



# YEMEN'S TRANSITION PROCESS

BETWEEN FRAGMENTATION AND TRANSFORMATION

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## ABOUT THE REPORT

This report, which is based on a series of lectures organized by the United States Institute of Peace (USIP), explores the rich domestic and external, historic and contemporary factors that have enabled the so-far positive processes of dialogue, peacebuilding, and transitional reform in Yemen in the aftermath of the Arab Spring upheavals. It offers a number of ideas for practical steps that Yemen could take—and that the international community should encourage and support—to achieve greater stability and prevent recurring cycles of violence. USIP is actively engaged in research and programming in Yemen, exploring the prospects for peacebuilding and conflict resolution, and the impact of transition on rule of law and justice concerns.

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[Yemen's multipolarity threatened to tear the country's fragile political fabric apart. A combination of factors enabled Yemen to step back from the brink of civil war.]



## Summary

- As other post–Arab Spring transitions have faltered, Yemen has so far defied expectations, moving from the brink of civil war to a managed transition process, under international mediation, that has largely remained on track.
- At the same time, the uprising of 2011 also brought the country's deeper divisions between its multiple power centers to the surface.
- This multipolarity has been a double-edged sword. On the one hand, it has the potential to tear the country apart. On the other, the balance of weakness and military stalemate between rival factions brought the parties to the negotiating table in 2011.
- Multipolarity has allowed for a unique transition process, including the National Dialogue Conference (NDC) that concluded its work on January 25, 2014. It brought youth, civil society, women, and other traditional outsiders to the bargaining table side by side with traditional elites of the country's rival power centers.
- Whether the negotiated transition will yield sustainable results depends on whether the implementation of the results of the NDC strike a balance between the country's fragmented constituencies.
- Yemeni leadership should establish a mechanism for continued negotiations among southern groups and between the South and the central government to address regional grievances.
- While negotiations between the different power centers must be continued, the key to stability lies in significant government restructuring and reform—some of which has already been agreed upon in the NDC but now must be implemented. In the past, the use of the Yemeni state as a patronage system, poor service delivery, and overly centralized governance have reinforced divisions, feeding instability.
- Resolving these issues will require years, not months, of engagement. A government of technocrats—ideally including some of the NDC's members and/or secretariat—would be best placed to turn the NDC's decisions into action. Since the upcoming constitutional drafting process will inevitably be elite-driven, it is all the more necessary to produce tangible improvements for average Yemenis as swiftly as possible.
- Trust-building measures called for in the NDC will play an important part in transforming Yemen's society. Such measures would include empowering the existing commission for land issues and forced retirees in the South and setting up a commission to address the conflict involving the Houthi group in the northwest.
- Regional and international actors have played an essential supporting role as constructive mediators throughout the transition process. Their maintained engagement is indispensable.



## Introduction

Many factors have been offered to explain the wave of revolts that swept over the Middle East beginning in early 2011, why it happened at that time, and why it all happened so quickly. The widening socioeconomic gap, bad governance, lack of political participation, the explosion of basic food prices, the technological revolution from al-Jazeera to Twitter, and even WikiLeaks have been identified as part of the equation. All of these factors may have played their parts, but it is important to remember that regime change by domestic revolt is not a novelty in the Arab world.<sup>1</sup>

The fourteenth-century scholar known as the father of Arab political thought, Ibn Khaldun, developed a model to explain regime change in the Arab world based on the concept of *'asabiya*, meaning tribal cohesion or solidarity, which determines both the internal cohesion of a ruling clan and the wider support it enjoys among other clans and tribes. Ibn Khaldun's theory hinges on the analysis of the political economy of the Arab states he observed throughout his travels. He noted that the distribution of wealth and resources is key to understanding how dynasties gain and eventually lose the support of other tribes and the population at large. Within the life cycle of any given regime, the dominant group commands a broad and inclusive power base at the beginning of its rule, which erodes over time as the ruling clan (or class) concentrates power and resources toward its inner circle and monopolizes them at the expense of the commonwealth, usually through increased taxation and corruption. This in turn alienates more and more of its subjects and one-time supporters until eventually a rival clan emerges and challenges the unpopular incumbent. In case the challenger succeeds in overthrowing the regime in place, he must build a fresh *'asabiya* among the tribes—usually through redistribution of resources and new patronage networks—to consolidate his power base, at which point the cycle starts anew.

Although much has changed since Ibn Khaldun's time, the *'asabiya* theory remains surprisingly cogent in explaining why Yemen was one of the first countries to rise up in the Arab Spring. At the beginning of his rule, Ali Abdallah Saleh, Yemeni president from 1978 to 2012, strove to establish a broad power base among the country's elites, in particular among the tribes. In Yemen, the ruling class belongs almost entirely to the same tribal confederation, the Hashid, which controls most of the military and tribal militias. Saleh granted the Hashid confederation privileged access to positions of power and wealth but allowed other tribes to benefit as well. Maintaining the façade of a modern republic, Saleh effectively tribalized state institutions by granting tribal leaders privileged access to state resources in various ways, which not only allowed Saleh to consolidate his power base but also enabled the tribal sheikhs to gain disproportionate control over public resources (and to buy vast quantities of weapons).

After unification, Saleh's patronage system allowed for enough political cohesion for him to marginalize and eventually defeat the former southern leader, Ali Salem al-Beidh, his vice president, who had entered the unity deal expecting that it would allow his socialist party to play at least an equal role in the north as well, if not take over completely.<sup>2</sup>

Following his victory over al-Beidh, Saleh strove to reinforce the *'asabiya* of his alliance by generously distributing southern land and government licenses to his allies. As he tried to co-opt his potential rivals, he reserved key military positions for his own clan and, by 2000, began to groom his son as a successor. This policy consolidated his position in terms of controlling command structures but also ended up alienating his allies, not to mention the former elites of the South. Further, the patronage system he set up to maintain his grip on power became so burdensome on the country's limited resources that frustration among the deprived population proceeded to grow across the country. By 2007, a civil protest movement had formed in the

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South, a hard-line Zaidi-Shia group known as the Houthis had taken up arms in the North, and leaders from within Saleh's own Hashid confederation, once a pillar of his regime, were plotting to overthrow him.<sup>3</sup>

Although the first demonstrations in Taiz began the same day that President Ben Ali fled Tunis,<sup>4</sup> the city of Sanaa needed a cue from Cairo.<sup>5</sup> When Tahrir Square erupted in Cairo, the first thing Saleh did was to send his own demonstrators down to Sanaa's Tahrir Square, a central intersection named after the one in Cairo. Yemen's revolutionaries did not hesitate in creating a protest venue of their own near the university campus and calling it Change Square.<sup>6</sup>

When the youth took to the streets in Sanaa demanding a civil state for Yemen, observers both outside and inside the country were taken by surprise. The Youth Movement in Yemen, as all over the Arab Spring, does not figure in Ibn Khaldun's fourteenth-century script—nor for that matter do Facebook, al-Jazeera, or WikiLeaks—but what followed for Yemen does.

The extent to which the *asabiya* underpinning Saleh's rule had eroded became quite visible when more and more of his one-time supporters turned against him. First was the influential al-Ahmar clan, then a few weeks later Saleh's long-time second-in-command, Major General Ali Muhsin, declared that they had, in their words, "joined the revolution."

Just as in Tunisia and Egypt, these defectors from within the ruling class were what prevented the regime from unleashing all its force on the protesters and what mitigated the initial violence. However, their entrée into the conflict and the military stalemate that resulted meant the possibility of civil strife of historic proportions, a prospect that terrified both Yemen's Arab neighbors and the international community, who did not want to see a second failed state on the Gulf of Aden.<sup>7</sup> As each side was preparing for armed conflict, the Gulf Cooperation Council (GCC, made up of Bahrain, Kuwait, Oman, Qatar, Saudi Arabia, and the UAE) presented a plan that would allow for President Saleh to step down and a peaceful transition of power.<sup>8</sup> To resolve the increasingly tense situation, the GCC countries, with the support of the United States and the European Union, presented an initiative in early April 2011 that paved the way to a peaceful and orderly transition of power.

Although Saleh initially accepted the deal, he then repeatedly refused to sign until after serious fighting erupted in Sanaa in late May and an assassination was attempted against him in June. It took several rounds of fighting between May and September and a bloody stalemate between Saleh's troops and the armed wing of the opposition before his General People's Congress party (GPC) and the main opposition parties eventually agreed to hammer out a detailed transition agreement under UN mediation. This agreement allowed Yemen to move from the brink of war to a managed transition process. Given the deep distrust between the parties, this was not a foregone conclusion.

What is even more remarkable is that the transition process also reached out to the opposition that had formed outside the political establishment—most significantly, the movements in the North (the Houthis) and South (al-Hiraak), and the independent protest movement, including civil society organizations, youth, and women. These groups were not represented in the negotiations on the implementation of the GCC initiative, but have taken an active role in successive parts of the transition process, most importantly in the National Dialogue Conference (NDC). The inclusion of these other actors in the NDC is all the more important because these groups represent other competing centers of gravity within Yemen's complex political picture, as will be discussed in greater length later in this report.

The NDC began in March 2013 and was due to last for six months, but missed several deadlines and was officially concluded on January 25, 2014. In addition, several major issues are

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still unresolved, revealing the depth of the divisions brought to the surface by the uprising. It appears that in the post-Arab Spring world, the *ʿasabiyya* model outlined—single-clan rule based largely on patronage—can no longer bridge these divisions and has therefore lost the ability to provide stability even in the short term. An alternative model is urgently needed to resolve the more fundamental issues Yemen faces today and prevent the country from relapsing into a crisis that is likely to be deeper and more severe than ever before. The NDC's outcome provides a useful blueprint for such a model, but all will depend on its successful implementation, which is by no means a foregone conclusion.

## Multipolarity in Yemen

Although a fairly homogenous country in terms of language, ethnicity, religion, and culture, and with hardly any record of sectarian strife, Yemen boasts at least four centers of gravity, not to mention myriad tribal convolutions and regional specificities.<sup>9</sup> Centers of gravity are distinct from political movements or parties. They are instead more like vectors for locating political forces on the spectrum and in particular where constituents will be drawn in times of extreme political polarization, such as a civil war, sometimes overshadowing divisions or alliances that may exist in times of greater stability. They can of course change over time, but do so more slowly than political movements or parties.

A comparative analysis might suggest that this multipolarity would be a source of instability—take, for example, Lebanon and Iraq.<sup>10</sup> In the most recent crisis, however, it was what ultimately led the parties to the bargaining table and has kept them there. The relative balance of power—or in this case weakness—of these competing camps ultimately meant that the parties to the conflict could not outmatch each other on the battlefield and were forced to negotiate.

The first and most obvious one is Sunni political Islam, as manifested through Islamist movements from the Muslim Brotherhood through Salafism all the way to al-Qaeda. Another is the Zaidi Hashemite current that has been increasingly defined as Shia in recent years. On the non-Islamist side, the divide between a tribal North and a postcolonial, postsocialist (though still somewhat tribal) South generates two more distinct centers of gravity.

These four have found expression in the political movements that formed the major blocks within the NDC. A meticulous observer will rightly point to more divisions, which may become more relevant in the future, but these four camps currently dominate political discourse and are the main rallying points for their respective constituencies. Should the transition process fail to produce solutions that address their concerns, these divisions are likely to become more entrenched and to draw the country into a protracted civil conflict.

### *Sunni Islamists*

It is common wisdom that the classical Western left-right dichotomy is not applicable to the Arab world. Instead, the main difference that has come to characterize countries such as Egypt, Tunisia, Turkey, and others is between Islamism and, for lack of a more accurate term, secularism.<sup>11</sup> Although this fault line has been more muted in Yemen than elsewhere, Sunni Islamists unmistakably are a center of gravity to contend with in Yemen's domestic politics.

Sunni Islamists in the region, whose origins go back to the demise of the Ottoman Empire, have been waiting their turn to govern for many decades. The void left behind by the official end of the Islamic Caliphate in 1924 was a source of deep frustration for many Muslims and a clear sign that Islam, not just as a religion, but also as a political ideology, had to be both revived and rede-

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fined.<sup>12</sup> Until the overthrow of Egypt's democratically elected President Mohamed Morsi in July 2013, Sunni Islamists were afloat in most countries of the Arab Spring. In Tunisia, Egypt, Libya, and even relatively stable monarchies like Jordan and Morocco, they have recently won elections.<sup>13</sup>

In Yemen, unlike in most other Arab countries, Sunni Islamists have had well over a decade of experience in politics. The Yemeni Islah (Reform) Party is a collecting basin for a broad range of Sunni Islamists—from moderate Islamic conservatives to hard-core Salafis. Its leadership is pursuing a notably moderate course, unequivocally endorsing the principle of a civil state without shying away from spelling out the principles of good governance and democracy in public. However, they do not seem willing or able to dissociate themselves from the more radical voices inside the party, such as the Salafi cleric Sheikh Abdul-Majid al-Zindani, who is on the UN Sanctions List of individuals associated with al-Qaeda.<sup>14</sup>

The movement was the first party to be founded after the introduction of a pluralistic system following the unity deal in May 1990. Its founder, the powerful tribal leader Abdullah al-Ahmar, who headed the leading clan within the Hashid confederation until his death in 2007, was an ally of President Saleh. Consequently, his party was considered a pillar of the regime for more than a decade after unification. Saleh's right hand, Major General Ali Muhsin, the commander of the First Armored Division, is also associated with Islah.

On the most extreme end of the Sunni Islamist spectrum, Yemen has also become a stronghold for al-Qaeda on the Arabian Peninsula (AQAP), and its local affiliate in the south, known as Ansâr al-Sharia (Supporters of Islamic Law). Another militant Islamist group known as the Jabhat al Nosrah (Front of Supporters [of Allah]), whose ties to AQAP are unclear, has recently emerged in the northern province of Saada.

In the context of the transition, the Sunni Islamists saw themselves as at the forefront of the uprising against Saleh. One of the pioneers of the protest movement, Tawakkul Kerman, who later received the Nobel Peace Prize for her activism, was also a leading Islah member. Other Islah figures belonging to the more traditional elites, such as General Ali Muhsin and the sheikhs of the al-Ahmar clan, also adopted revolutionary rhetoric early on.

As the best organized opposition party across the country, Islah considered itself the natural leader of the revolution and entitled to harvest the fruits of regime change as much as its peers in Egypt and Tunisia. It was soon criticized by other camps for trying to dominate the protest movement. After a national consensus government formed, Islah members were then accused of trying to consolidate their grip on the administration through nepotism and patronage. Vis-à-vis the international community, they have been eager to present themselves as a constructive actor within the transition process.

### ***Northern Non-Islamists***

Although it is as difficult to classify as the title suggests, the second center of gravity of northern non-Islamists is a highly diverse movement whose base ranges from liberals to conservatives, Sunnis to Zaydis, and even includes a non-negligible number of pro-unity southerners. It includes both followers of former president Saleh and elements of the youth movement that sparked the uprising that eventually led to his ouster. Currently the most divided constituency in the Yemeni arena, it is defined less by what it is and more by what it is not: namely, it is opposed to the general precepts and positions of the Sunni and Shia Islamist camps as well as al-Hiraak.

Apart from the rejection of the other centers of gravity, its main mobilizing factor has been patronage rather than any political doctrine. Given its almost thirty-year history as the only ruling party of Yemen, its ability to provide access to positions of power and wealth has always

### Liberal-Islamist Divide

The long-standing conflict between Islamists and liberals across the Middle East has a presence in Yemen. Although its impact was muted at the beginning of the uprising, its recent escalation in the region conditions the readiness of Yemen's conflicting parties to coalesce and confront the perceived threat of a Sunni Islamist takeover.

Perhaps the most significant feeder of this fault line in Yemen's domestic politics is Egypt. When the Muslim Brotherhood won the elections in Egypt, their Yemeni counterparts felt emboldened to the point of believing that power was within their reach as well. In turn, when the Egyptian military took government out of the Muslim Brotherhood's hands again, al-Islah considered the move an attack against itself. Meanwhile, some GPC leaders displayed a triumphalism over the military takeover in Egypt that was equally uncalled for. The extent to which Yemenis overidentified with their respective Egyptian allies is best illustrated by the sit-ins in support of President Morsi in Sanaa and the appearance of Saleh's nephew Yahya, shortly after being removed from his command of the paramilitary Central Security Forces, at an anti-Muslim Brotherhood rally in Cairo. So far, however, all of this has been little more than posturing.

Another pertinent example of this fault line is the conflict in Syria, in which the anti-Assad coalition between moderate and liberal forces (mostly abroad) and hard-line Islamists (mostly inside Syria) has fallen apart. The Yemeni government's official position has gradually moved from being somewhat pro-Assad to being against him, which also reflects the decreasing influence of Assad's allies within the Yemeni government. So far, however, the impact of the Syrian crisis on Yemeni politics has been limited.

been the main source of the GPC's appeal. Consequently, the most threatening aspect of the transition process is the prospect of losing the ability to use patronage, particularly to another competing political force, such as Islah.

The traditional centerpiece of the northern secular camp, the GPC, is undergoing the deepest crisis in its history at the time of writing. Its founding father and chairman of more than thirty years, former president Ali Abdallah Saleh, has become an international pariah yet has maintained a relatively strong position at home. The new president, Abd Rabbuh Mansur Hadi, has not yet been able to assert himself as the party's new leader, nor have other leaders emerged. The main factor that has prevented the party from falling apart seems to be the fear of a Sunni Islamist takeover. This, however, has not prevented the defection of many of its members and the alienation of even more of its sympathizers in the course of the uprising and beyond.

Since the beginning of the uprising, a number of other political parties and movements have emerged from dissenting GPC members. The most prominent of them is the Justice and Building Party led by the influential Sheikh Mohammed Abulohum from the Bakil, Yemen's second most powerful tribal confederation, who combines a strong tribal identity with a progressive political program and a Western education.

Meanwhile, the liberal part of the protest movement remains largely amorphous as a political movement, but manifests itself in a fledgling civil society that often relies on financial support from international donors. A significant number of its members have been promoted to positions of responsibility within the NDC, where independent non-Islamists make up one of the largest contingents, second only to the GPC. Relative to their political influence before the transition process and their lack of organization as a coherent movement, their impact on political decision making in the post-NDC phase is contingent on the extent to which the NDC succeeds in laying the foundation for a more participatory civil state.

### *Zaidis, Hashemites, and the Houthi Movement*

The third center of gravity stems from a Zaidi Hashemite political movement that morphed into an armed rebellion in the north of the country and is referred to as the Houthis, or Ansâr Allah.<sup>15</sup> It is an entirely endogenous phenomenon whose roots go far back in Yemen's history, but it has important regional implications as well.

The word *Hashemite* describes a direct descendant of the Prophet of Islam.<sup>16</sup> Zaidism is one of the two main Islamic sects, or *madhhabs* (schools of Islamic law), that dominate northern Yemen. Both sects, Zaidism and Shafism, date back to the eighth century and the ninth century respectively and make up roughly half of the population in the northern highlands of Yemen, though there are no reliable statistics. Zaidis are generally considered Shia, though their religious jurisprudence is quite similar to some strands of Sunnism, notably the Shafii *madhhab*. Traditionally, the two schools have coexisted peacefully for centuries, reciprocal mosque visits are common, and even intermarriage is not uncommon.

Northern Yemen was ruled by Zaidi Hashemites for roughly a thousand years, until 1962,<sup>17</sup> when the tide of Arab nationalism inspired a republican revolution ideologically and militarily supported by Egypt's Gamal Abdul-Nasr. The former Hashemite ruling class—with the notable exception of the royal family itself—and their supporters were allowed to stay in the country. They remained an integral part of the sociopolitical make-up of Yemen and continued to be revered by Zaidis by virtue of their direct descent from the Prophet of Islam.

Until the mid-1990s, the Hashemites, as a group, kept a relatively low profile in the new Arab Republic of Yemen. However, the spread of radical Salafism in the country sparked the resurgence of a political movement based on a Zaidi-Hashemite identity. Under the presidency of Ali Abdullah Saleh, who is himself a Zaidi but relied heavily on financial support from Saudi Arabia, Salafi activities were allowed to flourish. Radicals like the Salafi cleric Abdul-Majid al-Zindani were even courted to the point of appointing him head of the council of Sunni scholars that still exists today.<sup>18</sup> This development, in addition to the increasingly apparent corruption of the Saleh regime, led to the formation of a movement led by Zaidi Hashemites who openly opposed the spread of Salafism, which they blamed on a conspiracy between Saleh, Saudi Arabia, and the United States. Under the leadership of Hussein Badreddin al-Houthi from Saada, the Believing Youth (*al-shabâb al-mu'minin*), as they called themselves, began engaging in peaceful, but vehemently antiregime, anti-Salafi, and anti-American political protest.

By 2004, their activities met with such repression from the Saleh regime that they began taking up arms. Later, they changed their name to Ansâr Allah (followers or defenders of God) but are still more commonly referred to as Houthis. Between 2004 and 2010, the government in Sanaa waged six military campaigns against the Houthis, turning Saada into one of the most desolate places in the region. Despite killing the movement's founder and bombing Saada's old city to the ground, the military campaigns did not succeed in crushing the Houthi uprising. Instead, the Houthis kept growing stronger. They are now in control of the northern province of Saada and several adjacent territories. More recently, they have expanded their political activities into territories with little or no Zaidi presence, where they have come to be seen as a more viable bulwark against Sunni Islamism than the GPC.

Although the Houthis claim not to aspire to restoring the monarchy, the movement's obvious ideological roots in the pre-revolutionary Imamate make them the subject of much speculation about their alleged hidden agenda. In public, they present themselves as a revolutionary movement aiming at the establishment of a civil state embracing the principles of good governance. A charter of pro-Houthi Zaidi scholars published in 2012 stating that Hashemites are

### Sunni-Shia Conflict, Iran, and the Houthis

In Yemen, sectarian relations have traditionally been peaceful. The coexistence between Zaidi minority and Sunni majority, for example, has been characterized by mutual acceptance. The deepening Sunni-Shia polarization in the region, however, precipitated by the civil war in Iraq after 2003, is having an impact on Yemen as well as on other countries, primarily in the conflict between Islah and the Houthis. This violence has reached alarming levels since 2012. At the time of writing, late 2013, both the Houthis (Ansâr Allah) and Islah regard each other as a greater threat to their political future than the ruling GPC. Despite repeated attempts at mediation between the rival groups, both continue to engage in aggressive rhetoric, frequent shows of strength, and armed clashes throughout the country.

An additional complicating factor to the domestic rivalry is Houthi-Iran relations. Iran is accused of supporting the rebel movement both financially and militarily, though both sides flatly deny this. Ansâr Allah conduct and modus operandi have become conspicuously similar to that of the Lebanese Hezbollah, another Iranian ally in the Arab world. A certain ideological proximity to the Iranian regime is expressed in the remarkably similar slogan: "Death to America, Death to Israel, Curse on the Jews."

It is unclear what influence Iran has on Ansâr Allah decision making. There is no evidence that their relationship is one of either subordination or dependency. Nevertheless, a possible détente between Iran and the international community, especially the United States and Saudi Arabia, might also have a positive effect on relations between the Houthis and the Yemeni government.

better qualified to govern the country and their fierce anti-American and anti-Semitic rhetoric have raised doubts about their true intentions.<sup>19</sup>

The Saada issue remains one of the main stumbling blocks for the success of the transition process. Even though the Houthis participated in the NDC, the fact that they are in de facto military control of a part of the country creates an additional hurdle not easily overcome. Changing the situation on the ground would require the Houthis to allow the state to exercise full control over the territories they now hold, hand over heavy weaponry to the state, and permit the internally displaced population to return to their homes. This will require a great deal of trust-building between the Houthis and state authorities as well as their rivals from Islah. It will also require a durable solution to the fundamental issues that have caused the Houthi rebellion in the first place: a modern civil state that guarantees equal rights for all its citizens and peaceful coexistence between Zaidis and other Islamic sects. However, current indicators are pointing in the other direction—the level of violence between the Houthis and tribes allied with Islah, and between Houthis and Salafi fighters in the North, have escalated dramatically with hundreds of casualties on both sides in the last few months of the NDC alone. A number of fatal attacks against Houthi representatives as well as a recent attack on the secretary-general of al-Islah in the NDC have further undermined trust between the parties.

### *Al-Hiraak, the Southern Movement*

The fourth center of gravity is not governed by age-old sectarian divisions but is instead a result of the more recent geopolitical division of Yemen, as well as developments since unification.

The geographic separation between North and South was initially the result of colonial rule, the Turks dominating the North and the British the South. The frontier was then formalized between the post-Ottoman ruler of North Yemen, Imam Yahya, and the British in the treaty of Sanaa in 1934. Following the revolutions that had established independent republics in both territories during the 1960s, the division was at first maintained, but the idea of Yemeni unity as a first step toward greater Arab unity, in line with the zeitgeist of the time, was very much present in the political discourse, especially in the South. During the Cold War, however, the geographic separation was reinforced by strategic alliances much stronger than the forces of unity. Because the People's Democratic Republic of Yemen was the only true Soviet ally in the Arab World, the Warsaw Pact proceeded to shower it with attention and resources. When it became clear that the Soviet empire was falling apart, South Yemen did not hesitate to rush into unity, which was sealed as early as May 1990.

In the event, however, southerners were ill-fated on two accounts. First, their leader, Ali Salem al-Beidh, dragged them into a union that did not allow for any degree of local self-determination, let alone separation.<sup>20</sup> Second, the new president of united Yemen, Ali Abdallah Saleh, proceeded to politically marginalize al-Beidh by playing off his tribal allies against him, and then came down hard on him when he attempted to withdraw from the agreement in 1994. At the end of a brief war of separation, al-Beidh fled abroad and the southerners were left to face the consequences. Their once proud capital of Aden was pounded by Saleh's air force, their institutions dissolved, their (socialized) lands distributed to Saleh's cronies (including his co-optable rivals), thousands of their officers dismissed, their industrial infrastructure partly dismantled, and many of their public sector jobs given to northerners. Subsequently, their renowned port—once the third largest in the world—was sold out to their main competitor<sup>21</sup> and their main newspaper closed down in 2009. It is therefore no surprise that southerners are highly disillusioned about Yemeni unity.

Nevertheless, it took southerners more than a decade after the civil war of 1994 to form a political protest movement. It came to the fore in 2007, at first demanding the restoration of civil rights and equal citizenship for all southerners. That their calls were not heeded for several years, and in some instances were met with violence, prompted an increasing number of southerners to see the restoration of the state they had voluntarily given up in 1990 as the only way to reclaim their rights.

Ironically, the traditional flag bearer of Yemeni unity before it occurred, the socialist party of South Yemen, formed the backbone of the South's independence movement, known in full as al-Hiraak al-Ganoubi (the Southern Movement). Unlike the Houthis, which is run strictly top-down, al-Hiraak is an amorphous grassroots movement whose main uniting factor is a common experience of disenfranchisement by the North. Its base ranges from frustrated, jobless youth to frustrated, jobless former officers of the southern army forced into early retirement after the civil war of 1994.

Meanwhile, considering al-Hiraak as one center of gravity should not belie the divisions within the movement. Historically, at least four distinct constituencies within the South also have a long record of discord and even armed conflict.<sup>22</sup> As a result, al-Hiraak has not been able to present a unified leadership. Its members are, however, united in their demand for the reassertion of the right to self-determination for the south and the reestablishment of South Yemen. International calls to preserve Yemeni unity and for participation in the National Dialogue have largely been falling on deaf ears among southern activists. Instead, myth-building about the pre-unity situation in the south and a lack of realism on the part of many southern leaders have made matters worse, creating an almost insurmountable gap of perception between the public in the North and the South.

At this point, it is hard to conceive a comprehensive solution to the southern issue that would be acceptable to both sides in the short term. It has become the most significant roadblock in the NDC and in the transition process as a whole. Nonetheless, resolving it will be fundamental to achieving a stable political balance. The Agreement on a Just Solution that was signed between the NDC parties in late December 2013 offers a path forward. However, southerners will still need some convincing that the preservation of unity is in their interest. The only way to achieve this would be a government that delivers good governance and economic opportunities and takes serious steps to address some of the specific southern grievances.<sup>23</sup> The conclusions of the NDC reiterate the need to address these grievances, but the NDC's legitimacy itself nevertheless remains highly contested in the south.

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***The southern issue has become the most significant roadblock in the NDC and in the transition process as a whole.***

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### **From Balance of Weakness to Mediation**

As the introduction to Ibn Khaldun's theory of political development suggests, Yemeni regimes have in the past been able to overcome this multipolarity by co-opting key clans and elements of the different centers of gravity to muster their support and thus strengthen their own *'asabiya*. When President Saleh's regime collapsed in 2011, however, a dilemma presented itself: no ready successor or party emerged with enough strength to form a new *'asabiya*. Instead, the ongoing struggle between the two central political parties—the GPC and the Islah-led opposition (the core of the northern non-Islamist and the Sunni Islamist centers of gravity respectively)—“allowed the two opposition movements in the north and the south of the country to gain ground politically and, for the Houthis, militarily. Yemen's multipolarity, exacerbated by a host of long-neglected grievances, threatened to tear the country's fragile political fabric apart.

A combination of factors enabled Yemen to step back from the brink of civil war. First, the military and political stalemate that ensued a few months into the uprising convinced the warring factions that none of them could win by going on the offensive. Second, Yemen's tradition of accepting third-party mediation allowed them to turn to outside actors equally concerned about the possible implosion of Yemen. Third, the international community and Yemen's regional power brokers came together and agreed on the parameters of a transition plan early on and allowed the UN to act as a mediator. This was partly because Ali Abdallah Saleh had failed to forge strategic alliances the way that Bashar al-Assad of Syria had. Moreover, given Yemen's relative geopolitical insignificance due to its peripheral position and overall poverty, the international community saw more to lose in a failed Yemen than to gain in backing one side against another.

### ***From Popular Uprising to Elite Power Struggle***

Most of the revolutionaries who set up the first protest tents in Sanaa were nonpartisan and often liberal-minded idealists from a social class and generation whose political aspirations were informed by contacts with the outside world and who used modern technology to mobilize. It took the established opposition, under the de facto leadership of Islah, several weeks to grasp that this movement constituted a real opportunity to topple a regime that had managed to suppress, co-opt, or otherwise outwit them for decades. Once they realized what was happening, the parties representing the three centers of gravity opposed to the regime—Sunni Islamists, Houthi (Ansâr Allah) rebels, and al-Hiraak in the South—joined, and subsequently sought to dominate, Change Square in Sanaa.<sup>24</sup> What had begun as a small youth protest was taking the shape of a multipartisan uprising against the regime—and would soon stir up the deeper divisions of the Yemeni political arena.

For a brief moment it seemed as if the three opposing centers of gravity and even many northern non-Islamists (both dissenters within the GPC and independent liberals) might come together to overthrow a regime that had reached the end of its shelf life. However, it did not take long before they were pulled apart again.

Following the massacre committed by regime snipers on what became known as the Friday of Dignity (*jum'at al-karâma*), March 18, 2011, General Ali Muhsin of the First Armored Division and a number of powerful sheikhs of the al-Ahmar clan—both former supporters of the Saleh regime but also prominent Islah leaders—declared that they had joined the revolution. That Change Square fell under the “protection” of such controversial figures, alienated both the al-Hiraak and the Houthis, as well as many of the liberal pioneers of the protest movement, who felt that they were being increasingly marginalized. The Houthis remained in Change Square for lack of a viable alternative, but al-Hiraak began to stage separate protests of their own.

The looming escalation brought the international community to the scene early on. By mid-April, the Gulf Cooperation Council had presented a transition plan that offered Saleh domestic immunity from prosecution in exchange for his resignation. According to the initiative, Saleh would form a unity government led by the opposition, hand power over to his deputy after thirty days, and formally step down after ninety days.

Saleh signaled his readiness to accept the deal but, as mentioned earlier, backed down repeatedly from actually signing it. By the third time around, in late May, the armed wing of the opposition had seen enough, and serious fighting ensued between the tribal militias of the Al-Ahmar clan and the First Armored Division under Ali Muhsin on the one hand, and the troops loyal to Saleh on the other, notably the Republican Guards under Saleh's son, Ahmed Ali, and the Central Security Forces under his nephew, Yahya Saleh. Both sides proceeded to use heavy infantry weapons, including rocket-propelled grenades (RPGs) and mortars, in the midst of the capital, causing substantial destruction in some parts of the city.

On June 3, 2011, a bomb exploded inside the presidential compound mosque during prayer, killing several of Saleh's guards and severely injuring the president himself and some of his associates. Before being flown out to Saudi Arabia for treatment, Saleh ordered his son and his associates not to wage all-out war on his rivals, Ali Muhsin and the Al-Ahmars, whom he suspected of having orchestrated the attempt on his life.<sup>25</sup>

Meanwhile, the peripheral opposition movements were able to hold their own, complicating the potential for a prolonged military standoff. Houthi rebels had seized the moment to consolidate their sway over parts of the North. By mid-2011, the Houthis were in de facto control of the province of Saada and parts of neighboring governorates and reported to be in possession of tens of thousands of weapons, including dozens of tanks, myriad RPGs, and several batteries of anti-aircraft artillery. Additionally, Abdulmalik al-Houthi, who came to be recognized as their spiritual and political leader by many Zaidis throughout the country after the killing of his older brother, Hussein Badreddin al-Houthi, was (and still is) able to organize mass rallies even in the capital.

In the South, al-Hiraak became increasingly disillusioned by the fact that the popular protest movement in Sanaa had been completely overshadowed by a fratricidal struggle between rival wings of the ruling Hashid confederation, to which both the Al-Ahmars and the Sanhan tribe (of Ali Muhsin and the Saleh clan) belong. Consequently, the more radical elements within al-Hiraak that had been calling for self-determination and separation from the North since 2009 swiftly became the dominant voices.

Fighting between antigovernment militias as well as renegade army units and troops loyal to Saleh spread through various parts of the country, but full-scale civil war did not break out. The protest movement, which continued to hold mass rallies in Sanaa, Taiz, and other urban centers, adhered to the principle of nonviolence but was now limited to areas under the control of Ali Mushin's First Armored Division. However, public opinion was much less enthusiastic about the uprising than previously, taking the violent clashes as evidence that the protest movement was moving from a popular revolution to an elite power struggle.<sup>26</sup> The uneasy coalition of liberal revolutionaries, (Sunni) Islamist opposition, Zaidi rebels, and al-Hiraak was effectively falling apart.

The result of this development was a military and political standoff throughout the country. Although Saleh's troops had the superior fighting power, they clearly faced opposition from large segments of the population and would have been unable to bring the country under control again. Meanwhile, the Houthis were expanding their influence in the North and the security situation in the South was in free fall as al-Qaeda affiliates gained control in territories close to Aden.<sup>27</sup> By late summer 2011, the buzzword of the day in Sanaa's political circles was the balance of weakness that months of military face-off had revealed. During the late summer and fall of 2011, both sides came to realize that the only way forward was to accept mediation from outside. In looking for a way to do this, the different Yemeni political parties found a ready midwife in the international community.

### *Role of the International Community*

Because of its geographic location and political position, Yemen has always been somewhat buffered from regional pressures when compared with some of the other Arab Spring countries. During the 2011 crisis, the uniting factor for the GCC, the five permanent members of the UN Security Council (China, France, Russia, the United Kingdom, and the United States), and other relevant actors was to prevent the Yemeni state from collapsing altogether. That Yemen was seen as a potential threat by everyone but was not as highly contested as other regional playing fields presented an opportunity for the UN to live up to its vocation as an international broker for peace.

One of the dominant motivations for the international community was the potent transnational terrorist threat in Yemen. Al-Qaeda on the Arabian Peninsula is currently considered the most active branch of the international terrorist network, and Yemen is its main stronghold. The instability produced in 2011 threatened to allow the threat from militant extremism to metastasize much as it had in Afghanistan in the 1990s. At the height of the revolution, when the Saleh regime was struggling for survival, Ansâr al-Sharia seized the opportunity to take control of the southern province of Abyan. According to credible sources, their advance was even facilitated by the retreat of army units loyal to President Saleh, who left behind substantial stockpiles of weapons and ammunition including tanks, RPGs, and mortars.<sup>28</sup> The threat that al-Qaeda would have the incubator of a failed state undoubtedly motivated many in the international community to prioritize the stability of Yemen. Apprehensions about the security of global maritime trade, a third of which passes through the Bab al-Mandab (a strait on the Arabian Peninsula between the Red Sea and the Gulf of Aden), also played a role. Given the relative unimportance of Yemen on other fault lines or main strategic concerns, these concerns have so far trumped other interests that might have pulled apart the international consensus that has so far been an important driver in Yemen's constructive transition process.

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As important as the international community's willingness to play a positive mediating role was Yemenis' readiness to accept outside advice. At the height of the 2011 crisis, when the main political groups and forces had reached a stalemate, the diplomatic missions of the GCC, the EU, and the UN Security Council were closely collaborating to bring the sides together. For their part, both the Joint Meeting Parties (JMP, a coalition of opposition parties) and pragmatists within Saleh's camp were eager to find a negotiated solution and looked towards these international actors for mediation and support. Saleh himself, on the other hand, was less committed to a deal that would ultimately result in his ouster. It took significant pressure—including the threat of targeted sanctions—from the Security Council, the GCC, and the EU to eventually bring about the necessary concessions.

In one sense, Saleh's delaying tactics turned out to be a blessing in disguise. They opened the way for serious direct talks between moderate leaders of the two main camps, the GPC and the JMP, brokered by Jamal Benomar, the UN Secretary General's Special Adviser on Yemen, that resulted in a much more detailed implementing plan than provided by the GCC initiative. By late November, a three-thousand-word document was agreed to that laid out all the steps of the two-year transition process in some detail, including preparations for the NDC.

On November 23, 2011, Saleh and the opposition parties signed the GCC Initiative and its implementing mechanism in Riyadh, which included provisions for an amnesty law for Saleh and his associates; presidential elections in February 2012 (in which then vice president Hadi was elected without opposition) and the formation of a government of national unity; a two-year transition period to include a six-month NDC, on the basis of which a new constitution would be drafted within three months, to be subsequently endorsed by a referendum; and finally a new round of parliamentary and possibly presidential elections.

It was no mean feat to get the warring factions in Sanaa to agree to a constitutional process on the basis of a comprehensive national dialogue that would also include the extraparliamentary opposition forces (Houthis, al-Hiraak, protest movement) that had so far been excluded from the political process. The transition agreement has thus created a framework that would allow all of Yemen's centers of gravity to actively take part in reshaping the country. It has also given the nonpartisan progressive elements, including youth, women, and civil society, an unprecedented role in the political process.

Although Yemen continues to be plagued by a number of parallel crises that often reinforce each other, and the forces of inertia remain strong, the political process has by and large remained on track. The international community played an important role in keeping the sides at the table, often simply by offering an unbiased outside perspective. The UN, United States, EU, and some EU member states also offered technical expertise to support the NDC and the constitutional process. Several times, UN Special Adviser Benomar was asked to provide bridging proposals to resolve deadlocks in the negotiations.

President Hadi, fully aware of his limitations in terms of control over the military and of the weakness of the state as a whole, has been relying heavily on the international community to support his decisions as he tries to chip away at the power base of Yemen's traditional oligarchs—the Salehs, the al-Ahmars, and Ali Muhsin. The latter, in turn, remain so distrustful of each other that they have, albeit grudgingly, accepted every major decision that Hadi has imposed on them so far. Thus, Yemen's multipolarity and its resulting balance of weakness have been keeping various political actors in check.

The NDC itself, the centerpiece of the transition process, was delayed several times, mainly due to the difficulty of achieving adequate representation of al-Hiraak. To overcome this hurdle, the technical preparatory committee for the NDC appointed by President Hadi in July 2012

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***Yemen's multipolarity and its resulting balance of weakness have been keeping various political actors in check.***

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presented a list of twenty points for confidence-building measures toward southerners as well as toward the Houthi movement. Of these, only very few were implemented by the time the NDC finally got off the ground on March 18, 2013. Despite the fact that half of all participants are southerners, major constituencies in the South have remained opposed to the NDC. In addition, Houthi participation has been overshadowed by heavy clashes between Houthi forces and Sunni Islamist militants in the North as well as several fatal attacks on Houthi NDC representatives in Sanaa. The Houthis have responded to these attacks with temporary withdrawals from the NDC. Despite all this, the NDC was finally concluded in January 2014 without, however, resolving some of these core issues.

## **From Transition to Transformation?**

Although the Yemeni transition has both achieved the Herculean task of averting a civil war and created what is inarguably the most inclusive political negotiation process in Yemen's modern history, it has not been able to overcome some of the immediate road blocks and is currently at risk of running aground entirely despite the formal conclusion of the NDC. Nor has it even begun to seriously address the longer-term structural reforms necessary to reverse the negative trajectory that Yemen has been on for many years. Nepotism and corruption remain unabated. The humanitarian situation has worsened with now more than ten million Yemenis being food insecure, thirteen million without access to clean water and poverty and more than two hundred thousand internally displaced persons still unable to return to their homes.<sup>29</sup> That large parts of the Yemeni population have so far not witnessed any tangible improvement of their economic situation is a major liability for the success of the transition process.

Although President Hadi has prioritized countering the threat from AQAP, the network has repeatedly managed to regroup and is still capable of striking almost anywhere in the country.<sup>30</sup> Its continuing strength is a significant threat to the fragile transition process. Not only does this situation undermine the public's confidence in the interim government to deliver better results than its predecessors, or even to hold the country together, it also hampers the ability (and readiness) of international actors to place their personnel in harm's way to support the transition process.

The list of challenges Yemen faces in the years to come is long, and dealing with all of them would go far beyond the scope of this paper. The following recommendations focus on some of the fundamental issues that are linked, directly or indirectly, to the mismanagement of the country's multipolarity. The mismanagement of Yemen's diverse constituencies has reinforced centrifugal tendencies of Yemen's centers of gravity, threatening to tear the country apart.

### ***Immediate Roadblocks to the Transition Process***

Two immediate roadblocks within the transition phase stem from the historic divisions in Yemen's multipolar political environment: the southern issue and the Houthi-Saada issue. Because these are such fundamental schisms, it has been difficult to resolve them within the reach of the NDC. The solution requires years rather than months of negotiation. An important first step has been made by concluding the NDC and laying the groundwork for the next stages. Because these issues could not be resolved within the NDC, negotiations on the final status of South Yemen as well as to resolve the Houthi issue can and must continue during the next phase following the NDC. A Saada commission should be established, consisting of government officials, representatives of both Ansâr Allah and Islah, and tribal sheikhs and religious scholars of all sects from Saada and surrounding areas.

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***The government of Yemen should empower the existing commissions for land issues and retirees as a concrete trust-building measure for the South.***

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In both cases, continuing negotiations would be more effective if commitments were backed by trust-building steps and tangible progress. For example, the government of Yemen should empower the existing commissions for land issues and retirees as a concrete trust-building measure for the South. The substantial financial support announced by Qatar to this end (\$350 million) could prove very helpful in achieving it.

These continued efforts should take place alongside a continued transition process, more accurately a transformation process, in that it should focus more on the deeper institutional and structural reforms needed. As noted earlier, what may be ultimately persuasive to southerners and to the Houthis is a functioning state, with good governance and rights protection for all, including those groups outside the main two political blocks, the GPC and the JMP. Despite being ultimately a long-term goal, necessary reform must begin now. The NDC has developed a number of reform ideas that, if implemented thoroughly, could mean a course change from the negative trajectory of recent decades. They are not only crucial to addressing the grievances of southerners and Houthis, but would also enable the government to better respond to the needs of its citizens at large. Implementing these administrative reforms swiftly, even if more immediate political issues remain unresolved, is crucial.

According to the GCC agreement, the NDC conclusions will feed into a constitution drafting phase. Further political negotiations in a smaller format than the NDC will be required to hammer out the new constitution. Meanwhile, it is equally crucial to form a technocratic government tasked to implement the reforms agreed on by the NDC. Such a government should be based on merit to the greatest extent possible and avoid partisan affiliation while being acceptable to all sides. The creation of an independent NDC secretariat and its performance has proved that this is possible. The NDC concluding documents lay the groundwork for such reforms and call on President Hadi to “exercise his constitutional rights to make changes to the government in such a way as to ensure the realization of efficiency, integrity and national participation.”<sup>31</sup>

### ***Structural Reforms and Weak Institutions***

To manage its multipolarity sustainably in the long term, Yemen must move from transition to transformation. Rather than balancing out the interests of Yemen’s different constituencies, previous leadership reinforced historic divisions by using government institutions as tools of patronage and for political control, making existing differences more contentious and exacerbating corruption.<sup>32</sup>

Decades of nepotism also eroded state institutions. Possibly the main reason why so many Yemeni were alienated from the central authority and drawn toward their respective centers of gravity was that the Saleh state had failed to deliver the services citizens expected from their government. Resolving this failure will require long-term institutional reforms and greater attention to creating and enforcing institutional checks and balances through an independent judiciary and watchdog mechanisms such as the Supreme National Authority for Combating Corruption (SNACC) and the Central Organization for Control and Auditing (COCA). Greater accountability over how government officials are appointed, whether by reviewing recruitment processes or considering an automatic rotation and retirement system for both military and civil leadership positions, would also help prevent personal fiefdoms and the entrenchment of corruption.

Despite the fact that Yemen is de facto a highly decentralized country with distinct regional identities, state resources and decision making are primarily in the hands of the government in Sanaa, where they have been spent in a highly unequal fashion favoring some constituencies over others. This disparity has caused much disillusionment, leading to the emergence of peripheral op-

position groups such as al-Hiraak and the Houthis as well as a general discontent with the central government in various other parts of the country (such as the western coastal plain of the Tihama, the industrial city of Taiz, and the eastern province of Hadhramaut). As a result, the central government yields limited control over many parts of the country and has lost it almost completely over others. The need is therefore urgent for a new contract between the capital and the periphery that allows for an orderly decentralization of power and resources in return for universal recognition of the central state.

The NDC and the subsequent “Regions Defining Committee” agreed on a federal system of six regions even if the final structure of the state remains to be negotiated in detail during the constitution-drafting phase. Meanwhile, local power centers must be given incentives to play a constructive role in the transformation process by devolving responsibilities to the local level wherever feasible and appropriate.

## Policy Recommendations

A combination of greater decentralization of the Yemeni state and stronger checks and balances within it would give space for more functional institutions to develop. This in turn would help Yemen achieve greater stability and prevent recurring cycles of violence. The NDC has made a host of decisions that, if implemented thoroughly, would mean a sea change for Yemen going forward. The following are points that appear particularly urgent to the Yemeni leadership:

- Form a technocratic government as laid out in the NDC’s concluding document—ideally including some of the NDC’s members and/or secretariat—tasked with implementing the reforms agreed on by the NDC. These will include conclusions related to decentralization, reforming weak institutions, and addressing patronage systems, among others.
- Establish a mechanism that will allow for a continued negotiation on the southern issue both among southerners and between the South and the central government. This depends most on southern leadership’s willingness to seize the opportunity offered by the transition to constructively negotiate southern grievances, rather than the current all-or-nothing approach.
- Couple continuing negotiations with serious trust-building measures as stipulated by the NDC concluding document. This would include implementing the twenty points recommended by the NDC preparatory committee as well as empowering the existing commission for land issues and forced retirees in the South.
- Establish a Saada commission tasked with addressing both the root causes of the Houthi conflict, developing trust-building measures, overseeing ceasefires, and developing ways to ensure peaceful coexistence between *madhhabs*. This will require meaningful constructive engagement not only from the Yemeni government, but also from Islah and Ansâr Allah.

The international community can play a significant role in promoting these reforms:

- Continue to support the transition process through mediation, technical support and development cooperation, taking into account a deteriorating security environment.
- Encourage the formation of a technocratic government during the next stages of the transition process. This would be facilitated by technical and development support that would help realize the administrative reforms already suggested in the NDC concluding document.

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## Notes

1. The author expresses his deepest appreciation to Gabriele vom Bruck (SOAS), April Alley (ICG), Oliver Wils (Berghof Foundation), and Abdulghani al-Eryani for their valuable insights as well as to the USIP Rule of Law Center for institutional support and to Erica Gaston (USIP) for her vital input and support throughout.
2. Saleh's party and his then-ally, the Islamist Islah party founded by a prominent contingent of the Hashid confederation, the al-Ahmars, won three-quarters of the vote. Al-Beidh and the Socialists had completely underestimated the power of the Hashid tribal cohesion in the populous North, or at least overestimated the appeal of their own ideology. Moreover, the support the Socialists enjoyed in the North was largely erased by the first-past-the-post electoral system in place. In the South, tribal influence had been effectively reined in, partly due to the urbanization and civil administration the British had left behind in Aden, and partly due to drastic and sometimes brutal measures taken by the Socialist rulers during the 1960s and 1970s with support from the Soviet Union and its allies. Realizing their blunder, the Socialists tried to reverse history by (re-)declaring independence, only to be crushed by Saleh's army and tribal militias in the 1994 civil war.
3. Hamid al-Ahmar's plot against Saleh is documented in a cable by the U.S. Embassy in Sanaa in 2006 released by WikiLeaks in 2010 ("Cable 06SANAA1359, Hameed al-Ahmar: Yemen's Next Kingmaker?" May 22, 2006, Ref. ID 06SANAA1359, <http://wikileaks.org/cable/2006/05/06SANAA1359.html>).
4. Zeen al-Abedeem Ben Ali was president of Tunisia from 1987 to 2011. He fled Tunis on January 14, 2011, in the midst of mass protests calling for his ouster.
5. Historically, Egypt has been Yemen's prime political and cultural reference point. After the northern civil war (1962–1967), the Yemeni military and security services as well as its political system were based on the Egyptian model, Yemeni students were taught by Egyptian teachers and television programs dominated by Egyptian shows and movies. Today, Cairo is the first port of call to the outside world for Yemeni travelers, partly because of visa restrictions imposed by Yemen's GCC neighbors.
6. Tahrir (liberation) and taghir (change) are phonetically similar in Arabic.
7. Already an AQAP stronghold, a failed Yemen could become a major launching ground for international terrorism and high-sea piracy. About one-third of international maritime trade runs through the Bab al-Mandab. Piracy originating from both shores of the Gulf of Aden, that is, Somalia and Yemen, might make the protection of commercial vessels much more costly than it already is.
8. Qatar later withdrew its support for the initiative. Its embassy was evacuated in March 2011 and only reopened a year later after the initiative had been signed. Bahrain does not have a permanent presence in Yemen.
9. The focus on these four centers of political gravity should not hide the fact that Yemen displays several more layers of complexity that are not fully reflected in this simplified model. For a further discussion of the regional geopolitics, particularly between the highland and coastal regions, see Stephen W. Day, *Regionalism and Rebellion in Yemen* (Cambridge University Press, 2012). For an historic overview of Yemen's tribal politics, see Paul Dresch, *Tribes, Government and History in Yemen* (Oxford University Press, 1993).
10. Iraq has three clearly distinguishable centers of gravity (Kurdish, Sunni, and Shia). Lebanon has at least four, along sectarian lines (Christian, Druze, Sunni, and Shia), and the secular trend is severely weakened as a result. The Palestinian, Syrian, and Israeli factors do not constitute centers of gravity for Lebanon in their own right, but undoubtedly contribute to the complexity of the situation.
11. The term secularism (*almaaniya* in Arabic) has acquired a negative connotation over decades of inversed Kulturkampf that falsely equates the separation of religion and politics with enmity to Islam or, even worse, atheism. Consequently, most Arabs are reluctant to refer to themselves as seculars.
12. From the end of the 1920s, the Muslim Brotherhood emerged in Egypt as the champion of post-Caliphate political Islam. In Yemen, the Muslim Brotherhood began to establish itself as a political movement in the 1940s. The following decades, however, saw the rise and fall of military regimes inspired by third-world socialism, during which Islamist activism was often a ticket to jail. In 1967, Arab socialism suffered a blow from which it never recovered when the armies of three Arab countries and their supporters were defeated by Israel in what became known as the Six Day War and large parts of their territory were occupied. Other factors, such as the anti-Soviet uprising in Afghanistan, which served as a melting pot and breeding ground for militant Islamists from across the Arab world, as well as the end of the Cold War helped establish political Islam as the only viable political force to replace the remnants of Arab postsocialist regimes. Because they were banned from overt political activity in most Arab states, Islamists' strategy has been to reach the hearts and minds of the deprived masses. Islamist charitable organizations easily found a niche in the increasingly corrupt and failing postsocialist states by providing basic services to their rapidly growing populations.
13. The first Islamist election victory occurred in Algeria in 1991, but was followed by a government crackdown that effectively cancelled the election results. The Hamas victory in the Palestinian Legislative elections of 2006 brought about an Islamist government at first, but eventually resulted in the political split between the Hamas-dominated Gaza Strip and the West Bank leadership under Fatah.

14. UN Security Council, "Al-Qaida Sanctions List," December 4, 2013, <http://www.un.org/sc/committees/1267/pdf/AQList.pdf>.
15. It should be noted that the Houthi movement faces opposition from among Zaidis and Hashemites throughout the country and represents only a fraction of these two groups.
16. The term originates from Prophet Mohammed's tribe, the Bani Hashem. Hashemites are also known as Sherifs and Sayyids in different parts of the Muslim world. Hashemites belong to different sects of Islam but are particularly revered among the Shia, who consider direct lineage to the Prophet a prerequisite for legitimate government.
17. Hashemite rule was interspersed by Sunni dynasties, such as the Sulayhid (1047–1138) and the Rasulid dynasties (1229–1454), as well as the Ottomans, who ruled over large parts of northern Yemen several times between the sixteenth and the twentieth centuries. None of these rulers, however, was able to establish complete control over the northern highlands, where the succession of Zaidi Imams remained unbroken until 1962, and in theory remains so to this day.
18. The spread of Salafism in Yemen was both directly and indirectly supported by Saudi Arabia. One key event that still reverberates in Yemen was the failed siege of the Grand Mosque of Mecca by radical Salafis in 1979. Although the perpetrators of the attack were executed, one of their spiritual fathers, Muqbil bin Hadi al-Wade'i, was allowed to return to his native town of Dammaj in northern Yemen, only a few miles southeast of the city of Saada—in the heartland of Zaidism. Subsequently, he was even provided with the funds to establish a religious school that, until this day, indoctrinates thousands of foreign students with a radical form of Salafism that considers Zaidis to be infidels. The Dammaj center is just one of many established throughout Yemen in recent decades. In January 2014, it was finally evacuated after months of heavy fighting between Houthis and Salafis. The rise of radical Salafism was reinforced by the return of Mujahedin from the anti-Soviet insurgency in Afghanistan in the late 1980s, many of whom had been recruited by al-Zindani.
19. The indications as to what role their current leader, Abdulmalik, claims for himself in a future Yemen are contradictory. Although he does not officially claim the title of imam of Yemen, some independent Yemeni scholars claim that he is part of a lineage unofficially recognized as the postrevolutionary imams within parts of the Zaidi population.
20. Formally, al-Beidh was secretary-general of the Socialist Party, not president. Like in many other socialist countries, this position endowed him with more power than any formal state office. The unification agreement negotiated exclusively between al-Beidh and Saleh barely covers two pages.
21. In 2008, Dubai Ports World signed a joint venture leasehold agreement with the Yemeni authorities to run the container port of Aden through a subsidiary, Dubai Ports International. The Dubai government-owned company also runs the port of Djibouti, which is in direct competition with Aden given its geographic proximity on the Bab al-Mandab. It has been assumed that Dubai Ports World would have little commercial interest in developing the port of Aden at the expense of Djibouti and Djidda, which it also administers.
22. The two main contestants are the Tughma, whose base is in the southwestern provinces of Lahj and Dhale'a and who form the most radical wing of al-Hiraak, and the Zumra, whose strongholds are Abyan and Shabwa and who are close to President Hadi. Though their origins go back to colonial times, Tughma and Zumra only emerged as political formations in the run-up to the 1986 civil war in the People's Democratic Republic of (South) Yemen between supporters of incumbent Ali Nasir Mohammed (Zumra) and former People's Democratic Republic of Yemen president Abdul-Fattah Isma'il (Tughma), who had been unseated by Ali Nasir Mohammed in 1980. The civil war led to the ouster of Ali Nasir Mohammed and a number of his supporters, among them the current interim president of united Yemen. In addition, both the city of Aden, a former British crown colony, and the vast eastern province of Hadhramaut boast a strong local identity of their own and often have views quite different from the mainstream of al-Hiraak.
23. For a more in-depth analysis of the southern issue and recommendations on how to address it, see "Yemen's Southern Question: Avoiding a Breakdown," Middle East Report no. 145, International Crisis Group, September 2013, <http://reliefweb.int/sites/reliefweb.int/files/resources/yemen-s-southern-question-avoiding-a-breakdown.pdf>.
24. The phrase Change Square is generic here and refers also to the protest squares in other major cities, where they sometimes had different names, including in Aden and other southern governorates. In the North, al-Hiraak was absent, as were the Houthis in the South. Sunni Islamists were represented throughout the country.
25. This account of events has been confirmed by several independent sources present at the time.
26. Opinion polls conducted by the Yemen Polling Center in the summer of 2011, but never published, showed that public opinion was growing increasingly frustrated with both the opposition and Saleh's camp.
27. Many Yemenis argue that the deterioration of the security situation in the South was orchestrated by Saleh in an attempt to allow for a political comeback at a later stage, but these allegations have been overtaken by events.

28. A list of the spoils of war was published by Ansâr al-Sharia in the summer of 2011. The former governor of Abyan, who had fled to Aden, later testified in a press interview that these weapons were left behind deliberately, citing orders given by associates of President Saleh. The commander of a mechanized brigade who was under siege by Ansâr al-Sharia in Abyan's capital Zinjibar for several months reported that Saleh loyalists were refusing orders to send relief troops. Sources close to President Hadi confirmed these reports.
29. For further information on the current humanitarian situation in Yemen, see UN OCHA's Yemen Humanitarian Response Plan, [www.unocha.org/ocha2012-13/yemen](http://www.unocha.org/ocha2012-13/yemen).
30. As late as April 2013, Ansâr al-Sharia succeeded in taking over several small towns and villages in the eastern province of Hadhramaut. An attack on the Ministry of Defense in Sanaa on December 5, 2013, which lasted for more than twelve hours and caused several dozen casualties, testifies to the operational capacity AQAP has against even the most sensitive parts of the government security infrastructure. In addition, AQAP has entered the kidnapping business and is known to have several cells operating in the capital with the objective of abducting Western foreigners for ransom. Whether or not AQAP has adopted a new policy of killing Western foreigners is yet unclear as it has not claimed responsibility for killings so far.
31. National Dialogue Conference, 2013–2014, "Final Communiqué of the National Dialogue Conference," at 293.
32. For a more in-depth discussion of the detrimental effects of corruption on the political fabric of Yemen, Ginny Hill, Peter Salisbury, Léonie Northedge, and Jane Kinninmont, "Yemen: Corruption, Capital Flight and Global Drivers of Conflict," Chatham House, September 2013, [www.chathamhouse.org/sites/default/files/public/Research/Middle%20East/0913r\\_yemen.pdf](http://www.chathamhouse.org/sites/default/files/public/Research/Middle%20East/0913r_yemen.pdf). It is currently a common belief, especially among young Yemenis, that the only way to find a decent government job is by either belonging to a political party or by having personal or family connections, preferably both. This undermines both their aspiration to improve their skills and the quality and credibility of the public sector.



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The transition process in Yemen since the Arab Spring has defied expectations. The country moved from the brink of civil war to a managed transition process under international mediation that has largely remained on track despite repeated setbacks and delays. What has enabled this is a combination of a domestic balance of weakness and concerted international mediation efforts. Yemen's multipolarity, however, threatens to undo the achievements made and tear the country apart, because major challenges—from a dismal security and humanitarian situation to questions of statehood—remain unresolved.

## Related Links

- *Transitional Justice in Balance: Comparing Processes, Weighing Efficacy* by Tricia D. Olsen, Leigh A. Payne, and Andrew G. Reiter (USIP Press, 2010)
- *Waiting for Change: The Impact of Transition on Local Justice and Security in Yemen* by Erica Gaston and Nadwa al-Dawsar (Peaceworks, April 2013)
- *Guide for Participants in Peace, Stability, and Relief Operations* by Robert M. Perito (USIP Press, 2010)
- *Security Sector Transformation in the Arab Awakening* by Donald J. Planty (Special Report, September 2012)
- *Security Sector Transformation in North Africa and the Middle East* by Mark Sedra (Special Report, November 2011)
- *NGOs and Nonstate Armed Actors: Improving Compliance with International Norms* by Claudia Hofmann and Ulrich Schneckener (Special Report, July 2011)

