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# Yemen Between Revolution and Counter-Terrorism

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## Recommended Citation

Carapico, Sheila. "Yemen Between Revolution and Counter-Terrorism." In *Why Yemen Matters: A Society in Transition*, edited by Helen Lackner, 29-49. London: Saqi Books, 2014.

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## CHAPTER ONE

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# YEMEN BETWEEN REVOLUTION AND COUNTER-TERRORISM

*Sheila Carapico*

YEMEN'S LAYERED AND COMPLEX dialectics pit twenty-first-century optimism against twentieth-century cynicism. A struggle is unfolding between, on the one hand, the demographic majority in the most populous corner of the Arabian peninsula and, on the other, entrenched elites from a bygone era, anachronistic neighbouring gerontocracies and post-9/11 American imperialism. Aspirations of the forward-looking youth are thwarted not only by an intransigent domestic ruling class seeking to preserve the status quo, but also by the larger context of the outmoded Saudi-American-GCC 'stability' pact. Neither the unarmed movement for domestic political change – blessed with many strong personalities but no overall leader – nor the armed conflicts within Yemeni borders (the Huthi rebellion, al-Qa'ida jihadis, American and sometimes Saudi airstrikes, militant elements of the southern Hiraak, and battles between rival elements in the armed forces) can be fully understood in purely endogenous terms. Instead, they reflect the profound contradictions of the Arabian peninsula between the wealth and passivity of the Gulf and Yemen's destitution and chaos.

This chapter juxtaposes these seemingly two quite different storylines – one about Yemeni aspirations for social justice and better governance and the other about American and Saudi operations undertaken in the name of combating terrorism. The so-called GCC Initiative, and in particular the National Dialogue Conference process playing out as this book goes to press, provides the link between them. From the perspective of domestic politics, the Dialogue can be read as the outcome of agitation by

the new generation of 'peaceful youth', as well as an outgrowth of Yemen's tradition of dialogue – an historic effort to resolve crisis through broad negotiation between representatives of various political constituencies. In the context of the 'war on terror', however, the GCC Initiative and even the donor-sponsored Dialogue among political elites can be seen as security-driven or even hegemonic projects on the part of the US and its ally, the Kingdom of Saudi Arabia.

Fed up with three decades of corrupt, venal dictatorship, suffering from ecological and economic collapse, and inspired by the uprisings that toppled autocrats in Tunisia and Egypt, Yemenis mobilized on an unprecedented scale to express their discontent in early 2011 and continued peacefully to demonstrate for change throughout the year, even as dissidents and loyalists within the military waged war on one another, and as the president was injured, left the country for treatment and then returned. Popular demands were only partly met when Saleh's deputy, Abd Rabbuh Mansur Hadi, was inaugurated as president on 27 February 2012, after an election organized by international donors in which he was the sole candidate, and only partly addressed by the ambitious National Dialogue negotiations. In the meantime, the Obama administration pursued a military strategy of targeted and 'signature' strikes – extrajudicial assassinations – while paying only perfunctory lip service to Yemenis' legitimate political aspirations.

### **A CIVIC REVOLUTIONARY MOVEMENT**

In February 2011, Tawakkul Karman stood on a stage outside Sana'a University, a microphone in one hand and the other clenched defiantly above her head, leading a crowd of tens of thousands of cheering, flag-waving protesters. On other days and in other cities, other citizens led the chants. These mass public performances enacted a veritable civic revolution in a south-west Arabia where previous activist surges had never produced democratic transitions, but nonetheless did shape national history. Drawing inspiration from the Tunisian and Egyptian examples, as well as from home-grown, often localized protest repertoires, activists occupied the national commons as never before, animating a public civic renaissance with new forms of protest and expression. Women's public participation registered seismic sociocultural change. Whether this popular uprising – wracked by intra-elite street battles, perverted by proxy petrodollar machinations and complicated by American counter-terror operations – ends in glory or tragedy, its social, psychological and political significance

is inestimable. As in Tunisia and Egypt, the experience of collective, contentious mobilization 'from below' energized a veritable cultural transformation. Yemen's 'peaceful youth' (*shabab al-silmiyya*) are the frontline of revolution against the status quo in the Arabian peninsula.

Frustrations in the poorest Arab country had been mounting for years on a number of fronts. Patronage was rampant.<sup>1</sup> Restlessness stirred around the president's clear intention to ordain his son, already commander of the nation's Republican Guard, as his successor; postponement of parliamentary elections; widespread unemployment, especially among young people; deteriorating standards of living for all but the upper echelons of the ruling kleptocracy; ecological depredations against a formerly self-sufficient agricultural economy, resulting in serious environmental damage and acute water shortages; abysmal educational and medical facilities, sanitation, and physical infrastructure; crude resort to censorship, harassment, arbitrary detention and brutality against journalists, dissidents and regime opponents; and profound, widespread malaise.

By late 2010, regional demonstrations or uprisings had emerged in various parts of the country with seemingly various complaints. Most dramatically, people in the former PDRY until 1990 formed a movement known simply as Hiraak.<sup>2</sup> For several years, its supporters had been marching and staging displays in the Arabian Sea port city of Aden and outlying provinces like Hadhramaut and Abyan.<sup>3</sup> The movement revived some slogans, motifs and performative elements of the old anti-colonial struggle in Aden, Abyan, Dhala<sup>4</sup>, Hadhramaut and other communities in what were then known as the British 'Protectorates'.<sup>4</sup> Again, these blended Socialist elements with locally distinctive traditions of dance, dress and dialect. Hiraak also depended on human rights organizations and municipal newspapers established during the opening that followed unification in the early nineties. Saleh and his official media could portray their agony as treasonous southern irredentist threats to national unity reminiscent of the 1994 civil war. And indeed some citizens flew the flag of the old People's Democratic Republic even as others joined

<sup>1</sup> April L. Alley, 'The Rules of the Game: Unpacking Patronage Politics in Yemen', *Middle East Journal* 64: 3 (Summer 2010), pp. 385–409.

<sup>2</sup> Susanne Dahlgren, 'The Snake with a Thousand Heads: The Southern Cause in Yemen', *Middle East Report* 256 (2010), pp. 28–33.

<sup>3</sup> Stephen Day, 'Updating Yemeni National Unity: Could Lingering Regional Divisions Bring Down the Regime?' *Middle East Journal* 62: 3 (Summer 2008), pp. 417–36.

<sup>4</sup> Fred Halliday, *Arabia Without Sultans: A Political Survey of Instability in the Arab World* (New York: Vintage Books, 1974).

the nationalist movement to oust the national regime in Sana'a. Over the next couple of years the irredentist element of the Southern movement swelled.<sup>5</sup> Moreover, there was a more openly armed rebellion rooted in complicated, sometimes counter-intuitive sectarian and tribal frictions in the far northern province of Sa'ada, seemingly exacerbated by proximity to the Saudi border and unquestionably provoked by Wahhabi Saudi missionaries' absolutist fundamentalism.<sup>6</sup>

In cities and provinces between these geographical extremes, people were disheartened by high-level corruption, nepotism, and favouritism towards the president's Hashid tribal confederation and his own family members. It turned out that the tribulations of Southerners resonated throughout Yemen: the grotesque enrichment of regime cronies at the expense of the multitudes; obscenely bad stewardship of the commons; the skyrocketing price of meat, staples and even clean water; the lack of jobs for college and high school graduates. In a Wikileaks cable, the American ambassador had already noted in 2005 that riots prompted by the lifting of fuel subsidies possibly presaged a mass revolt, especially but not only among the perennially restive tribes of the north-eastern provinces of al-Jawf and Mareb, where truckers and pump-farmers considered cheap fuel their lifeblood.<sup>7</sup> Grandiose pageants of presidential power, half-truths in the official media, indignities suffered at military checkpoints, arbitrary arrests and imprisonments: these and other daily insults fed popular alienation, despair and frustration, most notably among young people. While a privileged few cooled off in swimming pools in their luxury compounds, the water table fell, crippling the agricultural economy that remained the livelihood of the rural majority. Farmers and ranchers facing starvation flocked to the cities, where water supplies and social services were swamped. Misery became the new normal; millions barely survived on the equivalent of a dollar or two a day. The economy was in a shambles.<sup>8</sup>

Demonstrators took to the streets in large numbers in Sana'a, the capital – now a teeming, sprawling, poorly laid out, still picturesque

<sup>5</sup> See the story as told by Peter Salisbury, 'Yemen's Southern Intifada', *Foreign Policy*, Middle East Channel, 13 March 2013, available at [mideast.foreignpolicy.com](http://mideast.foreignpolicy.com).

<sup>6</sup> Shelagh Weir, 'A Clash of Fundamentalisms: Wahhabism in Yemen', *Middle East Report* 204 (1997), pp. 22–6.

<sup>7</sup> Sheila Carapico, 'No Exit: Yemen's Existential Crisis', *Middle East Report Online*, 3 May 2011, available at [www.merip.org](http://www.merip.org).

<sup>8</sup> Nora A. Colton, 'Yemen: A Collapsed Economy', *Middle East Journal* 64: 3 (Summer 2010), pp. 410–26.

low-rise city of nearly two million mostly youthful inhabitants who have overwhelmed its schools, sewage disposal system and water supplies. Home to the ruling family and its security apparatus, Sana'a was also most exposed to its excesses and regulations, and was the prime site for parades of presidential power. After Saleh loyalists laid claim to Sana'a's central Midan al-Tahrir – so that it would not follow Cairo's example of becoming a stage for malcontents – students, faculty and other activists assembled around the university campus on the western edge of the city. They named the space they claimed Change Square ('*Midan al-Taghyir*'), and borrowed North African slogans – *Irhal* ('Leave!') and *al-Sha'ab Yuridh Isqat al-Nizam* ('The people want the downfall of the regime').<sup>9</sup> Occupiers mainly represented the demographic bulge of fifteen-to-thirty-year-olds who had never known any other leadership: university students, graduates, dropouts, and those hoping for a better future. In Change Square and adjoining spaces, these 'peaceful youth' performed music and dance and held poetry readings, displayed posters and street art, and organized collective gestures of defiance like 50,000 pairs of clasped hands held high. The call to prayer became a call to civic engagement, and mass prayers a form of civil disobedience. The crowds around Sana'a University swelled as villagers, farmers and other tribesmen from outlying areas joined the protests. Many of them pitched tents that eventually grew into a sprawling encampment snaking through the neighbourhood around the university campus with its own sanitation, medical services, teach-ins, and food and water supplies. As the Yemeni journalist Fare'a al-Muslimi later put it, 'The tribesman laid down his weapon and came to protest alongside his like-minded civilian compatriot, thus achieving voluntarily what years of attempts at banning weapons could not.'<sup>10</sup>

Interestingly, unlike in Egypt where some imagined that Facebook and the internet sparked the revolution, in Yemen Facebook membership, blogs and YouTube posts proliferated from being the preserve, in 2010, of mere handfuls of the elite with friends abroad to become major means of communications a year later. It was a cyber-explosion. While thousands joined Facebook during the spring of 2011, others blogged, hundreds practised guerrilla photo-journalism, countless numbers began to tweet. A montage of photos and video images of Ali Abdullah Saleh set

<sup>9</sup> For a description of the early weeks, see Nir Rosen, 'How it Started in Yemen: From Tahrir to Taghyir', *Jadaliyya*, 18 March 2001, available at [www.jadaliyya.com](http://www.jadaliyya.com).

<sup>10</sup> Fare'a al-Muslimi, 'The Social Transformation Of Yemen's Youth Revolution', translated and posted on 14 April 2013 by al-Monitor, available at [www.al-monitor.com](http://www.al-monitor.com), from an article in *al-Safir* (Lebanon), 3 April 2013.

to the lyrics of Katy Perry's 'Hot 'n' Cold' went viral. Virtual participants among Yemeni emigrant communities overseas passed images on. Some were picked up by al-Jazeera or analysed from abroad. As in Egypt, however, for all the talk of a digital revolution, mobile phones were by far the most salient piece of technology for domestic communication, and word of mouth spread news within and between neighbourhoods.

Never in the history of the Arabian peninsula had women been so politically prominent. Many women besides Karman defied a conservative cultural norm mandating speaking softly (if at all) in public. Indeed, women were in the forefront of the movement for change.<sup>11</sup> For instance, Amal al-Basha, Samia al-Aghbari, Bushra al-Maqtari, Arwa Othman, Jamila Raja, Asmahan al-Allas, Bilqis al-Lahabi and Amat al-Alim Sosowa displayed leadership in their cities and towns, on the national stage, on the internet and sometimes abroad. On the streets, less famous but even more courageous women mocked Saleh's sleazy innuendo about an un-Islamic 'mixing of the sexes' in protest camps. Almost all Yemeni women wear an all-encompassing black robe and veil. At one point many thousands lined up on a street in Sana'a, covered in the customary black. One row wore white baseball caps on top of their veils, and another sported red baseball caps. As they marched, the visual effect was to create a white, black and red Yemeni flag stretching more than a kilometre down a wide road in a show of patriotism. On another occasion, after a series of attacks on female activists by security forces, urban women in Sana'a, still wearing their customary all-black robes and veils, staged a particularly Yemeni form of protest drawing on rural traditions: they set fire to a pile of multicoloured head-coverings called *maqrama* in a symbolic distress signal to the tribes. Their pamphlet read: 'This is a plea from the free women of Yemen; here we burn our *maqrama* in front of the world to witness the bloody massacres carried out by the tyrant Saleh.'

The counter-revolution turned violent enough to provoke massive defections from the regime after a deadly incident on 18 March 2011, when plain-clothes snipers fired from neighbouring rooftops onto Change Square, killing more than fifty mostly young and entirely peaceful protesters. In disbelief, fury and sorrow, a record 150,000 marched in Sana'a's biggest 'day of rage' so far.<sup>12</sup> There was an avalanche of top- and mid-level resignations from the armed forces, the foreign service, the civil service,

<sup>11</sup> Jamila Raja, 'Yemeni Women in Transition: Challenges and Opportunities', paper presented at the 'Yemen . . .' conference, Harvard University, October 2012.

<sup>12</sup> Sheila Carapico, 'No Celebration of Yemen's Unity Day', *Foreign Policy*, Middle East Channel, 24 May 2011, available at [mideast.foreignpolicy.com](http://mideast.foreignpolicy.com).

and even the president's General People's Congress in protest at the excessive use of force against unarmed civilians. Key regime insiders, notably General Ali Mohsen, the army commander who had dealt mercilessly with Southern secessionists in 1994, and leaders of the president's own Hashid tribal confederation – including scions of the paramount sheikh – turned against Saleh.<sup>13</sup> Even as the regime split, however, collective rage and moral panic gradually solidified the protests into a nationwide movement. Sentiments crossed party lines, dividing not only the army and the Hashid tribe but also the conservative political party.<sup>14</sup> Henceforth the intra-regime struggle intensified in the streets of Sana'a and other cities, and in jockeying for representation and a voice within the National Dialogue that began on the second anniversary of the March 2011 massacre. While the GCC 'deal' was under negotiation, protesters in al-Baidha, Ibb, Aden and other cities and towns cried for Saleh's prosecution in an international court.

Instead of taking sides in intra-regime struggles, most people wanted them all to disappear from the political scene. Demonstrators in Sana'a and Ta'iz adopted the slogans 'Remaining Peaceful is Our Choice' and 'Peaceful, Peaceful, No to Civil War'. The Coordinating Council of the Youth Revolution of Change (CCYRC) issued a thirteen-point 'youth plan' in March, and later a 65-page 'Youth Vision for the Future of Yemen', both emphasizing concerns for justice and non-violence.<sup>15</sup> Protests swelled; multitudes massed. In Ta'iz, a bustling commercial and industrial city nestled in the verdant southern mountains of the former YAR, and the picturesque neighbouring city of Ibb, simmering discontent erupted. This populous 'middle region', a once rich agricultural zone tilled by peasants and sharecroppers, served as a bridge of sorts between the Southern Hiraak and Sana'a's Change Square; some called Ta'iz the epicentre of the popular uprising. The city's relatively educated, cosmopolitan student body entertained demonstration participants with music, skits, caricatures, graffiti, banners and other artistic embellishments. Throngs were photographed: men and women together, men and women separately, all

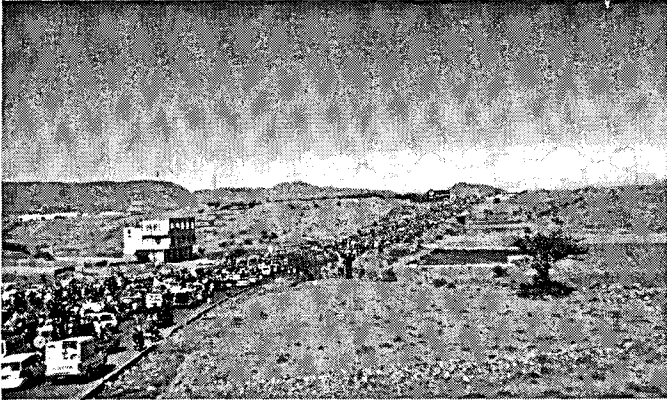
<sup>13</sup> For the background to this feud, see Sarah Phillips, 'Foreboding About the Future in Yemen', *Middle East Report Online*, 3 April 2006, available at [www.merip.org](http://www.merip.org).

<sup>14</sup> Analysis of the background to the ideological divisions within Islah is available in Stacey Philbrick Yadav, 'Segmented Publics and Islamist Women in Yemen: Rethinking Space and Activism', *Journal of Middle Eastern Women's Studies* 6: 2 (2010), pp. 1–30.

<sup>15</sup> Atiaf Zaid Alwazir, "'Youth' Inclusion in Yemen: a Necessary Element for Success of Political Transition', *Arab Reform Brief* 64 (December 2012), available at [www.arab-reform.net](http://www.arab-reform.net).



unarmed. On 30 October 2011, to cite one small example, women in Ta'iz posted a YouTube video full of flowers, confetti, balloons, music and ululation commemorating each martyr to the revolution. Some weeks later, thousands of people trekked nearly 200 kilometres from Ta'iz to Sana'a.



Ta'iz–Sana'a youth march, December 2011. © Ridan Bahran

Young people and parents in al-Hodeida, the steamy Red Sea port where African-Yemenis suffer exceptional rates of poverty and political disenfranchisement, filled their own Freedom Square with banners and chants and insurrectionary wall-art. *Irhal!* ('Go!'), they yelled; and, referring to the deposed Tunisian leader who had found refuge in Saudi Arabia: 'Oh, Ali Abdullah, join bin Ali in Riyadh!' They applauded Mubarak's resignation, celebrated the demise of Libya's dictator Muammar al-Qadhafi, and dedicated mass prayers to the martyrs of Syria. New mantras, skits and cartoons taunted Yemeni and Syrian dictators: 'Come on Ali, come on Bashar, it's time for you to go!'

The wide-open, semi-arid and sparsely populated plateaus and mountains north, north-west, east and somewhat south of Sana'a are landscapes that look like the American south-west. Tribes in this region are not unlike American cowboys or hillbillies: they raise livestock, drive pick-up trucks, carry firearms (in Yemen's tribal heartland, Kalashnikovs or even bazooka-launchers) and perennially harbour deep mistrust of the central government. In these regions, especially in the far eastern governorates of al-Jawf and Mareb, protests took the familiar form of acts of civil disobedience such as road blockages and commercial stoppages. Yet in al-Baidha province, just north of the former inter-Yemeni border,

tribesmen who rarely leave home without a rifle threw down their guns to march peacefully. Again, this was highly significant: in a country known to be awash with personal weapons, the mass uprising avoided guerrilla warfare or military insurrection. In short: tribesmen with the means to launch an armed revolt resisted the temptation to open fire.

### COUNTER-REVOLUTIONARY FORCES

The regime showed no such restraint. Divisions loyal to the president, mostly commanded by immediate members of his family, fired on unarmed demonstrators in Sana'a, Aden, Ta'iz, Hodeida and the countryside. Hundreds of deaths and thousands of injuries stoked rather than quelled discontent, however. Grainy, graphic cell-phone footage was uploaded to the internet. In many communities each funeral provoked more angry or grief-stricken dissenters to call for Saleh's downfall.

More explosively, after 18 March, loyalists and dissidents engaged one another in mortal combat, especially in certain neighbourhoods of Sana'a where Saleh's family commands, including the Republican Guards and Special Forces trained and equipped by the US, battled the renegade brigade led by General Ali Mohsen and Hashid tribal militia headed by the sons of the late great Hashid Sheikh Abdullah al-Ahmar. Both the general and the sheikh had been part of the Saleh regime for three decades. In other words, powerful elements of the president's inner circle had turned against him. At various times Saleh labelled them blood-thirsty, seditious, traitors, coup-makers, terrorists and thugs. General Ali Mohsen placed an armed cordon around the large neighbourhood surrounding Change Square to protect the protesters. There were frequent skirmishes around the al-Ahmar family compound on the airport road. The explosion in the mosque within the presidential compound that left Saleh disfigured and killed or crippled several of his deputies was almost certainly some kind of inside job.<sup>16</sup> This was an intra-regime squabble, among members of the same tribe. The 'peaceful youth', *al-shabab al-silmiyya*, did not line up behind the general or the sons of the late Sheikh al-Ahmar. Outsiders characterizing these events as 'tribal conflicts' or 'youth riots' were emphatically wrong.

To protect his positions around the capital, and perhaps to deliberately unleash zealous militants, Saleh withdrew government forces from parts

<sup>16</sup> Sarah Phillips, 'Who Tried to Kill Ali Abdallah Saleh? The Hidden Feud Behind the Revolution in Yemen', *Foreign Policy*, Middle East Channel, 16 June 2011, available at [www.foreignpolicy.com](http://www.foreignpolicy.com).

of the old PDRY, especially Abyan and its provincial capital, Zinjibar. No more than a couple of hundred Islamist fighters, many of them foreign, were able to overrun civilian officials there and in some other towns. This strange twisting of the main plot attracted American attention, and firepower was directed against al-Qa'ida; Saleh even managed to turn this to his advantage, presenting himself as a reliable ally for the US and Saudi Arabia against militant Islamists. Washington increased military assistance, and the regime seemed to benefit. The battles for Zinjibar and other towns abandoned by Saleh's forces, including aerial attacks that caused physical damage and civilian casualties, in turn fanned Southern rage against Sana'a; the government, locals felt, was not protecting them either from the jihadists or from missile strikes. Exiled Southern leaders, notably Ali Salim al-Beedh – the former vice president of unified Yemen who led the failed secessionist war in 1994 – called for a restoration of Southern sovereignty.

The hegemon of the Peninsula, Saudi Arabia, was ever-fearful of chaos or revolutionary change in poverty-stricken, crisis-riven Yemen.<sup>17</sup> In May 2011 the kingdom and the other oil monarchies in the GCC working with Saleh's government, and the diverse but entrenched parliamentary opposition in the Joint Meeting Parties, announced – over the heads of the protest movement – a plan whereby Saleh would relinquish presidential power in exchange for immunity from prosecution for him and his family. Saleh stalled and prevaricated for months, even after being severely injured in the attack on his compound in June 2011 and airlifted to top-of-the-line hospitals in Saudi Arabia and then the United States. The US and other Western powers joined the GCC in offering rhetorical support for this novel plan for a managed transition. During Saleh's three-month convalescence abroad, his son and nephews in the top military commands took aim at their allies-turned-rivals. Military and civilian deaths mounted. Electricity and fuel supplies waned. City life became even more intolerable.

By all accounts, the US ambassador and visiting American military officials were actively talking with all parties to the armed conflict between Saleh and his former colleagues, seeking to quell the street battles that disrupted life in the capital during 2011. Yet the international community did not press publicly for a ceasefire or threaten sanctions against the Saleh regime. The human rights minister, Houria Mashhour, tweeted: 'We were expecting a stronger attitude from the GCC countries towards

<sup>17</sup> Bernard Haykel, 'Saudi Arabia's Yemen Dilemma: How to Manage an Unruly State', *Foreign Affairs*, 14 June 2011, available at [www.foreignaffairs.com](http://www.foreignaffairs.com).

the crimes committed against the Yemeni people, but we are extremely disappointed to see the meeting between [Saudi] King Abdullah and Saleh.’ On 21 October the Security Council of the United Nations issued an ambiguous, toothless resolution – 2014 – condemning human rights violations by ‘the government and other actors’ and calling for ‘all sides’ to commit to a peaceful power transition in accordance with the GCC formula. Yemen’s official Saba press agency enthused that Saleh ‘welcomed’ the resolution; Tawakkul Karman, in a comment piece for the *Guardian* on 1 November expressed dismay.

At a ceremony in the Saudi capital on 23 November 2011, witnessed by Gulf royalty and some Western diplomats – but none of the Yemenis who had called for his removal – a smiling Saleh finally affixed his signature to four copies of the GCC plan. Vice President Abd Rabbuh Mansur Hadi, a native of South Yemen who had been acting president during Saleh’s convalescence, resumed that role. After a hastily arranged but uncontested ballot on 21 February 2012, he assumed the office of president. The daunting economic, social, political and security problems facing the country were laid at his feet. Instead of the downfall of a regime, this represented only a rearrangement of it. The ceremony symbolized the influence of the Gulf monarchs in Yemen. Soon after, donors pledged aid to address the daunting humanitarian, economic and security problems facing the country, as well as to facilitate the National Dialogue.<sup>18</sup>

Many activists were frustrated by the GCC plan’s immunity provisions and the one-candidate ‘vote’ for Hadi, which was itself a concession to Saleh’s insistence that he would only leave office ‘by ballot’. These terms were negotiated between the president and his long-time patrons in the wealthy Gulf kingdoms over the heads of the protesters, and with only marginal consultation with the multiparty political leadership in the Joint Meeting Parties of the parliamentary opposition. According to Atiaf Zaid Alwazir, it was ‘a byproduct of political negotiations that excluded the vast majority on the street’, leading to power grabs that shifted ‘priorities for reform away from comprehensive social changes that were the demands of the revolutionary movement’.<sup>19</sup>

The National Dialogue was relatively more inclusive, and it drew on indigenous precedents for high-level negotiation in times of national

<sup>18</sup> For analysis of the challenges as of early 2013, see Helen Lackner, ‘Yemen: Where Is the Transition Heading?’, *Open Democracy*, 12 March 2013, available at [www.opendemocracy.net](http://www.opendemocracy.net).

<sup>19</sup> Alwazir, ‘“Youth” Inclusion in Yemen’, p. 5.

emergency. Both South and North Yemen held mass conferences during the political transitions in the 1960s, during which some constitutional principles for post-colonial and post-Imamic regimes, respectively, were hammered out. A more direct and immediate precedent was the National Dialogue of Political Forces that had convened in 1994 in the hope of resolving the power struggle between Sana'a and Aden. Along with mass conferences in various parts of the country during 1993 and 1994, this Dialogue produced a Document of Pledge and Accord embraced by a wide segment of the political elite, even though it failed to prevent the outbreak of a civil war in which Saleh's forces effectively conquered the secessionist bid from former PDRY forces led by Ali Salim al-Beedh.

In consultations between the UN special envoy Jamal Benomar, the ruling General People's Congress (GPC) party and the Joint Meeting Parties (JMP), and in response to calls from women leaders, the 2013 National Dialogue Committee comprised 565 representatives of various factions, constituencies and regions. Unsurprisingly, aging male politicians from the GPC and the JMP – including veterans of the conferences in the sixties and the Dialogue in the nineties, and including Islamists, Socialists and various Arab nationalists – won the majority of seats at the bargaining table; the 'youth' group was allotted only forty positions. However – in an innovation undoubtedly pushed by the United Nations, proposed by prominent female and feminist activists, and supported by Socialists, many Southerners, and the youth contingent, against the conservative misogynist military incumbents in Sana'a – the rules accepted by all parties called for 30 per cent of delegates to be women. This was significant because they were women, but also because they came mostly from the 'middle generation' and the ranks of professionals and technocrats. They quickly rose to leadership in some of the Dialogue's nine subcommittees, including the difficult assignments dealing with the Huthi and Southern questions. On the other hand, some high-profile politicians – including several Southern separatists, a scion of Hashid's sheikhly al-Ahmar family, and Tawakkul Karman – declined their appointments unless or until specific ultimatums were met; some resigned only to return later. Old elites in and beyond the GPC positioned themselves to guard their longstanding prerogatives; Saleh and his male kinfolk remained on the scene, conniving to outmanoeuvre their many enemies. Much of this was politics and political bargaining as usual. Nonetheless, the combination of the historical memories of some male elders, the energy of many women and young people, and the financial and moral support of international donors infused the process with some positive energy and momentum. To some scholars and pundits observing

from afar the events in Yemen – alongside the absurd constitution-making in post-Mubarak Egypt and the abject bloodletting between Assad loyalists and armed militia in Syria – the National Dialogue Conference presented a hopeful, potentially fruitful path.

While this was going on, however, ordinary families were suffering. Most Yemenis were not following the Dialogue. In almost every community, power cuts were a daily occurrence. Poverty was spreading. Water tables were dropping. Jobs were scarce. Alongside the Dialogue process, protests and new forms of political expression continued, and continued to evolve. The Coordinating Council of the Youth Revolution of Change remained active even after announcing the formal end of its camp-out. Mural painters, bloggers, videographers, journalists, performing artists and others found new creative outlets. A media-savvy group of young people in Sana'a calling themselves 'Support Yemen' posted some YouTube videos, including one featuring interviews with peasants more concerned with food than with the 'National Dialogue'. Wounded protesters, dark-skinned 'marginalized' Yemenis and other groups staged sit-ins or other public events. Human rights groups documented violence, disappearances and arbitrary arrests. They added to their list of concerns air attacks supposedly aimed at al-Qa'ida suspects. Bushra al-Maqtari, the feminist, Socialist youth leader from Ta'iz, who was honoured in April 2013 in Washington, took advantage of the visit to meet with American anti-drone activists there. In July 2012, human rights minister Houria Mashhour and several members of the Dialogue committee joined a hunger strike at Sana'a's Central Prison demanding the release of youth activists arrested during demonstrations a year or two earlier. In Aden, Mukalla and other Southern cities and towns, mass rallies continued to attract throngs of people, many of them supporting calls for separation.

#### COUNTER-TERRORISM

Yemen's 'peaceful youth' uprising intersected with power politics in the international arena, and in particular with a globalized American military-security policy; in the meantime, the United States and Saudi Arabia had stepped up their coordinated, secretive counter-terrorism campaign against the Yemen-based branch of al-Qa'ida – which, in turn, seemed emboldened.

Despite its intensifying involvement, the United States did not formulate a Yemen policy or even a genuinely diplomatic mission there. Instead, it clung to a policy of keeping the Saudi monarchy secure and

happy, and a related counter-terrorism policy expanding the scope of the post-9/11 'Af-Pak' strategy. Washington regarded Yemen as a theatre of counter-terrorism in Saudi Arabia's backyard, as if it were not a real place where real people demanded decent governance, justice and the possibility of raising families with dignity, education and health. The Obama administration paid scant attention to these widespread popular concerns. US ambassador Gerald Feierstein, who many Yemenis saw as a major power-broker and who some called 'the Sheikh [or sometimes the Emir] of Yemen', was tapped for his counter-terrorism credentials as well as his diplomatic experience. He worked closely with intelligence and military officers. During the protracted negotiations to facilitate the presidential transition, Washington's envoy was a CIA veteran, then deputy national security advisor for homeland security and counter-terrorism, John O. Brennan – not someone with a State Department career or who had the ear of Hillary Clinton. Engagement in Yemen's transition was not a diplomatic mission, but part and parcel of security operations. Instead of providing material or even moral support to activists clamouring for social justice – much less calling for competitive elections or women's rights – Obama, Clinton, Brennan and Feierstein sought to placate Riyadh. American attention fixated on battling an enemy Americans like to call al-Qa'ida in the Arabian Peninsula (AQAP) – often said, sensationally and somewhat misleadingly, to constitute a grave threat to the American homeland.<sup>20</sup> Al-Qa'ida's local commanders and spokespersons revelled in publicity that helped recruit scores or even hundreds of jihadi wannabes from within, and especially beyond, Yemen. As is well known, al-Qa'ida's declared mission in the Arabian peninsula is to dislodge the American military from the kingdom; jihadists were drawn to Yemen because of its proximity to Saudi Arabia.

Most of the more than fifty recorded air attacks inside Yemen in 2012 were known or supposed, if never acknowledged, to have been launched by Americans. A dramatic airstrike in September 2012 near Rada', a historically distinguished but flyblown town in al-Baidha province where rogue al-Qa'ida militants had encamped, exterminated three children and nine other civilians.<sup>21</sup> Around Rada', where armed tribesmen left

<sup>20</sup> For an expert military analysis of the history and operations of AQAP that sheds light on this narrative, see James Spencer, 'Al-Qa'ida in the Arabian Peninsula: MOS and Deductions', *Small Wars Journal*, 19 August 2011, available at [smallwarsjournal.com](http://smallwarsjournal.com).

<sup>21</sup> Letta Taylor, 'Anatomy of an Air Attack Gone Wrong', *Foreign Policy*, 26 December 2012, available at [www.foreignpolicy.com](http://www.foreignpolicy.com).

their Kalashnikovs at home to demonstrate peacefully, the maddening overhead buzz of drones reminded everyone of American surveillance. On 24 December two attacks purportedly launched by the CIA or the Defense Department killed five suspected militants in al-Baidha governorate and Hadhramaut. After several more hits and constant fly-overs in the next ten days or so, dozens of tribesmen carried their rifles with them to a sit-in in front of a government building in Rada', convened to complain about Sana'a's authorization of these attacks. Later in January, tribesmen in Mareb stopped traffic after two drone strikes. Attacks on targets in Hadhramaut, Abyan and other Southern governorates increasingly enraged citizens of the South against a Sana'a government authorizing foreign attacks on Yemeni soil, adding to simmering tensions there.

There were more drone or fixed-wing salvos in an ongoing battle since the 2002 strike in retaliation for the bombing of the USS *Cole* in Aden harbour in 2000, in which an American citizen, Ahmed Hijazi, had died. In the last days of 2009, Obama authorized bombing that left at least twenty children and a dozen women dead in the southern town of al-Majalla, along with one militant. In May 2010 a tribal mediator, a Yemeni official and other civilians lost their lives in a misguided cruise missile attack. By the time Yemen's revolutionary movement began in earnest, several high-profile al-Qa'ida operatives and a number of innocent civilians had been blown to smithereens by Hellfire missiles. On 30 September 2011 the American-born Anwar Nasir al-Awlaqi, a firebrand preacher accused of inspiring the Fort Hood shootings and the failed attempt to blow up a Detroit-bound Northwest Airlines plane, was killed, while both the American Fort Hood shooter and the Nigerian arrested in Detroit awaited trial in the US; several weeks later, al-Awlaqi's teenage son was also struck dead. When even American citizens are not given due trial before execution, the US cannot claim to be standing for the rule of law.

The US had become thoroughly but haphazardly engaged in the southwestern portion of the Arabian peninsula. In addition to endless aerial surveillance and frequent bombardments, measures to 'stabilize' Yemen now included provision of light aircraft, armed vehicles, gadgetry and training; direct military cooperation with and command-and-control backing for Yemeni forces; coordination of the restructuring of Yemen's military command and the military subcommittee of the National Dialogue; some humanitarian assistance, and token support for civil society initiatives; and extra coordination with Saudi security institutions to make sure that Yemen's multiple conflicts did not spill across the border.



There was also some evidence of launch-pads for unmanned Predator drones and/or Hellfire missiles at al-Anad Airbase, near Aden, and perhaps another US base in the eastern Hadhramaut desert.<sup>22</sup>

In addition to the remote-controlled ‘targeted’ attacks purportedly conducted by the Defense Department or the CIA, there were so-called ‘signature strikes’ that do not aim at individuals identified by intelligence agencies as enemies of the US. Instead, ‘signature strikes’ are robotic attacks triggered by evidence of ‘suspicious activities’ or ‘patterns of movement’ observed by electronic drones from the air, such as the loading of rifles onto pickup trucks.<sup>23</sup> The Obama administration’s ‘signature strikes’ directive deemed any able-bodied men in the line of fire legitimate targets unless they were posthumously exonerated. This shoot-first-ask-questions-later policy was the very antithesis of applying the rule of law. Although lethal targeted attacks – especially those against American citizens – understandably attracted the most attention, signature attacks provoked even more outrage. In a well-armed country like Yemen, the presence of rifles or even bazookas or rocket-propelled grenade launchers does not in itself identify nearby individuals as terrorists. Nor do weapons in the hands of Yemenis pose a credible threat to the American homeland. The more immediate menace was to Saudi Arabia.

American military policies were patently contrary to the pursuit of justice, respect for human rights and cultivation of the rule of law in Yemen. The outspoken human rights minister, Houria Mashhour, told a Reuters correspondent that she would prefer to handle terror suspects through the judiciary, in a way that did not violate human rights or risk civilian casualties. ‘All we are calling for is justice and reliance on international regulations with regard to human rights and to be true to our commitment to our citizens in that they all deserve a fair trial’, she added.<sup>24</sup> The American-educated youth activist Fare’a al-Muslimi told a US Congressional hearing in April 2013 that attacks such as the one that had killed five people in his home village in Dhamar governorate were spreading intense anti-Americanism. For these two and many other supporters of

<sup>22</sup> Sheila Carapico, ‘The Laryngitic Dog’, *Middle East Report Online*, 14 February 2013, available at [www.merip.org](http://www.merip.org).

<sup>23</sup> Leila Hudson, Colin S. Owens and David J. Callen, ‘Drone Warfare in Yemen: Fostering Emirates through Counterterrorism?’ Middle East Policy Council, Journal Essay, 2013, available at [www.mepc.org](http://www.mepc.org). The Bureau for Investigative Journalism’s website keeps a running tally of documented strikes at [www.thebureauinvestigates.com](http://www.thebureauinvestigates.com).

<sup>24</sup> Mahmoud Habboush, ‘Yemen Minister Urges Ground Ops, Not Drones, against Militants’, Reuters, 22 January 2013.

the uprising, opposition to US military policy had become part of the struggle for social justice.

Long known for meddling in Yemen's domestic politics, Riyadh had many worries there: the Shi'a Huthi rebellion on the kingdom's southern frontier, which the Saudis blame on Iran; al-Qa'ida in the Arabian Peninsula, based in Yemen since militants had been chased out of Saudi Arabia; the popular 'youth' uprising calling for democracy; the risk of chaos and/or full-fledged civil war in the Peninsula's south-west quadrant; and the very prospect of a strong, unified, mobilized country where democratic values and women's empowerment might be on the rise. In the face of popular demonstrations of an order of magnitude that had toppled dictators in Tunisia and Egypt, the kingdom sought to maintain its traditional influence in Yemen through the patronage system of payments to various Yemeni political actors in and beyond Sana'a's central government, overseen by the Saudi Ministry of Interior.<sup>25</sup>

Although air strikes are usually attributed to the United States, evidence indicates Saudi involvement in some operations. In 2010, Amnesty International said it was 'extremely likely' – though difficult to verify – that Tornado fighter-bombers supplied by the UK to Saudi Arabia were used in indiscriminate attacks against Huthi rebels that killed civilians as well as militants.<sup>26</sup> The *Guardian* suggested that some deadly bombings of Yemen were 'outsourced' to the Saudi Air Force.<sup>27</sup> The internet was abuzz with claims that Saudi fighter jets had conducted operations in Yemen in early 2013. Investigative journalists found evidence of an undisclosed American drone base in Saudi Arabia from which the attack that had killed al-Awlaqi was launched.<sup>28</sup> Perhaps the House of Saud was outsourcing its al-Qa'ida problem to the US military, rather than the other way around.

Washington supports the House of Saud, but the monarchy is wary of Yemeni aspirations for social justice. As the National Dialogue was progressing, the kingdom expelled tens of thousands of Yemeni migrant workers or small entrepreneurs as part of an effort to tighten immigration,

<sup>25</sup> Bernard Haykel, 'Saudi Arabia and Qatar in a Time of Revolution', Washington, Center for International and Strategic Studies, Middle East Program Gulf Analysis Paper, February 2013; Stig Stenslie, 'Not Too Strong, Not Too Weak: Saudi Arabia's Policy Towards Yemen', Norwegian Peacebuilding Policy Centre, Policy Brief, March 2013, available at [www.peacebuilding.no](http://www.peacebuilding.no).

<sup>26</sup> 'Amnesty Links British Jets to Saudi Attacks in Yemen', *Guardian*, 24 August 2010.

<sup>27</sup> Lakshman Menon, 'America Outsources Yemen Qaeda Fight to Saudi Arabia', *Sunday Guardian*, 14 March 2013, available at [www.sunday-guardian.com](http://www.sunday-guardian.com).

<sup>28</sup> Mark Mazzetti, Charlie Savage and Scott Shane, 'How a US Citizen Came to Be in America's Cross Hairs', *New York Times*, 9 March 2013.

curb smuggling and ‘Saudiize’ the labour force. Work was begun on an 1,800-kilometre security fence along the Saudi border with Yemen, complete with massive guard towers; a Yemeni pundit, Haykal Bafana, tweeted to the effect that ‘at least an effective barrier might stem the flow of jihadis from Saudi Arabia into Yemen’. Official and personal-account payments from the oil-rich GCC countries to military commanders, politicians, tribal sheikhs and other figures continued in a fifty-year-old pattern, while new actors probably including Iran and Qatar also got into the act. Furthermore while Yemeni women spoke up, led chants for regime change, performed liberation theatre, campaigned against violence and took leadership roles in the National Dialogue, the Custodians of Mecca and Medina continued to restrict women’s right to drive, ride bicycles, travel abroad or otherwise constitute themselves as functioning adults. On this front, supposedly backward Yemen put the kingdom and its GCC cousins to shame. Likewise, the Gulf monarchs’ antipathy towards the Arab revolutions and aversion to democratization were hardly a secret. Riyadh had a sometimes counter-intuitive, convoluted history of backing the Zaydi-Shi’a imamate against Yemeni republicans in the 1960s, Salafi jihadis in the interim and Socialist secessionists in 1994. Historically, the kingdom has consistently sought to thwart Yemeni nationalism, self-determination, unity, welfare, poverty alleviation, workers’ rights, women’s empowerment and democratization. Since 2002, Saudi and American policies have been overwhelmingly concerned with the fight against al-Qa’ida, and this drove their Yemen policies which were, in turn, largely strategic. A decade later, they also worried about Iranian influence on the Huthi movement. Strategic realpolitik made good sense from both Riyadh’s and Washington’s point of view, but was not attentive to the consequences of building up Saleh’s military machine, nor to the mounting frustrations of the Yemeni people. Lastly, then, US policy is largely concerned with supporting the interests of the Kingdom of Saudi Arabia – a priority that conflicts with the prospects of democratization in Yemen.

Many Yemenis question whether key foreign players and neighbouring governments appreciate the extent of popular discontent and the depth of the desire for change. Arranged under tight security at the five-star Sana’a Mövenpick, or occasionally in similarly luxurious facilities in other cities, the work of the National Dialogue Conference seems far removed from the everyday concerns of the other twenty-five million Yemenis, nearly half of whom are undernourished. The naming of the whole process as a ‘GCC Initiative’ (rather than a Yemeni Initiative); the direct and dominant role of the US in military restructuring; the flood of ‘foreign

experts' some Yemeni intellectuals refer to as 'tourists' – all of these contributed to perceptions that the Dialogue had been commandeered by international donors more interested in protecting their own interests than in transitional justice.



EARLY IN THE SECOND DECADE of the twenty-first century, Yemen is in a state of flux. After over three decades of corrupt, incompetent leadership in Sana'a and violence and uncertainty in the former PDRY, the vanguard of a new generation who had known no other form of rule seized the initiative. Women raised their voices, and many men laid down their arms. Together, some millions of citizens in cities and towns from the Saudi border to the Indian Ocean, and from the Red Sea to the Empty Quarter, staked their claim to the public civic sphere: they seized not only the streets and plazas, but also cyberspace. They confronted the counter-revolutionary defenders of the status quo ante: first, the old men who had ruled and ruined Yemen since the 1960s; second, and indirectly, both their foreign backers and spoilers in the neighbouring petro-monarchies and the American security establishment.

The experiment of the National Dialogue Conference deserves to be seen as a Yemeni initiative drawing on indigenous precedents and activism, and thus as a possible avenue towards a new, negotiated social contract between regions, parties and stakeholders in a pluralistic and decentralized polity. At the same time, the GCC Initiative also needs to be understood as a Western-backed effort by wealthy, misogynistic and distinctly anti-democratic gerontocracies to tame popular energies, partly by co-opting key elites into a process of managed political change and security restructuring.

It is important to note that both of these different readings offer the potential to reduce or avert armed conflict. In the best-case scenario, negotiations between various Yemeni forces and interested foreign parties could put the Huthi rebellion to rest, prevent a replay in 2014 of the 1994 civil war, and perhaps even eliminate the presence of Yemeni and especially foreign al-Qa'ida operatives in the country – thus, with any luck, removing the perceived need for American and/or Saudi airstrikes. The atrocious bloodletting in Syria, Egypt's haphazard top-down post-Mubarak constitutional revisions, and the ignominious example of

gunpoint regime change in Iraq all tend to point to Yemen as a positive model. Yemen deserves credit for drawing on its tradition of dialogue to draw representative elites into a national conversation. The role of rich neighbours and Western powers should also be acknowledged for facilitating talks rather than (or perhaps just in addition to) simply bankrolling clients. Something good might come from the Dialogue; prospects for disaster might be foreclosed.

By the same token, there is a world of difference between pursuing justice and supporting a securitized ‘rule of law’. If the GCC Initiative and the National Dialogue are to be deemed a success, they will need to deliver more than the professionalization of Yemen’s military and security forces under new commands whose primary mission is to protect the US and the GCC from al-Qa’ida. International donors recognize that Yemen faces many daunting humanitarian, environmental, social, legal and political challenges that need to be addressed if a modicum of security is to be achieved. Dozens of development agencies are pursuing large and small projects in these and other fields. Yet security spending – including both direct military expenditures and security assistance – dwarfs all other forms of foreign aid and investment, because the two most influential foreign actors regard Yemen mainly as a battlefield in the global war on terror. These heavy expenditures do not meet the needs of starving millions for economic relief, the pleas of the ‘peaceful youth’ for demilitarization, or human rights concerns about extrajudicial executions. Instead, military actions and involvement, as well as weapons transfers, have provoked widespread mistrust of American motives and alienated some of the country’s most articulate political activists. To the extent that the GCC Initiative is perceived by the public as a donor project aimed at stability rather than a Yemeni project for social justice, it runs the risk of minimizing rather than maximizing prospects for democratization.

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