, free trade, women’s and children’s rights, or the like. Moreover, Saleh signed agreements allowing U.S. drones to target alleged terrorist operatives and groups on Yemeni soil in return for \$1.4 billion in U.S. economic and military assistance between 2009 and 2015.⁸

Ironically, Saleh was also instrumental in harboring al-Qaeda in the Arabian Peninsula (AQAP) on Yemeni territory and providing the major terrorist affiliate with training grounds, going so far as to support its existence in order to keep the threat alive and extract more funding from the West.⁹ Not only did he support the real AQAP, he reportedly created fake terrorist groups and directed their operations through his nephews in order to keep waving the terrorism card every now and then.¹⁰

Meanwhile, the Saleh government was carefully monitoring the growth of Yemen’s civil society movements by keeping tabs on potential public leaders who might threaten the status quo. This was done by creating pro-regime civil society organizations and defusing opposition figures by buying their loyalty or making their lives very challenging (assuming they were not killed outright). As Yemen specialist Sarah Phillips phrased it in 2008:

Generally, the state has sought to avoid outright oppression where possible. Instead, it prefers to allow political and civil organizations to exist and run out of steam through their own lack of capacity, stymie them through a series of legal or bureaucratic obstacles, co-opt their leaders, flood their

body with GPC members, or suppress them from within if necessary.¹¹

Even so, incidents of harassment against independent journalists, political opposition figures, and activists were rife. Human Rights Watch emphasized this point in its “World Report 2011”:

Yemen’s human rights situation continued to deteriorate in 2010. Amid political unrest in the south, hundreds of arbitrary arrests and the use of lethal force against peaceful demonstrators undermined advances in the rule of law.¹²

In contrast to the relatively recent advancement of civil society and civil liberties—which reached its apex between 2003 and 2009, especially during the 2006 elections¹³—political instability has dominated the country’s history for much longer. Beyond terrorism and other security challenges, Yemen’s political problems over the past couple decades have stemmed from the secessionist Southern Movement, also known as Hirak, which first came to prominence during the 1994 civil war between the north and south. Southern leaders had come to believe that the May 1990 unity agreement between the two sides was not in their best interests, since the north had taken control in an unbalanced manner. Grievances continued to brew, strengthened by the deterioration of living conditions and discrimination against southerners in state-run institutions such as the various ministries and their local offices.

8. David Francis, “Washington’s \$232 Million Question in Yemen,” *Foreign Policy*, January 20, 2015, <http://foreignpolicy.com/2015/01/20/washingtons-232-million-question-in-yemen/>.
9. Victoria Clark, *Yemen: Dancing on the Heads of Snakes* (Yale University Press, 2010).
10. Jason Burke, *Al-Qaeda: The True Story of Radical Islam* (Penguin, 2004).

11. Sarah Phillips, *Yemen’s Democracy Experiment in Regional Perspective* (Springer, 2008), p. 116.
12. See the full Human Rights Watch report at <https://www.hrw.org/world-report/2011/country-chapters/yemen>.
13. Perhaps the most significant democratic events in Yemen’s recent history was the 2006 local and presidential election, when the opposition won significant votes and threatened the one-party rule Saleh had held over the country for more than thirty years. It was supposed to be the election that changed everything; see Gregory Johnsen, “The Election Yemen Was Supposed to Have,” Middle East Research and Information Project, October 3, 2006, <http://www.merip.org/mero/mero100306>.

Political instability became more extreme when war broke out years later against the Houthis, a minority faction that practices the Twelver Zaidi branch of Shiite Islam. The conflict began in 2004 with a small insurgency in Saada, an impoverished northern town with a strong community of Twelver Shiites.¹⁴ Although the majority of Yemenis are Sunni, Twelver Zaidi Shiites, with a population of approximately 8 million, constitute approximately 30 percent of the population. More important, they have long wielded significant power and wealth in the north and in the country as a whole. Thus it is important to note that the Houthi insurgency did not start as a sectarian war, but rather as a minority's struggle for power.

Since then, however, the government's disproportionately violent response has resulted in six wars that have left hundreds of thousands displaced and tens of thousands dead.¹⁵ Moreover, Saleh appointed Gen. Ali Mohsen al-Ahmar, a strict Sunni and a prominent figure in the conservative Islah Party, to lead his forces in these wars because he knew they would eventually lead to a sectarian conflict—the essence of his divide-and-rule strategy.

TURNING POINTS

The first turning point in Yemen's recent political history was the Arab Spring. The revolutionary spirit behind this regional movement created an opportunity for the Yemeni opposition and other aggrieved parties to unite against the government and push their causes forward. Avowed enemies such as Houthis and Islah Party supporters, conservatives and secularists, all came together; women even found a voice in the male-dominated public sphere.¹⁶ The excitement over change and the vision of a

new Yemen, one that addressed the people's grievances and attended to economic deterioration, was the dominating spirit in 2012 and the first half of 2013.

Yemen's second turning point was the formation of the various political committees that paved the way for the 2013 NDC. The inclusion of all political parties, as well as a membership composed of 30 percent women and 20 percent youths, was unprecedented at the national level. Discussions across nine working groups ranged from trade rights and civil liberties to longstanding political grievances in the south. The NDC's general mandate was to create a new federal state, with the number of regions to be decided later per a technically sound and agreed-on method. Nevertheless, the eventual decision on regions turned out to be far from technical or harmonious; indeed, it was likely the spark that ignited the most recent war. From the final quarter of 2013 onward, it was clear that a political solution was not forthcoming, since the GPC, Hiraq, and the Houthis kept putting obstacles in the NDC's path.

In retrospect, the 2011–2014 period was a huge disappointment to Yemenis, particularly the independent youths who had led the uprising in the early weeks of 2011. In the end, members of the former regime still held power, and the former opposition had been coopted by the new power-sharing agreement. With the parliament functioning as a mere advocacy tool for the parties in power, and a void where the opposition used to reside, the free media and independent civil society organizations were the only ones left to represent the public's best interests. The interim coalition cabinet (or consensus government) that resulted from the 2011 GCC initiative was completely dysfunctional, led by a weak prime minister and officials who were more concerned with securing power and undermining rivals than with serving the people.

Extreme polarization of public and political spaces was the result, presenting Saleh with an opportunity he could not pass up. As scholar Tobias Thiel described it at the time:

The fragile achievements in the north are matched by chaos in the south. Aden is witnessing an unprecedented security vacuum, as the absence of

14. April Longley Alley, "Yemen's Multiple Crises," *Journal of Democracy* 21, no. 4 (October 2010).

15. Christopher Boucek, *War in Saada: From Local Insurrection to National Challenge* (Carnegie Endowment for International Peace, Middle East Program, April 2010), http://carnegieendowment.org/files/war_in_saada.pdf.

16. Nadia al-Sakkaf, "Yemen's Women and the Quest for Change: Political Participation After the Arab Revolution," Friedrich-Ebert-Stiftung, October 2012, <http://library.fes.de/pdf-files/iez/09434.pdf>.

the state allows [AQAP affiliate] Ansar al-Sharia, the Southern Movement, former regime loyalists, armed gangs and Salafists to wreak havoc. The [2013] upsurge in Islamist violence by Al-Qaeda and Ansar al-Sharia in Abyan, Shabwah, Al-Baydha and Lahj has developed into a full-blown insurgency, which suggests at least some links with Saleh's associates.¹⁷

Indeed, Saleh was among those wreaking security havoc in the south—despite having stepped down from the presidency, he still controlled the military and was even reaching out to the Houthis, his sworn enemies. His ultimate aim was to carry out a coup, specifically against his former deputy, President Hadi, but more generally against the Islah Party, which had spearheaded the effort to oust him from power.

Yet Hadi had been at Saleh's side for nearly two decades and was well aware of his methods. Sensing that a coup was imminent and that the public was deeply disappointed with how the political situation had turned out, Hadi's first thought was to change the government.¹⁸ To do so, however, he needed approval from the same parties that had put him in power—a difficult prospect because the GCC initiative's implementation mechanism stipulated that his consensus government was to last only three years, after which Yemenis would elect a new president to create the next government. Moreover, his efforts to implement the GCC initiative were limited by the fact that he was not truly in charge of Yemen's power structures. Saleh still ran these structures from behind the scenes, in collusion with a greedy former opposition that was making the most of the power-sharing arrangement.

Eventually, the Houthis partnered with the Republican Guard—an elite army branch managed indirectly by Saleh's son, Ahmed Ali—to take over northern governor-

ates and seize cities one by one. On September 17, 2014, they invaded the capital, Sana, seizing control four days later. By this point the Houthis had merged even more fully with the Republican Guard, wearing the branch's uniforms to give the impression they were a military institution rather than a militia.¹⁹

Immediately after Sana fell, UN mediators brokered the Peace and National Partnership Agreement between Hadi and the Houthis, which led to the appointment on October 13 of a new prime minister, Khaled Bahah. Bahah worked out an agreement with President Hadi and the political parties—and indirectly with the Houthis—to appoint a technocratic cabinet made up of professionals who were distinguished in their disciplines and respected by the public. Established on November 7, this “Cabinet of Professionals” generated very positive public reactions, especially since many of the ministers were taking government posts for the first time, thus starting with a clean slate.

Yet even these changes did not sufficiently appease the Houthis, who escalated their action against Hadi's government. On January 20, 2015, they attacked the presidential palace and put Hadi himself under house arrest. Hadi declared his resignation two days later, only hours after Prime Minister Bahah did the same. On February 6, the Houthi/Saleh camp announced a constitutional declaration dissolving the parliament and taking charge of the government, thereby formalizing the coup and forcing Yemen into its third sharp turn in the same decade.

At first, the Houthis publicized their takeover as a revolution against corruption, winning over many disgruntled Yemenis who were disillusioned by the Arab Spring and the resultant political system.²⁰ Most of the northern governorates surrendered to Houthi control without a fight, except for Marib, Taizz, and al-Bayda, which

17. Tobias Thiel, “Yemen's Arab Spring: From Youth Revolution to Fragile Political Transition,” in Nicholas Kitchen (ed.), *After the Arab Spring: Power Shift in the Middle East?* (IDEAS Special Reports, London School of Economics, 2012), http://eprints.lse.ac.uk/43465/1/After%20the%20Arab%20Spring_Yemen%E2%80%99s%20Arab%20Spring%28Isero%29.pdf.

18. President Hadi, discussion with author, Sana, 2014.

19. Nasser Al-Sakkaf and Brett Scott, “Rebels in Disguise,” *Yemen Times*, October 16, 2014, <http://www.yementimes.com/en/1825/report/4457/Rebels-in-disguise.htm>.

20. Shane Farrell, “Why the Houthis Are Taking a Leaf from Hezbollah's Military Playbook,” *Middle East Eye*, October 22, 2014, <http://www.middleeasteye.net/columns/why-houthis-are-taking-leaf-hezbollah-s-military-playbook-1716187276>.

are predominantly Sunni and have a strong Islah presence. Gradually, however, Houthi/Saleh groups began behaving aggressively against citizens: extorting money from businesses, looting homes, and punishing protesters, journalists, and others who stood against them via stabbings,²¹ illegal arrests, and torture.²² They also looted the offices of Yemeni intelligence agencies, resulting in the March 2015 seizure of secret files containing details of American counterterrorism operations.²³

A fourth turning point occurred on February 21, 2015, when Hadi, under house arrest in Sana, fled to the Republican Palace in his hometown of Aden, then withdrew his resignation and declared himself the legitimate president. The Houthis responded on March 19 by sending ground units and the air force, which was under their control, to bombard the Aden palace. Six days later, the Saudi-led coalition launched airstrikes against Houthi/Saleh military targets, changing the political scenario completely.

THE BIGGER PICTURE

Although the Zaidi Shiite Houthis and Saleh wound up leading the insurgency that posed the greatest threat to Yemen's stability, outside actors were more concerned about a potential Sunni Islamist political takeover prior to the war. Seeing how the Muslim Brotherhood had risen to power in Egypt during the Arab Spring, many Gulf and Western countries feared that the Brotherhood-affiliated Islah Party could topple Saleh's regime and establish an Islamic regime.

For the West, Yemen's conservative nature, strong tribal culture, and potent terrorist groups were a troubling combination, especially since the country is strategically located at the intersection of two seas (international maritime traffic in the area was already suffering because of Somali piracy). For Saudi Arabia, however, terrorism was not the main concern—rather, Riyadh was worried about the Brotherhood's growing challenge to its own Sunni Wahhabi ideology. In the eyes of Saudi royals, the Arab Spring was seemingly leading to a Mecca-like capital next door in Cairo, one that was connected to a supportive Turkish government to the north and an ascendant Islah faction in Yemen to the south. The Saudi ruler at the time, King Abdullah, had particularly strong sentiments against the Brotherhood, preferring to support the Saleh regime and the Zaidi Shiite Houthis rather than shake hands with the Islah.

The king's calculus probably made more sense at the time; when the Houthis first began their rebellion, the notion that they were receiving support from Riyadh's main enemy, Iran, was controversial at best, despite Saleh's apparent complaints to Western diplomats during the periods when he was at war with the Houthis.²⁴ To be sure, the Houthis shared similar religious slogans with Iran's Islamic Revolutionary Guard Corps (IRGC), and Houthi figures reportedly traveled to Iran seeking financial and educational support.²⁵ Yet little tangible proof of Iranian support for the Houthi rebellion emerged until later. For example, on January 25, 2015, Supreme Leader Ali Khamenei's representative to the IRGC stated, "Hezbollah was formed in Lebanon as a popular force like [Iran's Basij militia]. Similarly popular forces were also formed in Syria and Iraq, and today we are watching the formation of Ansar Allah [the

21. Hugh Naylor, "Yemen Rebels Use Increasingly Brutal Tactics Against Demonstrators," *Washington Post*, February 20, 2015, https://www.washingtonpost.com/world/middle_east/yemen-rebels-use-increasingly-brutal-tactics-against-demonstrators/2015/02/19/68b6d09c-b78a-11e4-bc30-a4e75503948a_story.html.

22. "Yemen: Peaceful Protesters Targets of Huthis' Disturbing 'Torture-Tactics,'" Amnesty International, February 16, 2015, <https://www.amnesty.org/en/latest/news/2015/02/yemen-peaceful-protesters-targets-of-huthis>.

23. Brian Bennett and Zaid al-Alayaa, "Iran-Backed Rebels Loot Yemen Files About U.S. Spy Operations," *Los Angeles Times*, March 25, 2015, <http://www.latimes.com/world/middle-east/la-fg-us-intelligence-yemen-20150325-story.html>.

24. Summary of WikiLeaks cables on "Yemen, the US and the Houthis," posted on al-Bab by Brian Whitaker, April 6, 2015, <http://washin.st/2bjKt9s>.

25. Mehdi Khalaji, "Yemen's Zaidis: A Window for Iranian Influence," PolicyWatch 2364, Washington Institute for Near East Policy, February 2, 2015, <http://www.washingtoninstitute.org/policy-analysis/view/yemens-zaidis-a-window-for-iranian-influence>.

Houthi movement's formal name] in Yemen."²⁶ Such statements were confirmed by actions on the ground, including the discovery of an IRGC training team in Yemen,²⁷ Iranian weapons transfers to Houthi forces,²⁸ images of Khomeini and Hezbollah leader Hassan Nasrallah decorating the streets in Sana, and the frequent medical and political visits that Houthi leaders made to Tehran and Lebanon, where they met with IRGC and Hezbollah officials, respectively.²⁹

Despite these discoveries, most of the military and financial support for the Houthi rebellion came from Saleh and other sources within Yemen rather than from Iran. Even so, the prospect of an extremist Shiite entity emerging on Saudi Arabia's southern border greatly troubled King Salman, who succeeded Abdullah in January 2015. Unlike his predecessor, he had no problem dealing with the Muslim Brotherhood and its affiliates, and the growing Houthi problem seemed to spur him into becoming the main driver behind intervention in Yemen. On several occasions before the coalition air campaign,³⁰ President Hadi commented that he had

sought Saudi help against Saleh and the Houthis at the beginning of their 2013 offensives, but it was only when Salman took over that his requests were met.

As a result, by the time Riyadh and its allies decided to intervene in March 2015, the Houthis had taken over most of the country. Instead of helping the Yemeni government deal with a small rebellion, the Saudis were compelled to launch Operation Decisive Storm, a major air campaign involving nine Arab countries and other foreign actors. For Saudi defense minister Muhammad bin Salman, the tipping point came when Houthis began using the air force against Hadi in Aden. Riyadh argued that the Houthis and Saleh could just as well use their air assets and long-distance missiles against the kingdom—a prediction that was soon fulfilled.³¹

As part of the intervention, the Saudis established a full blockade of Yemen, partially lifting it later on to allow commercial and humanitarian ships to reach the country. As for the air campaign, coalition forces initially focused on bombarding Houthi/Saleh military targets, yet later struck more indiscriminately in Houthi-held areas, causing thousands of civilian casualties and great damage to the already feeble infrastructure.³² At the same time, Houthis and Saleh loyalists kept advancing south, and the more resistance they met, the more aggressive they became against civilians, sometimes shooting children, women, and relief volunteers in cold blood.³³ In the end, Yemenis found themselves engulfed in full-scale war less than a year after celebrating a new constitution that had brought hope of a peaceful, federalized country.

26. Shahir Shahid Saless, "Does Iran Really Control Yemen?" *al-Monitor: Iran Pulse*, February 12, 2015, <http://www.al-monitor.com/pulse/originals/2015/02/iran-yemen-houthis-axis-of-resistance.html>.

27. Mohammed Ghobari, "Yemen Frees Members of Iran Revolutionary Guards-Sources," *Reuters*, September 25, 2014, <http://uk.reuters.com/article/uk-yemen-iran-idUKKCN0H-K1K320140925>.

28. Joshua Berlinger, "Weapons Seized by Australia May Have Come from Iran, Intended for Houthis," *CNN*, March 7, 2016, <http://edition.cnn.com/2016/03/07/middleeast/middle-east-weapons-seizure/>. See also Tom Wyke, "US Navy Intercept Iranian Weapons Shipment Including 1,500 AK-47s and Rocket Launchers in the Arabian Sea Heading to War-Torn Yemen," *Daily Mail*, April 4, 2016, <http://www.dailymail.co.uk/news/article-3522851/US-Navy-intercept-Iranian-weapons-shipment-including-1-500-AK-47s-rocket-launchers-Arabian-Sea-heading-war-torn-Yemen.html>.

29. Adel al-Ahmadi and Farah al-Zaman Shawqi, "Houthi Delegation on 'Official' Visit to Iran," *The New Arab*, March 2, 2015, <https://www.alaraby.co.uk/english/news/2015/3/2/houthi-delegation-on-official-visit-to-iran>.

30. President Hadi, meeting with author, Sana, December 2014.

31. Ian Black, "Saudis Strike in Response to Houthi Scud Attack as Forgotten War Rages On," *Guardian*, October 15, 2015, <http://www.theguardian.com/world/2015/oct/15/saudi-arabia-strike-response-houthi-scud-attack-forgotten-war>.

32. "Yemen War: Saudi Coalition 'Causing Most Civilian Casualties,'" *BBC*, March 18, 2016, <http://www.bbc.co.uk/news/world-middle-east-35842708>.

33. See, for example, Human Rights Watch, "Yemen: Pro-Houthi Forces Attack, Detain Civilians," May 7, 2015, <https://www.hrw.org/news/2015/05/07/yemen-pro-houthi-forces-attack-detain-civilians>.

COMMUNITY RESILIENCE INITIATIVES

Today, the entire concept of state and state institutions has disappeared in Yemen, along with the state itself. The northern part of the country is being mismanaged by disorganized and unskilled Houthi leaders who frequently resort to severe measures against anyone who challenges their command, including torture and murder.³⁴ In the south, no single entity has taken charge despite the president residing there and sizable contingents of Saudi and Emirati troops present to handle security. The Southern Movement has taken the Houthi coup as an opportunity to renew its demands for independence, raising its flag on almost every street and above every official building. Additionally, the south has a rampant terrorism and internal security problem—assassinations of officials and activists occur almost daily, AQAP has taken advantage of the war to seize areas in and around Hadramawt, and Saleh's undercover agents continue to wreak havoc and undermine Hadi's leadership. And in May, security authorities in Aden arrested around 800 people, many of them northerners, and forced them to leave the city, further fueling the fire of ethnic hatred.³⁵

Worst of all, Taizz governorate—Yemen's most-populated region, with more than three million inhabitants—remains an open wound where suffering continues unabated. The governorate has been a heavily contested battleground since April 2015, and access to food, medical supplies, and electricity is very limited.

The silver lining is that amid the lack of state control and the proliferation of fragmented militias attempting to run the country, civil society activists have risen to the occasion with effective local initiatives. Arguably, they were forced to step in, if only to provide urgent support to those in need.

34. See, for example, "Yemen's Houthis Accused of Torturing Rivals," Aljazeera, May 18, 2016, <http://www.aljazeera.com/news/2016/05/yemen-houthis-accused-torture-rivals-160518064134863.html>.

35. Nadia al-Sakkaf, "Ethnic Hatred in Yemen," *The New Arab*, May 12, 2016, <https://www.alaraby.co.uk/english/comment/2016/5/12/ethnic-hatred-in-yemen>.

Currently, three main types of civil society engagement are at work in Yemen. The first is direct participation in formal associations such as political parties, unions, and NGOs. This type of activism has taken a blow since the conflict began, largely because warzones do not exactly encourage organized events and entities capable of challenging the status quo.

The second type of engagement is material and financial contributions to charities and individuals. This has been ongoing throughout the conflict, and while the general economic crisis has left fewer people able to donate money, it has not stopped them from volunteering their time for various causes.

The third type of engagement—which is thriving at the moment—is intellectual production, including media and other publications, artwork, music, performances, conferences, and similar endeavors. Some of these are ongoing campaigns, though the lack of resources coupled with instability means that one-off initiatives tend to dominate.

Examples of all three types of civil society activity abound, formal and informal. In terms of relief and humanitarian assistance, many local initiatives have been launched, some more effective than others and often posing great risk to those involved. In some cases local charities have collected food and other items and distributed them in conflict zones where international humanitarian organizations will not go. Food baskets and other items have also been distributed in camps for internally displaced persons. For instance, in June 2015, a coalition of seventy-three civil society organizations called OMAM began carrying out humanitarian activities in Sana, including food distribution, hospital visits, and donation of medicines.³⁶ Yet the group has suffered in 2016 from a lack of resources and organizational capacity. Similar initiatives have appeared in other regions, including the "survive together" movement in Ibb, founded by female staff of the local university.

Meanwhile, microenterprises and other small-scale business initiatives have stepped in to support the local

36. See OMAM's official Facebook page at <https://www.facebook.com/OMAMEng/>.

economy. After factories and companies closed due to instability, thousands of Yemenis found themselves unemployed and confronted with increasing prices. Out of necessity, ingenious solutions were born, such as the use of solar panels to provide electric power, alternative efforts to address community hygiene, new forms of shared transport and accommodation, and an assortment of vocational trade initiatives.³⁷ New jobs were created to attend to each community's changing needs, with many locals forced to improvise just to stay alive.³⁸

In other sectors, the online-based initiative Support Yemen³⁹ has been producing and widely disseminating videos and documentation of the conflict in Arabic and English. Recent short documentaries on the war bear titles such as *Yemen Deserves Love Not War, They Have Not Returned, The Melody of Our Alienation*, and *The Happy Yemen Video*. Similarly, a new wave of online activists—mainly bilingual expatriate Yemenis who managed to flee the war—have used social media and other networks to advocate peace and keep their country's plight on the global radar. These activists often represent Yemen at international conferences, write news articles and policy papers, or simply spread the word online. Yet they must often counter the social media narratives spread by activists on the other side of the conflict such as the Facebook page "Afash. Yemen" and the YouTube account "True Story SAS."

Moreover, many youth initiatives emerged as community-based organizations began to sponsor peace-

building activities that emphasized tolerance and community resilience.⁴⁰ Most prominently, the Youth Leadership Development Foundation is one of Yemen's leading civil society organizations and has continued working despite the instability and hardships. With support from donors, it has carried out several crisis-management and conflict-resolution training activities aimed at empowering Yemeni youths to take positive action even amid armed conflict. These efforts are in addition to the foundation's other humanitarian and development projects. Local actors have also organized sports activities and competitions, primarily soccer matches, to defuse tension and bring some positive energy to conflict zones, particularly among youths. Another example is the only community radio operating in the south, Radio Lana,⁴¹ which is based in Aden and has been producing programs supporting tolerance and peace building.

On an individual level, some Yemeni youths have created new jobs such as selling ice and renting out phone-charging devices, which became more and more necessary as electricity grew scarce. The Cash for Work initiative established by the UN Development Programme in 2015 has furthered such efforts.⁴² For example, it has helped unemployed youths identify jobs they can perform for cash, such as cleaning up roads, removing garbage that accumulated when municipal collection services were halted, and delivering water to homes for domestic tasks.

Youth volunteers have also organized neighborhood security committees to stand watch against potential thefts or violence. These local security groups are visible in all of Yemen's conflict zones: in Aden, for example, the "We are All Aden Security" initiative tasks volunteers with patrolling various districts and reporting suspicious incidents. Interestingly, this initiative was created

37. "A Future During Crisis: Yemeni Youth Receive Key Job Skills," UN Development Programme, September 20, 2015, <http://www.undp.org/content/undp/en/home/presscenter/pressreleases/2015/09/20/a-future-during-crisis-yemeni-youth-receive-key-job-skills-.html>.

38. "UNDP Promotes Private Sector Development and Youth Entrepreneurs During Critical Times in Yemen," UN Development Programme, March 19, 2015, <http://www.un.org/youthenvoy/2015/03/undp-promotes-private-sector-development-youth-entrepreneurs-critical-times-yemen>. See also "In Yemen: jobs paying the price of war and others finding alternatives" (Arabic), Yemen 24, March 7, 2016, <http://www.yemen-24.com/news24536.html>.

39. <http://supportyemen.org>.

40. "Supporting Youth Initiatives in Yemen Through Small Grants," *Safer World*, March 2, 2016, <http://www.safer-world.org.uk/news-and-views/news-article/688-supporting-youth-initiatives-in-yemen-through-small-grants>.

41. <https://www.facebook.com/lanafmaden/>.

42. See <http://www.undp.org/content/undp/en/home/ourwork/our-projects-and-initiatives/YemenResponse.html>.

by ten female activists who held a protest on October 20, 2015, against the city's lawlessness. Soon enough, other individuals and organizations joined them, and today the movement comprises more than thirty youth initiatives and groups that not only provide security but also promote tolerance. They have painted murals on walls in prominent locations to advocate peace, distributed flyers at traffic lights, and spoken frequently with the media.

Despite these efforts, the promise of the Arab Spring has become a distant memory for most Yemenis.⁴³ The disillusionment spawned by the disparity between that promise and the situation today has caused many to lower their expectations of whichever ruling authority they happen to live under. The reality is that many Yemenis are satisfied simply if they can meet their basic needs such as food, electricity, security, and some kind of job, however minor.

YEMEN'S FUTURE AND THE U.S. ROLE

Over the past several months, the UN Department of Political Affairs has overseen intermittent peace talks, currently led by the secretary-general's envoy to Yemen, Ismail Ould Cheikh Ahmed. These talks may provide the Saudi-led coalition with a way out of this exhausting war if they can reach a compromise that protects their southern border. As described previously, this southern security problem (whether portrayed as a Sunni Islamist threat or an Iranian-linked Shiite threat), rather than protection of Yemenis, was the driver behind Riyadh's intervention.

Accordingly, the responsibility for creating an operational governing body has been left to President Hadi, whose latest move, in April 2016, was to remove his deputy vice-president/prime minister and replace him with two old-guard figures from the former regime: Ali Mohsen al-Ahmar as vice president and Ahmed bin Daghr as prime minister. Ahmar, who belongs to the same tribe as Saleh and has strong tribal connections in general, has been tasked with convincing the northern

groups to compromise. Bin Daghr, who is from Hadramawt and has some influence over the GPC, has been tasked with reforming the party and working out a solution with the Southern Movement.

Although these two men are experienced and, at least on paper, the best-qualified candidates to fulfill their newly assigned roles, they exemplify why Yemen is where it is today. They represent the tribal element and manipulative political elite who considered themselves above the law, using whatever resources under their sway to serve their own interests. Moreover, the public still remembers how deeply these factions were involved in human rights violations and corruption. In fact, most former regime officials—and, sadly, most members of the new government as well—have, in one way or another, degraded the country's economic prospects and civil liberties. In terms of development, Yemen has seemingly regressed at least five decades, especially with respect to its economy and infrastructure. It has also reverted to complete chaos and tribal rule: in most areas, the strongest clan or militia leaders can take control without accountability, while various state and independent institutions (e.g., the parliament, judicial system, police, anticorruption authority, and electoral commission) have been rendered void.

For its part, the United States has been busy coming to terms with Iran and dealing with its own domestic political affairs, apparently content to allow the Gulf countries to play the leading role in addressing Yemen's crisis. The failing UN resolutions on Syria and the continuous instability in Iraq have created public pressure on Washington and other Western governments not to spend any more tax money on distant failing states. Even the counterterrorism focus has been shifting to other arenas, with Islamic State operatives and sympathizers attacking Western cities directly in recent months.

In short, Yemen's peace talks may well succeed in establishing an actual, extended truce if Saudi Arabia is willing to pay the right price and Iran withdraws its most visible support to the Houthis. Yet the country's deeper problem will remain: how to reintegrate a society that has been torn to shreds economically, socially, and literally through divided geographical con-

43. Helen Lackner (ed.), *Why Yemen Matters: A Society in Transition* (Saqi Books, 2014).

trol. Yemen needs help in learning how to rebuild its economy, recreate the state, and regain the citizenry's trust and respect. Most important, it needs advice on establishing rule of law and fighting the various terror-

ist and armed groups that have flourished in the past two years. These are huge challenges, and the current authorities in Yemen are unlikely to deal with them effectively, if at all.

Nadia al-Sakkaf, director of Yemen 21 Forum, a development NGO based in Sana, was the first woman to be appointed information minister in Yemen. She was formerly the editor-in-chief of the Yemen Times, the country's first and most widely read independent English-language newspaper, and currently serves on its board of directors. A renowned journalist, activist, and human rights defender, she has received numerous international awards, including the first Gebran Tueni Award, the Oslo Business for Peace Award in 2013, and BBC recognition that same year as one of 100 women who changed the world. Today, in addition to her writing and advocacy works, she is deputy chair of the National Body for Monitoring Implementation of the National Dialogue Conference's outcomes.
