



Brandeis University

Crown Center
for Middle East Studies

Mailstop 010
Waltham, Massachusetts
02454-9110

781-736-5320
781-736-5324 Fax
www.brandeis.edu/crown

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Fragmentation and Localization in Yemen's War: Challenges and Opportunities for Peace

Stacey Philbrick Yadav

In the aftermath of an airstrike that destroyed a bus carrying forty Yemeni children to school in August, UNICEF released a letter from a 14-year-old schoolgirl named Hanin al-Asaadi. In the letter, al-Asaadi explained the kinds of changes she had experienced as a child over the five years during which her home has been in crisis or in the midst of war. Many of the changes she described are familiar to those who have followed the war in Yemen: fear of airstrikes, destruction of critical infrastructure, endemic hunger, and risk of disease. Others are subtler. Al-Asaadi describes her classroom as emptied by half as her classmates and teachers leave the city to take temporary refuge, and shares her uncertainty regarding whether they will return. "Families were dispersed, friends got separated," she writes, and she laments that she cannot visit them, knowing that she cannot travel to other parts of the country.

The Yemen Data Project reports that in the month following this attack, a staggering more than 70 percent of air strikes by the Saudi-led coalition involved non-military targets, destroying the infrastructure that connects city to countryside, interior to port, and the like among Yemen's increasingly fragmented communities.¹ Even when infrastructure and security allow for travel, the doubling of fuel prices this year keeps it out of reach for many Yemenis.² Al-Asaadi's letter paints a portrait of her neighborhood in which "life goes on"—school is in session, people go to work—but in which the social

fabric of everyday life is increasingly sealed off from a broader notion of “Yemen.” This speaks to the ways in which war has broken the country into isolated pockets, within which Yemenis experience the specificity of war in remarkably different ways. The implications of this fragmentation are wide-ranging.

This Brief argues that the war in Yemen has been misunderstood in at least two essential respects and that each of these constitutes a barrier to sustainable conflict resolution. First, the war is approached in formal diplomacy and public discourse alike as a single war between two primary factions, when in fact there are at least four arenas of conflict. Each of these arenas has distinct antagonists, methods, and aims; and none of them, alone or in combination, are explained by seeing the war as either a proxy war between Saudi Arabia and Iran or as a conflict between Houthi insurgents and the “central government” of President Abd Rabuh Mansour Hadi. Although there are elements of truth to the proxy-war framing, the sectarian dynamics of the war in Yemen have been created by the war more than they have driven it—and they take on different form and significance across the various arenas of conflict. Second, and as a consequence, the war is characterized by dual dynamics of fragmentation and localization, in both security and humanitarian dimensions. These processes of fragmentation and localization began well before 2015, but regional actors have been attracted by the fragmentary nature of the conflict in Yemen and have helped to exacerbate that fragmentation. Taken together, these sources of misunderstanding or mischaracterization have contributed to a stalled diplomatic process, suggesting that just as the experience of the war is not singular, the challenges of peacebuilding are not uniform.

Elite and Military Fragmentation: Mapping the Four Arenas of Conflict

The prevailing international understanding of the war in Yemen, derived from UN Security Council Resolution 2216, is that it is a war to restore “by all necessary means and measures, including military intervention,” the “authority of the legitimate Government of Yemen” against aggression by Houthi insurgents.³ A coalition of Arab states led by Saudi Arabia (hereafter “the Coalition”) presents itself as working to restore President Hadi and his government to Sana’a from their self-imposed exile in Riyadh, thereby upholding Yemeni sovereignty consistent with the principles of the UN Charter. The international diplomatic framework that has developed from this resolution acknowledges that Iran supplies financial and military support to the Houthi rebels and imposed sanctions in 2014 on former Yemeni president Ali Abdullah Saleh for his alliance with the Houthis until his dramatic death in December of 2017. Still, the dominant approach to analyzing the war is one that pits the Government of Yemen (GoY) against the Houthis, or else Saudi Arabia against Iran.

Several inconvenient truths challenge such binary understandings of the war. Even among the so-called “government-backed militias” fighting the Houthis in the North with arms and aerial support from Saudi Arabia, rival elites jockey for power. Preeminent among these are factions led by current Vice-President and former commander of the 1st Armored Division of the Yemeni Armed Forces General Ali Muhsin, who backs militias aligned with the Islamist Islah party and tribal forces from the North. To call Islah-aligned or tribal militias affiliated with Ali Muhsin “pro-government forces” or suggest that they are fighting to restore President Hadi obscures the vice-president’s own interests and history, as well as those of Islah and Northern Yemen’s tribes. Before defecting from former President

Stacey Philbrick Yadav is an Associate Professor of Political Science at Hobart and William Smith Colleges.

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Administrative Map of Yemen

Saleh’s military during the 2011 uprising, Ali Muhsin was long regarded as a shadowy but powerful figure with ties to militant Islamists, whose ambitions were best contained by keeping him close to the regime. Islah, for its part, has long been internally divided, with leaders drawn from the Muslim Brotherhood, Salafi communities, tribal constituencies, and socially conservative business elites, all with their own levers of power within the institution.⁴

At best, ties between Northern militias and Islah or Ali Muhsin ought to be regarded as ephemeral marriages of convenience pursuing the defeat of the Houthis while shelving important questions about a post-war future for Yemen. It is worth recalling that in past episodes of conflict in 2011, Islahi militias sometimes worked in concert with Houthi militants to achieve shared objectives, and factions of Islah aligned both with and against the late President Saleh. While the sectarian polarization that has escalated over the past several years makes Islahi-Houthi alliances virtually incomprehensible today, the rapidity with which similarly inconceivable changes have occurred in the recent past underscores that no single framework—sectarian, ideological, or tribal—has much predictive value.⁵

Beyond this intra-Northern story of elite alliances and militia mobilization is the continuing existence and evolution of the populist Southern Movement, or Hirak, active since 2007 across areas of former South Yemen. The Hirak’s demands were not originally secessionist but became increasingly so over time. Left out of the power-sharing government that was negotiated to end the 2011 uprising, the Hirak was forced into a position of transitional “spoiler”—and proceeded to play its part. Movement leaders’ advocacy of two-state federalism, in particular, was seen by many as a pathway to secession and ought to be regarded as at least as significant as the Houthis’ rejection of the 2015 six-state federal proposal that immediately preceded the war.⁶

Today’s exclusion of the Southern Movement from formal recognition in diplomatic channels is therefore not new, but it has certainly accelerated efforts toward secession in both word and deed. During the 2012–14 transitional process, the movement served as a de facto veto player through ad hoc processes, rather than a formally empowered participant in negotiating the parameters of a new regime;⁷ it is unlikely to accept such a role today.⁸ When Houthi militias pushed out of their own Northern stronghold and sacked Aden in 2015, the response was both a surge in Southern identitarian claims (against Northern “invaders”) and tactical cooperation with GoY forces to push the Houthis back northward. This cooperation, however, never supplanted the demands of the Hirak. With their movement riven by internal disagreements about how to proceed, some Hirak leaders participated in GoY efforts to restore order and resume governing functions in the Southern capital. But when Aden’s governor, Aydrous al-Zubaydi, faced off against President Hadi in 2017, the movement advanced the clock on secessionism by announcing the Southern Transitional Council, a quasi-state institution designed to provide security and carry out other state functions, the aim of which is surely to render a Southern Yemeni state a *fait accompli* ahead of any peace settlement.

The governorate of Hadramawt and, to a lesser extent, the governorate of al-Mahra to its east represent a third distinct arena of conflict—one that is “Southern” to the extent that it is part of the historical South and has long been politically distant to Northern elites and to the Sana’a-based government, but that is not driven exclusively, or even largely, by the politics of the Hiraq. While the Hiraq has enjoyed some support in Hadramawt, Hadramis have not supported secession in large numbers. Instead, the governorate—home to important religious institutions, families with strong traditions of local leadership, and significant natural resources—fell under the temporary control of al-Qaeda in the Arabian Peninsula (AQAP) for the better part of a year, in 2015 and 2016. This can be understood as a function of both motive and opportunity. AQAP was unquestionably attracted to Hadramawt’s natural resources and to the prospect of maritime access through its port city and capital, Mukalla. At the same time, it was the security vacuum created by war that enabled AQAP’s advance, and the rise of ISIS elsewhere in the Middle East and North Africa (MENA) that drove the organization to adapt its approach in Yemen and seek to establish direct territorial control.

Under AQAP control by April 2015, Hadramis experienced a fusion of local and AQAP administration, as the militant group cultivated respectful relationships vis-à-vis some local customs and worked to rebrand itself as both indigenous and committed to service provision. As Elisabeth Kendall notes, the organization “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.”⁹

Whereas in other arenas of conflict, U.S. policy has largely taken the form of technical support and weapons provision, the role of AQAP in Hadramawt attracted direct U.S. military engagement and a new strategic relationship between the U.S. and the United Arab Emirates that has had enduring consequences. In April 2016, UAE and U.S. forces successfully recaptured Mukalla, but it is not clear that AQAP has been substantially weakened by this loss.¹⁰

The offensive in Hadramawt had two significant consequences for the fragmentation of the war in Yemen. The first is that it drove an operational wedge in the Saudi-led alliance by demonstrating that coalition members could pursue their respective objectives independently. Alongside Emirati political support for

the Southern Movement, the campaign in Hadramawt helped to further demarcate an Emirati sphere of influence. The second consequence of the U.S.-Emirati campaign against AQAP in Hadramawt in 2016 has been the dispersal of AQAP members and sympathizers into other fighting factions outside of Hadramawt. Notwithstanding U.S. declarations of victory, reports suggest that, rather than AQAP being defeated, its fighters have been integrated into existing Salafi militias that the UAE supports as a clear counterweight to militias aligned with Saudi-backed Islah.¹¹

The de facto division by Saudi and UAE forces of zones of responsibility as the war has developed has also played a role in furthering fragmentation, by allowing coalition allies to pursue related but not identical objectives through substantially different means in different parts of the country and with different kinds of tactical alliances. In particular, absorbing displaced radicals from Hadramawt into militias in bordering governorates accords with the broader Emirati practice of mobilizing Salafi militias in Southern governorates. Laurent Bonnefoy has observed that a critical difference between Salafi militias in the South and other militias is that they are more motivated by ideology than by territory, so they have been willing to go outside of their local communities and push into areas under Houthi control to the North.¹² Though sectarian differences are a longstanding feature of Yemeni society, the sectarianization of the conflict has grown as a result of AQAP and ISIS discourse and the targeting of symbolic sites by these radical organizations, as well as via Houthi discourse, targeted killings, and the disappearances of Islahis.¹³ By 2016, these sectarian dynamics had become an entrenched feature of the war, but one that was still strongly flavored by regionalism.

Nowhere are the effects of fragmentation felt as acutely as in the frontline city of Taiz and the port of Hodeidah, which might jointly be considered the final arena of conflict. These provincial capitals are significant as an arena of conflict because they bring these different fragmented strands together into particularly intractable tension. The fighting involves militias aligned with different warring parties, different radical organizations, and the armed forces of different neighboring states. But Taiz and Hodeidah are also distinctive because the humanitarian consequences of urban warfare, including cuts to supply lines and destruction of essential infrastructure, are particularly acute, and the populations of these cities do not neatly fit into any of the aforementioned groups. Residents thus live on a frontline but are almost wholly lacking in formal representation in any diplomatic process.

Taiz is a symbolically significant city in the Yemeni midlands and, true to its geography, has historically been a meeting ground for North and South, whose residents (and others) recognize its distinctly *madani* (urbane) character; it produces a disproportionate share of Yemeni journalists, civil servants, intellectuals, and political activists. It has also served as a seemingly intractable frontline for most of the war, its pluralism yielding to a divided city, surrounded by rival militias, where the targeted killing and disappearance of critical voices has been carried out by all sides. Experiencing intermittent siege conditions over several years, its population has been ravaged by both Houthi and other Islamist militia blockades and Coalition bombardment.¹⁴

The Red Sea port city of Hodeidah and the wider governorate bearing the same name have been under Houthi control since early in the war but faces constant threat of invasion by Coalition forces. Its population is both militarily and politically captive to the Houthis, who are highlanders with cultural and religious practices distinct from the largely Afro-Yemeni population of the Tihama coastal plain. The poorest of Yemen's governorates before the war, Hodeidah has survived thanks only to the black market that runs through its port and the population's ability to supplement its diet from the sea. Preparation in the summer of 2018 for a military seizure of Hodeidah port—strenuously challenged by the UN and nearly every international humanitarian agency on the basis of the likely consequences with respect to food security and looming famine—drew together the Coalition's armed forces, as well as a range of militias from North and South lacking centralized command or, frankly, shared objectives beyond the defeat of the Houthis. While a full-scale attack on Hodeidah has thus far been avoided, Houthi attacks on Saudi oil shipments in the Red Sea have continued to ratchet up hostilities, and Hodeidah remains at risk. It seems most likely that it will be subject to an underreported siege, as with Taiz, in order to avoid the international opprobrium that would come with the invasion and destruction of the port.¹⁵

Taken together, these interconnected but separate zones of conflict suggest that there are at least four wars ongoing in Yemen: the intra-Northern war between Houthis and militias aligned largely with Islah and Saudi Arabia; a Southern war of secession; a southeastern war against but now also dispersing militant Islamists; and the battle for Taiz and Hodeidah, where all of these threads come together. Each of these conflicts has distinct antagonists, who use different methods and pursue different aims. Unsurprisingly, this has translated into highly localized experiences of conflict, as well

as equally localized efforts to establish authority and security.

Localization and (In)security

The second major dynamic shaping both the war itself and the prospects for peace is the localization of security. This includes both the localization of the experience of war and the localization of responses to the war on the part of a diverse array of tribal and community leaders, grassroots social service organizations, militias, ad hoc courts, informal schools and clinics, and other actors.

As Peter Salisbury has observed, even before 2018, “the conflict had mostly settled into a pragmatic, if economically destructive, stalemate,” in which “[f]ront-line fighting was confined to several largely static battlefields, with many actors increasingly focused on the internal politics of individual territories rather than on the wider conflict.”¹⁶ Data from the Yemen Polling Center supports this interpretation, including the startling finding that a majority of Yemenis reported feeling “personally safe” after several years of war, whereas only 5 percent reported feeling always or mostly unsafe.¹⁷ This only makes sense when one considers the geographical features of Yemen's war and the population distribution of Yemen vis-à-vis the arenas of conflict. Uncharacteristically for the MENA region, a staggering 74 percent of Yemenis live in rural communities—whereas the major conflict zones in the country are overwhelmingly urban. Urban dwellers often maintain close kinship ties to rural communities, and many have been able to seek temporary shelter in the countryside during the war. Measures of internal displacement may be misleadingly low in Yemen as respondents may not interpret this form of sheltering as displacement, even though it introduces similar forms of economic and social strain.

The fragmentary nature of the war(s) in Yemen also significantly complicates the process of humanitarian relief and the access necessary to provide it. Amnesty International has extensively documented the difficulties that aid agencies face in delivering essential food and medical supplies, with inconsistent and unpredictable barriers erected by local militias and international military forces alike.¹⁸ Accounts of a flourishing war economy suggest that these bottlenecks may be intentional, as they offer an important source of revenue for warring factions that benefit directly from black and gray market activities helping to keep civilians alive.¹⁹

The primary political implications of the localization of the war are threefold. First, it has eroded the shared experience of Yemeni national belonging (which had already been deeply strained by a benighted “transitional process”²⁰), thereby reducing the kind of non-tangible resources on which post-war rebuilders might rely. Second, and at the same time, localization has prompted the growth of local organizations and nurtured the emergence of new community leaders, most notably among non-combatant youth and women. They may have stepped into a breach out of necessity, but they are unlikely to simply fade away in the post-war period, unless international donor agencies and post-war political settlements ignore them. Given the destruction of much of the centralized data-gathering capacity of the Yemeni state, these local community actors are essential purveyors of information in both directions; they can help post-war planners better understand the needs and capacities of local communities, and they are also well positioned to help implement planning initiatives.

But there is no one-size-fits-all formula for supporting these local actors’ capacities or needs. Tapping into their knowledge and skills will require more openness and flexibility than many international agencies have shown in the past. During the transitional period, for example, international agency staff complained that they could not disperse pledged funds because local community organizations “lacked the capacity” to generate the kind of project proposals that agencies required. Donor aid particularly privileged those organizations with offices in the capital city, but this is no longer a viable model for a country with no center. Some international organizations are adapting to the fragmentation and localization in Yemen; the World Bank’s Emergency Crisis Response project, for example, finances widely divergent local projects employing a high proportion of women, internally-displaced people, and youth. Many of these local organizations and the individuals who lead them may not have developed much technical capacity or be plugged into networks in Sana’a or Aden, but they are meeting essential community needs.²¹

A final political implication of localization is the challenge it will pose for transitional justice. The transitional framework that followed the 2011 uprising contained no major provisions for transitional justice but deferred the matter to a subcommittee of the National Dialogue Conference (NDC), itself a lumbering process that produced nearly 1,800 policy recommendations without clear mechanisms for implementation. The localization of both the experience of and the responses to war in Yemen suggests that demands for transitional justice will vary in substantive form and intensity. It

will be tempting to again approach this as a lower-order priority to be addressed after the “essentials” of security and humanitarian response. Given the role that the NDC played as an antecedent of the war in Yemen, however, one might justifiably regard the promise of transitional justice as essential, if not to making peace than to securing it. Moreover, based on the conditions that have characterized the war as experienced by different Yemenis in different places, reliable and accountable security and access to food and health care—all of which have been instrumentalized by warring factions—may be substantive components of what some communities seek as restitution.

As with questions of development assistance, an approach to transitional justice that can account for variations in the desires and needs of local communities would be ideal. Yet achieving that ideal will be politically and pragmatically challenging. The World Bank’s flexibility, for example, has been enabled in part by its semi-autonomous role in relation to state power. Transitional justice is more likely to be advanced (if it is advanced at all) by a political settlement negotiated within a diplomatic framework dominated by the voices and priorities of state actors. Yet, as other regional examples have amply shown, reconstruction models that seek to work around the state rather than through it do little to help rebuild faith in institutions shaken or destroyed by civil war.

Conclusion

A political settlement to Yemen’s war—and indeed, there is broad agreement among Yemeni and non-Yemeni negotiators alike that the only settlement to this war must be a political, not military, one—will need to attend to the dynamics of fragmentation and localization if it is to be sustainable. Yet attending to such realities will also make the process of rebuilding politically complicated. If it is clear that local communities with highly differentiated experiences of the war will enter a post-war transitional process with different needs and capacities, it will be tempting for external actors to fund and support rebuilding in ways that may also undermine national reintegration or reconciliation by seeking to work around the state, rather than rebuilding it as the provider of security and welfare. To avoid more deeply embedding the fragmentation that has characterized the war and instead allow for the possibility of a political settlement and transitional justice that will support national reintegration, Yemen needs peace brokers willing both to recognize these different arenas of conflict and to reject the simple binarism and

reductive logic of regarding the conflict in Yemen as a straightforward “proxy war.”

Endnotes

- 1 Yemen Data Project, “Air Raids Summary for September 2018.”
- 2 Declan Walsh, “Yemen Girl Who Turned World’s Eyes to Famine is Dead,” *New York Times*, November 1, 2018.
- 3 United Nations Security Council Resolution 2216 (2015).
- 4 Islah participated in the 2011 revolutionary movement and in the subsequent power-sharing government, and in transitional mechanisms like the National Dialogue Conference, but was at the same time witnessing a disintegration of its party institutions and increased militarization among some of its cadres. Islah was never a highly unified institution, and the 2012–14 transitional process and the war since 2015 have geographically, ideologically, and institutionally fractured Islah, to the extent that it is hard to speak of it as a single entity today.
- 5 Stacey Philbrick Yadav, “Sectarianization, Islamist Republicanism, and International Misrecognition in Yemen,” in *Sectarianization: Mapping the New Politics of the Middle East*, ed. Nader Hashemi and Danny Postel (New York: Oxford University Press, 2017), pp. 185–98.
- 6 For a useful elaboration on President Hadi’s establishment of the “8+8” subcommittee of the National Dialogue Committee to address the Southern issue outside of the main NDC structure, as well as his eventual appointment of a constitutional drafting committee outside of specified channels, see: Erica Gaston, “Process Lessons Learned in Yemen’s National Dialogue,” *United States Institute for Peace Special Report 342*, February 2014.
- 7 Ibid.
- 8 Susanne Dahlgren, “Why the South of Yemen Is Key to Its Stalled Peace Talks,” *Washington Post* (Monkey Cage), October 23, 2018.
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- 10 International Crisis Group, *Yemen’s al-Qaeda: Expanding the Base* (Middle East Report No. 174, February 2, 2017); Michael Horton, “Which Way Forward for al-Qaeda in the Arabia Peninsula?” *Terrorism Monitor* 16, Issue 6, March 23, 2018.
- 11 International Crisis Group, *Yemen’s al-Qaeda: Expanding the Base*.
- 12 Laurent Bonnefoy, “Sunni Islamist Dynamics in Context of War: What Happened to al-Islah and the Salafis?” pp. 23–26 in *Politics, Governance, and Reconstruction in Yemen* (draft).
- 13 Yadav, “Sectarianization, Islamist Republicanism, and International Misrecognition in Yemen.”
- 14 Afrah Nasser, “From the Front Lines of Yemen’s Lawless Taiz,” *Atlantic Council*, February 23, 2018.
- 15 “A Siege of Hodeidah Could Have Devastating Consequences, Warns Save the Children’s Global CEO Helle Thorning-Schmidt after Returning from Yemen,” July 26, 2018.
- 16 Peter Salisbury, “Yemen: National Chaos, Local Order” (Chatham House, December [20], 2017).
- 17 Marie-Christine Heinze and Hafez Albukari, “Yemen’s War As Seen from the Local Level,” pp. 34–38 in *Politics, Governance, and Reconstruction in Yemen* (draft).
- 18 Amnesty International, “Stranglehold: Coalition and Huthi Obstacles Compound Humanitarian Crisis” (June 2018).
- 19 Salisbury, “Yemen: National Chaos, Local Order.”
- 20 This “transitional process” originated in a negotiated settlement drafted by the Gulf Cooperation Council and later adopted by the United Nations as the basis for President Ali Abdullah Saleh’s transition from power. It included a power-sharing government, an uncontested presidential election, and a National Dialogue Conference intended to address some of the country’s most pressing crises. Controversially, it also extended legal immunity to Saleh and allowed him to remain in the country and be politically active. Both the Southern Movement and the Houthis were excluded from the transitional government, and though they were participants in the NDC, the conference itself was marred by violence and political obstruction. In the end, more Yemenis died as a result of political violence during the transitional process than during the eleven-month uprising itself.
- 21 World Bank, “Yemen Emergency Crisis Response Project (P159053),” April 24, 2018.



Brandeis University Crown Center
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Mailstop 010
Waltham, Massachusetts
02454-9110

781-736-5320
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