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# Reclaiming Yemen: The Role of the Yemeni Professional Diaspora

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THE YEMENI PROFESSIONAL DIASPORA**

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# BROOKINGS

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Noha Aboueldahab  
Doha, April 2019

## EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

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Little is known about the Yemeni diaspora's engagement in recent political developments in Yemen. This group of Yemenis includes professionals from diverse backgrounds who actively engage in efforts to improve the political and economic situation in Yemen. This paper finds that Yemeni diaspora actors, particularly those who have departed from Yemen since 2014, are a valuable, but largely untapped, resource for the international policymaking community. The poor mobilization and coordination among these Yemeni professionals is a major challenge that is inseparable from the polarization in their home country. Nevertheless, they should be key partners in shaping the international and domestic policies that affect them and the situation in Yemen.

This paper examines the efforts of Yemeni professional diaspora members to influence, challenge, and shape policies addressing their country's political crises. The ability of international policymakers, non-governmental organizations (NGOs), journalists, and researchers to access significant parts of Yemen remains severely limited by the ongoing war. Yemenis outside of Yemen, however, are an immediately accessible and indispensable resource for policymakers, and could help enhance the latter's impact during the conflict, transitional, and post-conflict periods.

The Yemeni professional diaspora, however, is far from homogenous in its composition and objectives. Diaspora members disagree, for instance, on how best to revive the transitional process in Yemen. Still, they share common frustrations regarding the international community's engagement with them (or lack thereof) and regarding the conflict in Yemen more broadly. Their overarching concern is that policymakers engage in a superficial, tokenizing manner with Yemenis both inside and outside of Yemen, whether at domestic negotiations or peace talks.

Three principal observations emerge from this paper's findings, which are largely based on interviews with leading members of the Yemeni professional diaspora. First, the Yemeni diaspora serves a powerful awareness-raising role by unpacking and underscoring the complexities of the local economic, political, and social dynamics of Yemen. Yemeni diaspora members aim to ensure that influential

Western policymakers and the media are better informed about the Yemeni context, and have consciously prioritized efforts to counter what they view as a superficial, misguided, and misinformed narrative upon which international actors overwhelmingly base their policies. Secondly, Yemeni diaspora actors have shared their expertise and made their country physically accessible to foreign journalists and scholars. While challenges remain, this expertise and access have nevertheless facilitated the production of better-quality journalism on the situation in Yemen, particularly for Western audiences. Finally, despite deep divisions and aggressive polarization among Yemenis inside and outside of Yemen, the interviewees demonstrated that they agree on a number of policy approaches to help alleviate, or even end, the conflict.

Rather than present policy recommendations for conflict resolution in Yemen, this paper instead foregrounds a largely overlooked set of actors—the Yemeni professional diaspora—whose political engagement continues to be overshadowed by a misinformed and disinterested international community. It is their policy recommendations, informed by locally-based Yemenis and supported by partnerships with international actors, that should be at the center of reclaiming Yemen.

## INTRODUCTION

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Little is known about the Yemeni diaspora's engagement in recent political developments in Yemen. Many reports and analyses that address the country's conflict tend to focus on the role of external political actors in steering the war via proxies to fulfill their geopolitical ambitions. Meanwhile, international policymakers have tended to view the conflict through a binary lens, according to which the "Iranian-backed" Houthis are pitted against the government of President Abed Rabbo Mansour Hadi. Yemen analysts and scholars have repeatedly warned against this binary as "deeply and dangerously misleading."<sup>1</sup> And yet, the role of Yemenis who have fled to or re-settled in foreign countries has received minimal attention from scholars and practitioners.<sup>2</sup> This group of Yemenis includes professionals from diverse backgrounds who actively engage in efforts to improve the political and economic situation in Yemen. Despite poor, and in some cases non-existent, mobilization and coordination among these Yemeni professionals, they should be key partners in shaping the international and domestic policies that affect them and their country.

This paper examines the efforts of Yemeni professional diaspora members to influence, challenge, and shape policies addressing their country's political crises. The ability of international policymakers and non-governmental organizations (NGOs) to access significant parts of Yemen remains severely limited by the ongoing war.<sup>3</sup> Journalists and researchers also face difficulties in gaining on-the-ground access, a situation that, combined with rampant propaganda in media coverage of the war, has created a context that is not "conducive to sustained, rigorous, empirically and theoretically informed analysis of Yemen."<sup>4</sup> Yemenis outside of Yemen, however, are an immediately accessible and indispensable resource for policymakers, and could help enhance the latter's impact during the conflict, transitional, and post-conflict periods.

The older Yemeni diaspora is diverse and has a lengthy history, especially in countries such as Indonesia, Djibouti, the United Kingdom, Saudi Arabia, and Malaysia.<sup>5</sup> This paper, however, largely focuses on the "fresh" Yemeni diaspora, which includes those Yemenis who fled the country following the Houthi rebel takeover of Sanaa in September 2014 and the Saudi-led coalition's ensuing



military intervention in March 2015.<sup>6</sup> This group of Yemenis is small, but has great potential to be influential. It includes judges, activists, journalists, intellectuals, artists, doctors, civil society leaders, and former politicians, many of whom fled for their safety.

The paper draws on material gathered from 17 in-depth and semi-structured interviews conducted in 2018 with Yemeni professionals who are predominantly based outside of Yemen and who are, or recently were, actively engaged in the political, cultural, and economic developments inside their country.<sup>7</sup> The group of interviewees comprises 11 women and six men of varying geographic, ethnic, and professional backgrounds, including civil society leaders, activists, scholars, artists, students, former politicians, journalists, and one filmmaker. Some have been unable to return to Yemen since they left, while others return on a regular basis. One interviewee is based in the Yemeni capital, Sanaa, but travels abroad intermittently and engages with Yemeni diaspora actors and international policymakers. Most of the interviewees made clear their intention to return to live in Yemen as soon as the violence has subsided. The interviews were conducted in Arabic and English and were multi-sited, with interviewees based in Amman, Beirut, Berlin, Cairo, Doha, Hamburg, Lille, London, New York, Sanaa, Vienna, and Washington D.C. By examining the transnational activism and political efforts of these individuals in multiple host country contexts, the paper aims to highlight the “dispersedness” of the Yemeni professional diaspora, as well as the consequent challenges they face and the policy opportunities they seek to advance.<sup>8</sup>

This sample is not representative of the Yemeni diaspora. By virtue of the professional makeup of the interviewees, the findings are generated by an elite sample of the population and do not capture the diversity of Yemeni insight and opinions. The question of how Yemenis inside Yemen perceive this elite sample of Yemenis is beyond the scope of this paper, but is an important area for further research. The paper will explore, however, how the “relative security and affluence” of Yemeni professional diaspora members enhances their ability to engage with and challenge host country policy approaches toward Yemen.<sup>9</sup>

The Yemeni professional diaspora possesses distinct attributes that could enable it to promote effective policymaking: its members retain strong personal and professional ties to their country, as well as have access to host country policymakers and to international policy influencers. Since policies regarding the conflict in Yemen are overwhelmingly internationalized, the Yemeni professional diaspora has the potential to re-orient the focus of international policymakers, so that they can more adequately address the internal challenges and opportunities

for conflict resolution in Yemen.<sup>10</sup> As such, the findings of this paper relate primarily to reclaiming Yemen via Yemeni-led efforts to expand the parameters of how to address the current conflict.

Three principal observations emerge from this paper's findings. First, the Yemeni diaspora serves a powerful awareness-raising role by unpacking and underscoring the complexities of the local economic, political, and social dynamics of Yemen. Yemeni diaspora members aim to ensure that influential Western policymakers and the media are better informed about the Yemeni context, and have consciously prioritized efforts to counter what they view as a superficial, misguided, and misinformed narrative upon which international actors overwhelmingly base their policies. Secondly, Yemeni diaspora actors have shared their expertise and made their country physically accessible to foreign journalists and scholars. While challenges remain, this expertise and access have nevertheless facilitated the production of better-quality journalism on the situation in Yemen, particularly for Western audiences. Finally, despite deep divisions and aggressive polarization among Yemenis inside and outside of Yemen, the interviewees demonstrated that they agree on a number of policy approaches to help alleviate, or even end, the conflict. This paper finds that Yemeni diaspora actors, particularly those who have departed from Yemen since 2014, are a valuable, but largely untapped, resource for the international policymaking community. The poor mobilization and coordination among these Yemeni professionals is a major challenge that is inseparable from the polarization in their home country. Nevertheless, they should be key partners in shaping the international and domestic policies that affect them and the situation in Yemen.

The paper will begin with a brief overview of the current conflict in Yemen. It will then situate the analysis within existing scholarship on the role of diasporas in policymaking, after which it will outline the findings of interviews with members of the Yemeni professional diaspora. The findings address the challenges faced and strategies pursued by the diaspora members in their transnational efforts to influence and expand international actors' policy approaches toward the conflict. The paper will conclude with policy recommendations, calling on international actors to engage with the Yemeni professional diaspora in shaping international and domestic policies targeting the multiple crises in Yemen.

## A HISTORY BETWEEN WAR AND PEACE

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Yemen has had a long and difficult history of internal strife. From 1962 to 1970, Republicans fought a war against supporters of the Mutawakkilite Kingdom, which had ruled North Yemen since gaining independence from the Ottoman Empire in 1918. This civil war in North Yemen led to the declaration of the Yemen Arab Republic in 1962. South Yemen was a protectorate of the British Empire between 1839 and 1967. Ali Abdullah Saleh became president of North Yemen in 1978, after which he led the unification of the North and South, which took effect in 1990, creating the Republic of Yemen. A civil war broke out in 1994, during which the South attempted to secede from the union. This attempt was crushed, and the South has, for decades since, expressed grievances related to social, political, and economic marginalization. Hiraq, a separatist movement in the South, emerged in 2007, eventually engaging in a series of violent clashes with Saleh's military and security forces. Meanwhile, Saleh and his domestic allies fought a number of other wars in Yemen, including against the Houthis, a Zaydi Shiite group vying for political control.<sup>11</sup> Between 2004 and 2010, General Ali Mohsen al-Ahmar led six wars against the Houthis, but did not succeed in defeating them completely.<sup>12</sup>

As in several other Arab countries, a massive anti-government uprising erupted in Yemen in 2011. Unlike his counterparts in Egypt, Libya, and Tunisia, Saleh stepped down in a Gulf Cooperation Council (GCC) brokered agreement that guaranteed his immunity from prosecution. Hadi, his vice president of 16 years, became president of Yemen in 2012. The GCC-brokered deal, however, failed to prevent Saleh's forceful political and military comeback, during which he formed an alliance with the Houthis and moved to oust Hadi from power.

The current war, triggered by the Houthi rebel takeover of Sanaa in September 2014 and the ensuing Saudi-led military intervention in March 2015, has sent the country further into turmoil. The Saudi-led coalition, often referred to as the "Arab coalition," intervened at Hadi's request, with the objective of restoring the so-called legitimate government of Yemen. More than four years later, this objective has not been achieved, despite more than 19,000 airstrikes conducted by the Saudi-led coalition against the Houthis, as well as a blockade on Yemen's

ports and airports.<sup>13</sup> These actions have had a devastating impact on the Yemeni population. Moreover, in a sharp turn of events in 2017, Saleh announced his willingness to engage in dialogue with the Saudi-led coalition. The Houthis immediately viewed this shift as treason, since Saleh had allied himself with them in 2015, and killed him in December 2017.

A number of other factors have complicated the prospects for resolving the conflict in Yemen, including the intensification of the Southern secessionist movement, the expansion of al-Qaida in the Arabian Peninsula (AQAP), and drone attacks conducted by the United States as part of its counterterrorism strategy in Yemen. Corruption and dysfunction have also plagued the Yemeni government, which has failed to pay many civil servant salaries since 2016, exacerbating the ongoing economic crisis.<sup>14</sup> The United Nations describes the current situation in Yemen as one of the world's worst humanitarian crises since World War II.<sup>15</sup>

Following a string of failed peace talks, a breakthrough was reached during negotiations in Sweden in December 2018. This meeting resulted in the Stockholm Agreement, which laid out a plan for a ceasefire in Hodeida, a strategic port and major frontline in the war. Appointed as the third U.N. special envoy for Yemen in February 2018, Martin Griffiths has continually tried to bring the warring parties to the table.

However, the multiplicity of parties to the conflict has complicated prospects for a resolution that addresses the needs of Yemenis. Several Western governments, including the United Kingdom, United States, Canada, France, and Australia, have maintained their lucrative arms deals with Saudi Arabia, despite international outcry as a result of the war's devastating human toll, most of which has been directly caused by the Saudi-led coalition's military actions in Yemen since 2015.<sup>16</sup> In particular, continued U.S. support for the Saudi-led coalition stems in part from fears of Iranian expansion in Yemen and the region, given Iran's political support for the Houthis.<sup>17</sup> As a result, the war in Yemen has become overwhelmingly internationalized, and policymakers aiming to address the situation significantly overlook—and even dismiss—Yemeni-led efforts to shape the decision-making process. Before examining these efforts more closely, the next section outlines relevant literature on the role of diasporas in shaping policies affecting their home countries and identifies issues relevant to the Yemeni case.

# GLOBAL DIASPORAS AND POLITICAL ENGAGEMENT

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Much of the literature on how diasporas engage with their home countries centers on economic support via remittances, humanitarian aid, and development projects.<sup>18</sup> Scholars have also examined questions regarding the social integration and cultural identities of diasporas, as well as their political participation in their host countries.<sup>19</sup> Within this scholarship, there is a growing body of literature that analyzes how diasporas engage with policymakers in host countries with a view to influencing home country politics, including contexts in which there is ongoing violent conflict.<sup>20</sup> Still, more research is needed to better understand the political engagement of diaspora actors and the ways in which they influence, challenge, and shape policy discourses and decision-making that affect their home countries. Maria Koinova underscores the importance of mainstreaming diaspora studies, even in cases where the state remains the predominant decision-making actor. She argues that “in a world of increasingly networked populations...attention to diaspora mobilisation could become an integral part of political, economic, and social analyses, which at present have a blind spot for diasporas as agents and their contextual embeddedness.”<sup>21</sup> Questions persist surrounding how such diaspora political engagement takes place in contexts of protracted violent conflict in home countries. Importantly, the role of diasporas in international relations, the foreign policies of host countries, and “migration incorporation regimes” are areas that “have largely proceeded in isolation from each other...[and must] be integrated to capture how specific contextual factors shape migrants’ transnational activism.”<sup>22</sup>

While tensions within diasporas are common, political divisions among the Yemeni diaspora are compounded by a number of factors. Dana M. Moss explains that Yemeni communities outside of Yemen experience challenges in mobilizing to send humanitarian aid to their home country. This is because of disagreements concerning “who has the right to speak and mobilize for the relief effort and where aid should be directed,” in addition to counterterrorism measures that prevent effective humanitarian mobilization.<sup>23</sup> For example, Yemenis who reside in the United States fear that financial remittances to their relatives in Yemen will be “mistaken as support for terrorism,” especially following the Muslim travel

ban imposed by President Donald Trump, which includes a ban on Yemenis wishing to enter the United States.<sup>24</sup> Moss argues that the curtailment of minority rights in the name of the war against terrorism has directly impacted “Yemenis’ collective abilities and willingness to resource relief efforts across borders.”<sup>25</sup> For one of the world’s worst humanitarian crises, this presents a significant obstacle to the delivery of much-needed aid.

Since the anti-government Arab uprisings of 2011, the literature on Arab diaspora mobilization has grown significantly.<sup>26</sup> In addition to analyzing political divisions and tensions among diaspora community members, scholars have identified a number of other challenges that these individuals face in effectively mobilizing to improve the situations in their home countries. For example, “homeland repression” often extends across borders in the form of global surveillance and threats, pushing diaspora members to refrain from engaging in any kind of mobilization or political activity.<sup>27</sup> In her discussion of extraterritorial authoritarian practices, Marlies Glasius examines the inclusion of diaspora actors “as subjects,” rather than as “citizens,” of authoritarian states.<sup>28</sup> The result is that authoritarian states extend the reach of their repressive practices to such “subjects” transnationally, as a way for governments to assert “authority ‘as if’ the subject[s] were still on [their] territory.”<sup>29</sup>

As Emma Lundgren Jörum observes in her discussion of the Syrian diaspora in Sweden, one consequence of this transterritorial repression is that “citizens with roots in certain authoritarian states are effectively discouraged from exercising their constitutional rights.”<sup>30</sup> This means that diaspora members wishing to influence policies affecting their home countries must first weigh the consequences of doing so, particularly if the home state regimes engage in this sort of transnational repression. Most troubling, however, is that the increasing use of threats, global surveillance, and illicit intelligence gathering to monitor the activities of diaspora members restricts the ability of these individuals to fully engage in political mobilization, no matter how peaceful. Attempts to coordinate and influence policies that affect their home countries thus become exceedingly difficult. Such surveillance also directly threatens the lives of the relatives of diaspora members who still reside in the home country.<sup>31</sup> The Yemeni professional diaspora has not been immune to this kind of global surveillance and intimidation.

Moreover, intra-diaspora distrust and polarization exacerbate this lack of mobilization.<sup>32</sup> Cecilia Baeza and Paulo Pinto’s discussion about the pro-Bashar Assad Syrian diaspora in Argentina and Brazil demonstrates how layers of intimidation, sectarian polarization, and political division complicate prospects

for effective mobilization of the anti-Assad diaspora. Pro-Assad Syrians in Argentina and Brazil have, to a certain extent, succeeded in soliciting support from Brazilian and Argentinian government officials for the Syrian regime. This part of the Syrian diaspora, Baeza and Pinto contend, exploited anti-imperialist sentiment in Latin America as a catalyst for pro-Assad mobilization. The “‘anti-imperialist’ struggle of the Syrian regime,” they continue, “found eager interlocutors in the Argentinean and Brazilian political landscapes.”<sup>33</sup> This argument was made in the context of the impending U.S. military intervention in Syria in 2013, following the chemical attack in the Ghouta area surrounding the Syrian city of Damascus. By framing Western military intervention as imperial, pro-Assad Syrians won the sympathy of powerful individuals in their host countries’ governments.

Baeza and Pinto’s illuminating discussion focuses on the more established Syrian diaspora in Argentina and Brazil, which exerted significant influence over the political views of these countries’ governments. Still, Moss’ empirical study on Syrian diaspora mobilization found that other diaspora members were *supportive* of Western military intervention. Such intervention (in the form of no-fly zones, as opposed to the ground troops and invasion that characterized the U.S. military intervention in Iraq) was deemed necessary to help address the immediate urgency of saving lives.<sup>34</sup> Moss demonstrates that many of those who supported Western military intervention in Syria also professed their anti-imperialist dispositions, with Western intervention perceived “as the best bad option” to help the revolution’s cause.<sup>35</sup> Divisions within diasporas, then, emerge on different social and political levels. They can shift depending on the length of time individuals within the diaspora have resided outside their home countries, as well as on the strength of their relationships with host country governments.

The media is another factor that influences policymaking. Literature on the relationship between the media’s issue-framing role and policymaking is robust.<sup>36</sup> Scholars believe that the media can have a powerful impact on the policy process, especially as it “can establish the nature, sources, and consequences of policy issues in ways that fundamentally change not just the attention paid to those issues, but the different types of policy solutions sought.”<sup>37</sup> Indeed, as Stuart Soroka et al. argue, “Policymakers are not simply affected by issue framing in the media, but they actively engage in policy framing.”<sup>38</sup> Less prevalent is research on how diaspora members engage with the media to influence policies affecting their home countries. The next section aims to address this gap in the literature by outlining how the Yemeni professional diaspora has prioritized the use of media in order to shape its agenda-setting and issue-framing roles regarding the conflict in Yemen.

## AN ENGAGEMENT STRATEGY BORNE OF FRUSTRATIONS

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The extent to which the recent Yemeni professional diaspora has formed organized networks is not well understood. What steps, if any, are Yemenis taking to reclaim their country from internal and external forces, both now and after the cessation of violence?<sup>39</sup> What are their objectives? One observation that clearly emerges is that, despite having to struggle with deep divisions and polarization, Yemeni diaspora members are powerful actors who have great potential to push for a Yemeni-led resolution to an overwhelmingly internationalized conflict. They are powerful because of the depth and diversity of knowledge they hold about a complex country; they have great potential because of their access to international, host, and home country policymakers, as well as the “relative security” and mobility with which they operate.<sup>40</sup> However, many international policymakers do not engage with Yemeni diaspora members in a meaningful or effective way, making it more difficult to formulate policies that reflect Yemenis’ goals with respect to conflict resolution and the subsequent transitional process.

Yemeni diaspora actors engage in a multi-pronged advocacy strategy that is not necessarily coordinated. The actions of individuals and stand-alone organizations constitute the bulk of the diaspora’s political engagement with Yemen. While such individuals and organizations work with Yemen-based and international organizations, they do not form part of a broader, organized network or movement with shared, specific objectives. Their strategy can be described as ad hoc coordination, involving activities such as testifying at host country government agencies, engaging with the media, generating research, producing and showcasing art, participating in formal and informal meetings with diplomats and international organizations, sharing information via social media, and facilitating access to Yemen for international journalists and scholars. This media access involves facilitating transport to and within Yemen, as well as providing advice on key Yemeni actors to interview on the ground.

Through such efforts, the Yemeni professional diaspora seeks to educate international actors about Yemen by providing policymakers and the media with insights “from the ground,” thereby countering dire misinformation at the



international level about the unfolding crisis and local political dynamics.<sup>41</sup> These diaspora members are concerned about the media's overwhelming use of the humanitarian narrative to explain the conflict in Yemen. While important, they feel that this narrative cannot be separated from the broader political factors that have created and perpetuated the humanitarian crisis. As Soroka et al. underscore, several studies suggest "that the complexity of issues seriously constrains the potential for media effects, on both the public and policy-makers."<sup>42</sup> In this way, the complexity of the conflict in Yemen has, in part, deterred policymakers and the public from a more meaningful and careful engagement with it. The Yemeni professional diaspora members, then, view media engagement as an important strategy, if they are to have any impact on enhancing, or indeed correcting, the public's understanding of the conflict and how it can be resolved.

As discussed, the Yemeni diaspora serves a powerful awareness-raising role by foregrounding the historical complexities of the local economic, political, and social dynamics of the country. Diaspora members pursue a number of strategies that target host country policymakers and public opinion. For example, certain Yemenis, particularly those residing in European and North American capitals, testify before host country government agencies, as well as before United Nations bodies, such as the Human Rights Council. Yemeni civil society activists, scholars, and former politicians regularly hold formal and informal meetings with diplomats and high-level international civil servants, such as the U.N. special envoy for Yemen. Diaspora members also produce research at Yemeni and international research institutions and think tanks, based in cities ranging from Sanaa, Beirut, and Istanbul to London, New York, and Washington D.C. A loose, but important, Yemeni intellectual network is thus easily accessible to international policymakers. A network of Yemeni artists in Europe and Yemen has also served an awareness-raising role through exhibitions that weave together themes of art, culture, politics, humanitarian catastrophe, media, and the Yemeni diaspora.

#### **POLARIZATION: PAYING A PRICE FOR INDEPENDENT VOICES**

But those same networks have also often become hostile spaces, where distrust and polarization among Yemeni professional diaspora members are thrown into sharp relief. Divisions emerge at the personal and political levels. Some diaspora members support the Saudi-led coalition's continued military intervention, while some support according the Houthis some form of political power in a federal-style form of governance. Still others reject any role for the Houthis entirely, while others reject the legitimacy of the Hadi government, stating that the mandate for Hadi's presidency expired in 2014. Others disagree on the merits of reviving the National Dialogue Conference (NDC) outcomes once the conflict subsides.

Personal accusations are often borne of such political differences: “I don’t trust her—she’s a Houthi!”; “His pockets are surely filled by the Saudis”; “How can he have such a large apartment in London? Is it a coincidence he is pro-war? I think he has either been coerced or he gets paid to spew pro-war ideas.”<sup>43</sup>

All of the interviewees expressed dismay and frustration regarding the obstacle such polarization poses to any kind of effective Yemeni mobilization outside of Yemen. Baraa Shibani, a civil society activist based in London and NDC member, noted, “Conflict polarizes society. You can’t really bring a coherent framework and say this is what the majority of groups agree on. For me, the most concerning issue is that this allows international organizations to hijack the voices of local civil society.”<sup>44</sup> Shibani also warned against the practice of including token Yemenis on panels organized by international organizations without thinking through whom those Yemenis represent (or do not represent). He argued that this results in a disconnect between what Yemenis on the ground want and the priorities of foreign governments and international organizations.<sup>45</sup> Shibani emphasized that it is important for public forums on Yemen to include Yemenis of varying backgrounds and opinions. Another Yemeni scholar and civil society professional expressed a dilemma that she struggles with: recognizing that polarization is normal at times of war, but finding difficulty in working with those she strongly disagrees with. As she said, “We can better mobilize, but we are divided because of the war. It’s hard for me to say because the people I disagree with—I don’t want them to be more mobilized! A lot of us have strong political opinions and that makes us overlook some critical things, like how the war is affecting civilians.”<sup>46</sup>

## TRANSNATIONAL REPRESSION AND GLOBAL SURVEILLANCE

The intense polarization of the Yemeni professional diaspora has far-reaching and adverse consequences for effective policymaking. Several interviewees pointed to the repercussions that have been faced by those Yemenis who claim to be “independent.” This group of “independent” Yemenis is large and far from homogenous. When the “independent” interviewees were asked why they identify as such, they all responded that they are anti-Arab coalition, anti-Houthi, and anti-Hadi government because of the alleged crimes committed by those three parties and their allies. As a result of their views, they face retaliation in the form of online harassment, intimidation, heckling at public talks delivered by Yemenis in foreign countries, and even deportation. The interviewees identified global surveillance, or illicit intelligence gathering targeting Yemenis abroad, as a major challenge that they have had to grapple with when engaging in efforts to inform policymaking and public opinion on the situation in Yemen.

According to several interviewees, Yemeni diplomatic missions in foreign countries have been particularly active in their attempts to thwart the activities of Yemenis outside of Yemen. As a former Yemeni politician, who describes herself as “externally displaced,” put it, “The parties are using all constitutional and unconstitutional avenues to target dissenting voices. Especially those who speak about peace. Either you are with us or you can go to hell.”<sup>47</sup> Sama’a Hamdani, a Yemeni scholar, activist, and expert, added:

They want to fit you in a category, but they can’t figure out what that category is. Independent Yemenis are [perceived to be] a big threat because they don’t know who is moving them. My greatest opposition has become my own government. They have now put me in the Houthi sympathizer box because I am critical of the Hadi government and the war... When you have access to media, [all] political factions want to control what you say.<sup>48</sup>

Nawal Al Maghafi, a journalist based in London, agreed: “Independent Yemenis are the most vulnerable.”<sup>49</sup> Afrah Nasser, another Yemeni journalist, echoed similar concerns: “Objectivity is like a stigma. You’re either with us or against us. This negatively impacts efforts toward peace.”<sup>50</sup> Nasser also highlighted the impact of regional politics on the work of Egypt-based Yemeni journalists and bloggers, who have begun self-censoring “because of the crackdown on journalists.”<sup>51</sup>

Sectarian divisions have intensified as a result of such polarization. Some interviewees argued that such sectarian divisions have worsened as a result of the current war in Yemen. Atiaf Alwazir, who retreated from activism following her disillusionment with the fragmented Yemeni society both within and outside of Yemen, explained:

When the war started, people turned on each other very quickly and it became very much ‘oh your last name is this, so you must be Houthi,’ or ‘you are from this area, therefore you must be pro-Hadi.’ Suddenly, we started to hear ‘Zaydi, Sunni...’ we never heard this crap before! It was like the Bush doctrine: you are either with us, or against us.<sup>52</sup>

Bader Bin Hirsi, a Yemeni-British filmmaker based in London, also pointed to worsening sectarian politics and the adverse impact this trend has had on the ability of independent Yemenis to engage in Yemen-related activities. He explained how this has affected his own work as a filmmaker:

Many people are neither with the Houthis, nor with the Saudis. But if you’re part of the resistance, you are always pigeonholed. Your decision is to be Yemeni, but people assume you are either pro-Houthi or pro-Saudi. If I want to make a film that is anti-Houthi, I will find financing. If I want to

make a film that is anti-Saudi, I will find financing. If I want to make an independent film, I will not find financing. This war has opened a whole can of worms. No one trusts anyone.<sup>53</sup>

Still, other interviewees noted that sectarian divisions within Yemen have a long history, and it is the fact that they were never addressed properly that has led to their exacerbation in the current war. As one former politician explained, political violence in Yemen has been ongoing for decades, and today's conflict has roots stretching back to the unification of North and South Yemen in 1990. This interviewee attributed many of Yemen's current political crises to a history of "Gulf meddling" in Yemeni affairs, while also emphasizing the failure of the NDC process that took place between 2013 and 2014 to address these historic divides:

The transitional period, unfortunately, wasn't truly representative... There was 29 percent representation for women in the NDC. Who were they? Not a single representation of rural women—the illiterates, the ones who don't have glamorous presence. They [the Hadi government] said 'ah, these are independent women who can speak freely as opposed to their rural counterparts.' No, they were not independent. And regarding Southern representation, yes, it's true they made up 50 percent. But in reality, the southerners said, 'What are you talking about? Which south? The Hadi south? Or Hiraq? The post-unification south? Or pre-unification? Pre-independence south? Or post-independence south?'<sup>54</sup>

Despite these challenges, Yemenis continue to pursue a range of strategies aiming to educate policymakers, to inform public opinion about Yemen, and to expand the parameters of policy approaches to conflict resolution in Yemen. These efforts are primarily aimed at countering the mainstream media narrative that oversimplifies the conflict by presenting Yemen's complex war as one that is fought between two sides: the Houthis and the Hadi government, supported by the Saudi-led military coalition. The next section outlines the strategies and objectives of those Yemenis who devote a significant amount of their time and energy to these efforts.

## **POLITICS AS CULPRIT IN CREATING THE YEMENI HUMANITARIAN CRISIS**

One significant way in which Yemenis outside of Yemen engage with international policymakers is by testifying at various European parliaments, the U.S. Congress, the U.N. Human Rights Council, and the U.N. Security Council. These Yemenis' overall objective is to provide insight from the ground, in order to draw attention to issues that would not otherwise be discussed at such forums. Shibani stressed

that his efforts are predominantly aimed at ensuring that the voice of Yemeni civil society, which was quite prominent at a certain stage of the NDC process, is heard in international and Yemeni domestic and diaspora circles.<sup>55</sup> Another Yemeni scholar and civil society professional called on donors and the U.S. government to focus on bottom-up approaches to building Yemeni governance institutions. She and several others emphasized the importance of supporting formal and informal governance in Yemen at the local level, as well as devising policies to enhance security in Yemen that are not strictly contained within a counterterrorism framework. Shibani, who also argued for the importance of local governance, noted that such a discussion is “unpopular” among policymaking circles because “It’s easier to focus on the humanitarian side.”<sup>56</sup>

The international community’s focus on the humanitarian dimension of the conflict in Yemen is unsurprising, given the horrific extent of the devastation wrought by the war. However, as several interviewees noted, the “purely humanitarian approach” to the conflict is unhelpful. Farea Al Muslimi, who founded the Sana’a Center for Strategic Studies in 2014, describes this misguided focus as the “cholerization” of the conflict, in reference to the cholera epidemic that has infected over one million Yemenis.<sup>57</sup> As a result, international policymakers do not properly address pressing political issues and fail to effectively take into account the multiple—and multi-dimensional—sources of Yemen’s crises. Al Muslimi underscored the international community’s failure to adopt a strategy that tackles the political nature of the humanitarian crisis:

There are a lot of international efforts to shift the Yemen conversation into an aid conversation. It’s all about cholera, etc., but the conflict in Yemen is political goddamnit!<sup>58</sup>

Warfare in the form of mass starvation through blockades is a major tactic used by the warring parties in Yemen. And yet this crucial fact does not figure into policy considerations.<sup>59</sup> This is a great source of frustration for those Yemenis whose persistent efforts to draw attention to the broader and inextricable issues that perpetuate the humanitarian crisis in Yemen have thus far not yielded significant results.

International policymakers and diplomats have also largely addressed the conflict in Yemen within a narrow framework that prioritizes Sanaa, the Yemeni capital, and the Hadi government, which has been operating out of Riyadh since 2015. Several interviewees argued that this “Sanaa-lens” has grave consequences for the peace process, as it leads policymakers to overlook opportunities for conflict resolution that lie in other parts of Yemen, some of which are relatively stable in comparison to flashpoint areas such as Sanaa, Hodeida, and Taiz. The interviewees

placed great importance on the impact of media coverage on policymaking, arguing that the predominant media narrative is “very misleading—very focused on Sanaa and not the rest of the country.”<sup>60</sup> As Al Muslimi stated, “The problem in Yemen is misinformation.”<sup>61</sup>

Much of the work of Yemeni scholars and civil society activists outside of Yemen, then, involves informing policymakers and public opinion by providing first-hand knowledge and in-depth research on a broad spectrum of issues in the country. Al Muslimi explained that this is essentially what led to the formation of the Sana’a Center for Strategic Studies, which produces analyses on Yemen that cover a range of political, economic, regional, and international areas:

I was frustrated with the very little content internationally about Yemen and the fact that, when there is content, it is rubbish. So, we [started] the Sana’a Center. A Yemeni platform by Yemenis, for Yemenis, and to do research on Yemen. We have non-resident scholars in several countries. They are our ambassadors to the world. A big part of our research takes place ‘on the ground.’ We take the findings and communicate them to the world. Part of our agenda is to influence decision-making on Yemen. The Yemeni government or the Saudis spend \$2 million to try and influence decision-making through [public relations campaigns]. So, okay, I’ll spend two megabytes on the internet to do the same. We are more powerful in D.C. than Yemeni diplomatic missions. Because we are independent. Diplomats come to *us*.<sup>62</sup>

Nasser affirmed Al Muslimi’s view that the Sana’a Center has had a positive impact on the policymaking community, saying that “the Sana’a Center does what the foreign ministry failed to do.”<sup>63</sup> Misinformation and preconceptions regarding the conflict in Yemen have proven difficult to reverse, both regionally and internationally. Hamdani made this clear: “I realized that very few people understood what Yemen is. It wasn’t just the European or Western world. It was the Arabs themselves.”<sup>64</sup>

Art and culture have also emerged as attractive platforms for Yemenis of different backgrounds to express their views and hopes for their country to Yemeni and international audiences. Through residencies, workshops, and exhibitions, Yemeni artists like Ibi Ibrahim use art to promote dialogue among Yemenis of different backgrounds, even in the face of political divisions:

The art world is paying close attention to the region and Yemen must have a voice in that perspective...Poetry, for example, is very rich in Yemen. While Yemenis don’t speak to each other, I’m trying to see if I can ‘trick’ them by attracting attention through their poetry.<sup>65</sup>

Ibrahim explained that such artistic forms of political expression are a way he hopes to bring pro-Houthi Yemenis, pro-Saudi Yemenis, and others together in one space.

After retreating from public activism, Alwazir decided to write a novel set in Yemen, alongside her academic job in France. She described this writing process as “therapeutic, and my way of saying ‘ok, this is what I’m doing for Yemen.’ It’s not like what I used to do, but it’s something that I hope will show people that we’re not just what you see on TV.”<sup>66</sup> The emotional toll of the war in Yemen, the aggressive polarization that unfolded, and the absence of a “unified strategy” among diaspora members to impact policymaking on Yemen has led Alwazir to value the impact of individual actions. She referred to the popular Yemeni entrepreneur, Mokhtar Al-Khanshali, whose coffee business has flourished internationally and generated substantial revenues for Yemeni coffee farmers.<sup>67</sup> Alwazir concludes: “I think we should focus on individuals, on targeting long-lasting things. How do you mend relationships? How do you keep Yemen alive outside of Yemen? Maintaining Yemen outside is resistance. It’s something you bring back to Yemen.”<sup>68</sup>

### **“THEY TALK TO US, BUT THEY DON’T LISTEN TO US.”**

Yemeni professionals interviewed for this paper expressed a common frustration: the tendency of international policymakers to dismiss—or not take seriously—their policy advice. One of them stressed that there is a difference between engagement and partnership. She finds the relationship between international actors (including representatives of foreign governments and the United Nations) and Yemeni experts to be problematic:

I don’t think it’s a partnership... I have been calling on donors to build local institutions like courts, police, [and] prisons in areas such as Maarib, Mukalla, Aden, etc. when there is turmoil in Sanaa. And they look at me like I’m stupid. They say ‘no, we want a peace process with the national government.’ This was their position since the beginning of the war. But now, this year, they are starting to work at the local level. So it’s only when they realize that a focus on the central government will not work, they change their strategy. It’s not because they listened to Yemenis. It’s because they realized it didn’t work. Why? They think they know how to resolve our conflict better than us. ‘Yemeni-led’ is their way, not our way. They talk to us, but they don’t listen to us.<sup>69</sup>

Al Muslimi’s experience has been similar, but he believes that the Sana’a Center has succeeded in convincing policymakers to take its work seriously. Still, he acknowledged that there are difficulties in the relationship, which he attributed

to the independent nature of the Sana'a Center: "They hate us for calling them out on their faulty policies, but they respect us."<sup>70</sup> Bin Hirsi, the filmmaker based in London, has been disappointed by what he described as the "ridiculously sensationalist" Western media. The opinion pieces he wrote in U.K. newspapers were, for example, always edited "in a way to fit their agenda—very sensationalist." He noted that "They all had preconceived ideas. It was a dilemma for me. What shall I do as an Arab director? That's when I chose [to] do my films. I didn't want to hand over to the Western media's preconceptions." Bin Hirsi elaborated on the implications of such global misinformation on Yemen:

A lot of people in Yemen think that [the war] is big news in the world. They think that the rest of the world is talking about Yemen every single day. But they don't know no one is caring. And that's when they realize we only have each other. Maybe this is a success—[an] awakening of Yemeni people that we can't rely on other countries. It is just us.<sup>71</sup>

Despite these challenges, the interviewees noted that there has been some level of success in maintaining visibility and countering misguided political narratives on Yemen. They believe that Yemenis working both inside and outside of Yemen are succeeding in making their testimonies accessible and compelling to key international stakeholders, including international NGOs, U.N. agencies, and foreign governments. The range of professions within this pool of Yemenis, including artists, filmmakers, scholars, and former politicians, means that efforts to educate non-Yemeni policymakers take multiple forms.

In the absence of broader mobilization, much of the impact generated by the Yemeni professional diaspora has been the result of work carried out by individuals, stand-alone organizations, and smaller-scale initiatives. As Alwazir lamented, "We don't have someone trying to bring Yemenis together."<sup>72</sup> The failure of Yemeni diaspora members to collaborate in a systematic and meaningful way among themselves is in part a result of the deep polarization that has plagued Yemenis over the course of the war. Efforts to form effective mobilization networks have been hampered by personal accusations, distrust, geopolitics, and fears stemming from global surveillance practices that include intimidation and coercion by both Yemeni and foreign actors. Mobilization has also been made difficult by the lack of international attention to the Yemeni cause and the limited mobility of Yemenis, who are even more constrained than refugees, asylum seekers, and exiled individuals from other countries, such as Syria. This limited mobility has resulted in a significantly smaller Yemeni presence in European and North American countries, which has consequently limited diaspora members' ability to influence policymakers or garner support from host country societies.



## CREATING SPACE TO MOBILIZE FOR YEMENI-LED POLICYMAKING

The challenges Yemenis both inside and outside of Yemen face in their efforts to effectively influence policymaking are not insurmountable. Progress was made following the intensive efforts of U.N. Special Envoy Griffiths during the Stockholm negotiations of December 2018. The warring parties agreed to implement a prisoner swap and, immediately following the negotiations, a ceasefire was declared in the strategic port of Hodeida.

Beyond these high-level political negotiations, the Yemeni professional diaspora and domestic Yemeni actors would benefit significantly from physical spaces where they could regularly exchange views and identify policy solutions in a respectful environment. Such venues would ideally be hosted by a “neutral” third party, such as a government or institution that is not involved in the political and military activities of the war. Neutral entities would also need to provide the necessary funding for these kinds of productive encounters, so as to avoid political sensitivities. It would also be important for such engagements to take place with a view to complementing and increasing the number of similar engagements inside Yemen.

Perhaps most importantly, those participating in such dialogue processes would need reassurance that the spaces within which they engage with other Yemenis and international policymakers would be free from repressive surveillance. This requirement would enable the formative stages of Yemeni policymaking to be more effective and inclusive, thus promoting the type of mobilization that the Yemeni professional diaspora currently lacks. Furthermore, given the localized and “highly differentiated experiences of the war” in Yemen, international donors and organizations should expand their reach and support to local community actors located outside of centralized locations like Sanaa.<sup>73</sup> This suggestion is central to the concerns of the Yemeni diaspora actors who remain actively engaged in Yemeni policymaking, as explained earlier.<sup>74</sup>

While this paper does not aim to present an in-depth guide to conflict resolution in Yemen, it is worth noting key areas where the views of Yemeni professional diaspora members have converged.<sup>75</sup> The latter half of the war has seen the warring parties increasingly focused on the fate of Hodeida port, due to its geostrategic importance as Yemen’s largest port in the Red Sea. Fighting near Hodeida was one of the significant developments of 2018, drawing concern from Yemenis and some international actors, most notably the United Nations, as Hodeida is a crucial port for processing humanitarian aid. In October 2018, U.S. Secretary of Defense Jim Mattis and Secretary of State Mike Pompeo called for a ceasefire in Hodeida, which gave impetus to the eventual start of negotiations in Stockholm

in December 2018. However, some Yemeni diaspora members had previously warned against a battle for Hodeida, calling for a ceasefire long before Mattis and Pompeo's statements.<sup>76</sup> Had the concerns of the Yemeni professional diaspora regarding this issue generated this kind of impetus when they were first raised, the worsening of the conflict may have been effectively mitigated much earlier.

In addition to calling for a political solution, many interviewees underscored the need to strengthen Yemeni decision-making power. They pointed to the need for international actors, including Western governments and institutions like the United Nations, to form more robust partnerships with Yemenis inside and outside of Yemen. Such partnerships would, they argue, strengthen Yemeni policy networks and re-orient what they view as international policymakers' misguided approach to the conflict in Yemen. They stress that these partnerships could lead to important deliberations on how to approach the formation of a transitional government, the drafting of a new constitution, and post-conflict governance.<sup>77</sup> Some interviewees argued that international concern about the war in Yemen rose in 2018 only because certain actors view Saudi foreign policies as destructive and destabilizing for the region. They claimed that, as such, these international actors are not concerned with how best to approach conflict resolution or how Yemen should reclaim its future, resulting in a "total disconnect between the international narrative and the local context."<sup>78</sup>

The question of how the Yemeni professional diaspora could contribute to reconstruction is also important, especially since post-conflict governance, like conflict itself, can often be heavily internationalized. Without diaspora involvement, there is a risk that the post-conflict period would repeat the current cycle of internationalized narratives and meddling, with the vast majority of Yemeni civilians continuing to suffer as a consequence. The role of the Yemeni diaspora in post-conflict governance, while beyond the scope of this paper, is a key area that should be examined closely in future research.<sup>79</sup>

## CONCLUSION

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Whether through the production of scholarly research at think tanks in Lebanon, the United States, Turkey, and the United Kingdom, or through art exhibits in Berlin and Paris, the Yemeni professional diaspora has unparalleled access to international policymakers, governments, organizations, media, and cultural institutions. Unfortunately, this access has rarely translated to influence. International policymakers in foreign governments, the United Nations, and the European Union must meaningfully partner with Yemeni professional diaspora members to formulate policies. These partnerships should not just aim to end the war, but also to ensure that post-conflict governance building is conducted in a way that addresses the needs and wishes of Yemenis in all their diversity.

The impact of the war in Yemen is not confined to the country. The war's devastating humanitarian toll, the vast grievances endured by Yemenis, and the high level of insecurity have all had dire regional and international consequences. The proxies that have thrived in the power vacuum created by the war have succeeded in exploiting the rampant corruption and war economy from which all parties to the conflict benefit. The process of addressing these political and economic voids can and should involve Yemenis both inside and outside of Yemen, and particularly those who have sustained an active engagement with their country's affairs. As this paper has demonstrated, there is no shortage of such Yemenis, but, unfortunately, they continue to be marginalized, and they struggle to effectively mobilize in policymaking that affects Yemen.

Despite a certain level of disillusionment with the United Nations' past political mediation role, many Yemenis agree that Griffiths, the U.N. special envoy for Yemen, continues to play an important role. This belief has primarily to do with ending the current war. It is unclear, however, who could take on a domestic leadership role to bring Yemen back on its feet, especially given the "breakdown of Yemen's social fabric," and the perceived weakness of Hadi, who runs his presidency in exile.<sup>80</sup>

It is therefore imperative that Yemenis inside and outside of Yemen are provided with safe spaces in which they can address their differences, identify areas of agreement, and begin working toward rebuilding their state and society immediately, without having to wait for the war to end. Donors and international institutions that are not involved in the current war are well placed to make such spaces available on a

continuous basis. These institutions include foreign ministries, as well as research institutes and cultural organizations. The dialogue that such spaces generate must not be confined to high-level political actors, who are often not representative of the diverse identities and socioeconomic backgrounds of Yemenis. Participants should include local actors from all parts of the country, women from rural and urban areas, Yemeni civil society members, scholars, former politicians, and artists.<sup>81</sup> Christian Testot, the French ambassador to Yemen, characterizes the way in which many diplomatic missions to Yemen operate outside of the country for security reasons as a far-from-ideal form of “nomadic diplomacy.” He warns that “The risk is, as the conflict lasts, of losing contact with reality in the form of ‘hotel lobby diplomacy’ which only the resumption of negotiations between all the parties, a condition of a return to the country, could avert.”<sup>82</sup> While this may be true for high-level negotiations, it does not necessarily have to be the case for much-needed engagement at the professional and grassroots levels.

Finally, foreign governments must work to prevent illicit intelligence gathering that targets Yemenis abroad. Such global surveillance has created a climate of fear, pushing some Yemeni diaspora members to retreat from activism in order to avoid violent repercussions. As discussed, this presents a serious obstacle to the effective mobilization of Yemenis, thereby aggravating the lack of Yemeni decision-making power. It also restricts their ability to practice the constitutional rights afforded them by their host countries.

Major differences aside, none of the Yemenis interviewed expressed a belief that the war requires a military solution.<sup>83</sup> All interviewees stressed the need for an immediate ceasefire, followed by an inclusive state-building process that is led by Yemenis without foreign meddling. They deemed partnerships with international donors, governments, and policymaking institutions as crucial, but emphasized that these must not trump the needs identified by Yemenis embedded in their country as well as by those in the diaspora who have been actively engaged in Yemeni politics.

Accessibility to Yemen remains severely limited by the ongoing war. Yemenis outside of Yemen, however, are an immediately accessible and indispensable resource for international policymakers to enhance their impact during the conflict, transitional, and post-conflict periods. Rather than present policy recommendations for conflict resolution in Yemen, this paper instead foregrounds a largely overlooked set of actors—the Yemeni professional diaspora—whose political engagement continues to be overshadowed by a misinformed and disinterested international community. It is their policy recommendations, informed by locally-based Yemenis and supported by partnerships with international actors, that should be at the center of reclaiming Yemen.

## ENDNOTES

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<sup>1</sup> Stacey Philbrick Yadav and Marc Lynch, “Why it won’t be easy to resolve Yemen’s many wars,” Project on Middle East Political Science (POMEPS), January 2017, <https://pomeps.org/2018/01/25/why-it-wont-be-easy-to-resolve-yemens-many-wars/>.

<sup>2</sup> Exceptions include Dana M. Moss’ prescient study, “A diaspora denied: Impediments to Yemeni mobilization for relief and reconstruction at home,” POMEPS, POMEPS Studies 29, January 2018, <https://pomeps.org/2018/01/11/a-diaspora-denied-impediments-to-yemeni-mobilization-for-relief-and-reconstruction-at-home/>.

<sup>3</sup> Scholars and journalists have traveled and continue to travel to Yemen to conduct research and reporting, but access is limited, risky, and unpredictable. This makes regular, on-the-ground field research and reporting very difficult.

<sup>4</sup> Yadav and Lynch, “Why it won’t be easy.”

<sup>5</sup> See Tim Smith, *Coal, Frankincense and Myrrh: Yemen and British Yemenis* (Stockport: Dewi Lewis Publishing, 2008); Samson A. Bezabeh, *Subjects of Empires/Citizens of States: Yemenis in Djibouti and Ethiopia* (Cairo: The American University in Cairo Press, 2016); Noel Brehony, ed., *Hadhramaut and its Diaspora: Yemeni Politics, Identity and Migration* (London: I.B. Tauris, 2017); Hassan Ahmed Ibrahim and Ahmed Ibrahim Abushouk, eds., *The Hadhrami Diaspora in Southeast Asia: Identity Maintenance or Assimilation?* (Leiden: Brill, 2009).

<sup>6</sup> Exceptions include: Yemenis who were born in Yemen but left as children and grew up in foreign countries; Yemenis who returned to Yemen during or immediately after the 2011 uprising, after spending most of their lives outside of Yemen; and Yemenis who continue to travel back and forth between their host countries and Yemen. One of the interviewees was always, and continues to be, based in Yemen, with occasional travel abroad for his activism.

<sup>7</sup> Some Yemeni professionals who were quite active in their political engagement and activism from abroad decided to withdraw from such activities, for reasons that are explained in subsequent sections of this paper.

<sup>8</sup> Marlies Glasius, “Extraterritorial authoritarian practices: a framework,” *Globalizations* 15, no. 2 (2018): 184, <https://doi.org/10.1080/14747731.2017.1403781>. Yemeni diaspora actors in Asia were not interviewed for this paper, primarily because of the stronger involvement of Western governments and policymaking circles in the war in Yemen.

<sup>9</sup> See Nicholas Van Hear and Robin Cohen, “Diasporas and conflict: distance, contiguity and spheres of engagement,” *Oxford Development Studies* 45, no. 2 (2017): 181, <https://doi.org/10.1080/13600818.2016.1160043>. Van Hear and Cohen further explain that the capacity of diaspora actors is “shaped... by security of status, having an income above subsistence level, having the freedom to speak out, and developing social competence and political literacy—and connecting to civil society by such means as lobbying, campaigning, speaking in public...” (174).

<sup>10</sup> While some interviewees view U.N. resolutions as an important component of addressing the conflict in Yemen, many believe that decisions taken at the regional and international levels fail to take into account the conflict’s domestic complexities. This is explained in more detail in Section IV, “An Engagement Strategy Borne of Frustrations.”

<sup>11</sup> Saleh's rule was also marked by a complex fight against al-Qaida, which had been carrying out attacks inside Yemen since 2000.

<sup>12</sup> Al-Ahmar held military leadership positions in Yemen for decades under Saleh. He defected during the 2011 uprising, and President Hadi appointed him as vice president in 2016.

<sup>13</sup> Numbers accurate as of January 2019 are available from the "Yemen Data Project," accessed March 17, 2019, <https://mailchi.mp/89dccc9c8978/february2019-yemen-data-project-update-469991>.

<sup>14</sup> Rua'a Alameri, "'No income for a year': Yemeni professionals endure war without salaries," *Al Arabiya*, September 12, 2017, <https://english.alarabiya.net/en/features/2017/09/12/-No-income-for-a-year-Yemeni-professionals-endure-war-without-salaries.html>. See also Elizabeth Dickinson, "Banking conflict exacerbates Yemen's cholera and famine," *Devex*, August 4, 2017, <https://www.devex.com/news/banking-conflict-exacerbates-yemen-s-cholera-and-famine-90716> and Muhammad Shukri, "Yemen's unpaid teachers strike as education crisis deepens," *BBC News*, October 5, 2017, <https://www.bbc.com/news/world-middle-east-41510350>.

<sup>15</sup> "UN: World facing greatest humanitarian crisis since 1945," *BBC News*, March 11, 2017, <https://www.bbc.com/news/world-africa-39238808>.

<sup>16</sup> According to the U.N. High Commissioner for Human Rights, "Situation of human rights in Yemen, including violations and abuses since September 2014," Report, August 2018, <https://www.ohchr.org/EN/NewsEvents/Pages/DisplayNews.aspx?NewsID=23479>: "From March 2015 to June 2018, there were at least 16,706 civilian casualties, with 6,475 killed and 10,231 injured in the conflict; however, the real figure is likely to be significantly higher. Coalition air strikes have caused most of the documented civilian casualties. In the past three years, such air strikes have hit residential areas, markets, funerals, weddings, detention facilities, civilian boats and even medical facilities." On the lucrative arms deals, see: Noha Aboueldahab, "Reaping the fruits of war in Yemen," Brookings Institution *Markaz* (blog), May 30, 2017, <https://www.brookings.edu/blog/markaz/2017/05/30/reaping-the-fruits-of-war-in-yemen/>; Noha Aboueldahab, "How can we defend human rights while selling arms to Saudi Arabia?" *The Globe and Mail*, September 9, 2018, <https://www.theglobeandmail.com/opinion/article-how-can-we-defend-human-rights-while-selling-arms-to-saudi-arabia/>; "Stop Arming Saudi Arabia," Campaign Against Arms Trade, October 19, 2018, <https://www.caat.org.uk/campaigns/stop-arming-saudi>.

<sup>17</sup> Adam Baron, Waleed Alhariri, and Anthony Biswell, "Trump and the Yemen War: Misrepresenting the Houthis as Iranian Proxies," Sana'a Center for Strategic Studies, Report, December 2017, [http://sanaacenter.org/files/Trump\\_and\\_the\\_Yemen\\_War.pdf](http://sanaacenter.org/files/Trump_and_the_Yemen_War.pdf); Elisabeth Kendall, "Iran's Fingerprints in Yemen: Real or Imagined?" Atlantic Council, Issue Brief, October 2017, <http://www.atlanticcouncil.org/publications/issue-briefs/iran-s-fingerprints-in-yemen-real-or-imagined>.

<sup>18</sup> See B. Lindsay Lowell and Stefka G. Gerova, "Diasporas and Economic Development: State of Knowledge," Georgetown University Institute for the Study of International Migration, September 2004, <http://www.worldbank.org/content/dam/Worldbank/GEP/GEParchives/GEP2006/LowellDiaspora.pdf>; Claire Beaugrand and Vincent Geisser, "Social Mobilization and Political Participation in the Diaspora During the 'Arab Spring,'" *Journal of Immigrant & Refugee Studies* 14, no. 3 (2016): 239–243, <https://www.tandfonline.com/doi/full/10.1080/15562948.2016.1212133>.

<sup>19</sup> Andrea Rigoni, “Democratic participation for migrant diasporas,” Council of Europe, Report of the Committee on Migration, Refugees and Displaced Persons, December 2014, <https://bit.ly/2OevWQ0>; Janet Elizabeth Reilly, “Becoming Transnational Citizens: The Liberian Diaspora’s Civic Engagement in the United States and in Homeland Peacebuilding,” (PhD diss., City University of New York, 2014), [https://academicworks.cuny.edu/cgi/viewcontent.cgi?article=1097&context=gc\\_etds](https://academicworks.cuny.edu/cgi/viewcontent.cgi?article=1097&context=gc_etds); Shaheen Nanji, “The Role of Host Countries in Diaspora-Driven Development: Canadian Policy and Practice,” (MA Thesis, Simon Fraser University, 2011), <http://summit.sfu.ca/item/11997>; Luis Roniger, Leonardo Senkman, Saúl Sosnowski, and Mario Sznajder, *Exile, Diaspora, and Return: Changing Cultural Landscapes in Argentina, Chile, Paraguay, and Uruguay* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2017).

<sup>20</sup> Fiona B. Adamson, “The Growing Importance of Diaspora Politics,” *Current History* 115, no. 784 (November 2016): 291–297, <https://eprints.soas.ac.uk/23209/>; Bahar Baser and Ashok Swain, “Stateless Diaspora Groups and their Repertoires of Nationalist Activism in Host Countries,” *Journal of International Relations* 8, no. 1 (2010): 37–60, <http://cadmus.eui.eu/handle/1814/14820>; Jenny Kuhlmann, “Political activism of the Zimbabwean diaspora: opportunities for, and challenges to, transnational mobilisation,” Graduate Centre Humanities and Social Sciences of the Research Academy Leipzig, Working Paper no. 5, 2010, <https://www.issuelab.org/resource/political-activismof-the-zimbabwean-diaspora-opportunities-for-and-challenges-to-transnational-mobilisation.html>; Paul Tabar, Jennifer Skulte-Ouais, May Habib, and Marie Murray, “Home Politics Abroad: The Role of the Lebanese Diaspora in Conflict, Peace Building and Democratic Development,” Lebanese American University Institute for Migration Studies, Final Technical Report, December 2012, <https://idl-bnc-idrc.dspacedirect.org/bitstream/handle/10625/50883/IDL-50883.pdf>; Terrence Lyons and Peter Mandaville, “Diasporas in Global Politics,” George Mason University Center for Global Studies, Policy Brief, June 2010, <https://www.gmu.edu/centers/globalstudies/publications/rpbop/policybriefGMTPJune2010.pdf>; Benhardt Edem Kofi Norglo, Margriet Goris, Rico Lie, and Antony Otieno Ong’ayo, “The African diaspora’s public participation in policy-making concerning Africa,” *Diaspora Studies* 9, no. 2 (2016): 83–99, <https://doi.org/10.1080/09739572.2016.1183889>; Camilla Orjuela, “Distant warriors, distant peace workers? Multiple diaspora roles in Sri Lanka’s violent conflict,” *Global Networks* 8, no. 4 (October 2008): 436–452, <https://doi.org/10.1111/j.1471-0374.2008.00233.x>; Van Hear and Cohen, “Diasporas and conflict”; Maria Koinova, “Why do conflict-generated diasporas pursue sovereignty-based claims through state-based or transnational channels? Armenian, Albanian and Palestinian diasporas in the UK compared,” *European Journal of International Relations* 20, no. 4 (March 2014): 1043–1071, <https://doi.org/10.1177/1354066113509115>.

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- <sup>37</sup> Soroka, Farnsworth, Lawlor, and Young, “Mass media,” 204.
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- <sup>39</sup> While recognizing that the set of internal actors is complex and cannot easily be categorized, interviewees identified militias as some of the most significant actors in terms of destabilizing the conflict and post-conflict periods. The term “external forces” here refers mainly to neighboring states, especially Iran, Saudi Arabia, and the United Arab Emirates.
- <sup>40</sup> Van Hear and Cohen, “Diasporas and conflict,” 181.
- <sup>41</sup> Interviewees used the term “misinformation” to refer to both a lack of information and deliberately misleading information about the crises in Yemen. Members of the Yemeni professional diaspora provide insights based on both the research that they conduct inside Yemen and interactions with their personal and professional networks in Yemen.
- <sup>42</sup> Soroka, Farnsworth, Lawlor, and Young, “Mass media,” 206.
- <sup>43</sup> Anonymous sources, interviews with the author, 2018.



<sup>44</sup> Baraa Shiban (civil society activist and NDC member), interview with the author, March 18, 2018. The NDC was a transitional process that began in March 2013 and concluded in January 2014. It consisted of nine working groups that addressed issues including sustainable development, military and security, transitional justice, good governance, rights and freedoms, independent entities, and state-building.

<sup>45</sup> Ibid.

<sup>46</sup> Yemeni scholar and civil society professional, interview with the author, April 5, 2018.

<sup>47</sup> Former Yemeni politician, interview with the author, April 1, 2018.

<sup>48</sup> Sama'a Hamdani (scholar, activist, and expert), interview with the author, March 28, 2018.

<sup>49</sup> Nawal Al Maghafi (journalist), interview with the author, May 29, 2018.

<sup>50</sup> Afrah Nasser (journalist), interview with the author, April 2, 2018.

<sup>51</sup> Ibid.

<sup>52</sup> Atiaf Alwazir (university professor), interview with the author, April 25, 2018.

<sup>53</sup> Bader Ben Hirsi (filmmaker), interview with the author, April 2018.

<sup>54</sup> This interviewee emphasized that the flawed southern representation at the NDC was "one of the major factors that resulted in its failure." Former Yemeni politician, interview with the author, April 1, 2018.

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<sup>58</sup> Farea Al Muslimi (founder of Sana'a Center), interview with the author, April 10, 2018.

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<sup>60</sup> Yemeni scholar, interview.

<sup>61</sup> Al Muslimi, interview.

<sup>62</sup> Ibid.

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<sup>65</sup> Ibi Ibrahim (artist), interview with the author, April 30, 2018. See "In the Land of Shattered Windows," <https://www.shatteredwindows.com>.

<sup>66</sup> Alwazir, interview.

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<sup>68</sup> Alwazir, interview.

<sup>69</sup> Yemeni scholar, interview.

<sup>70</sup> Al Muslimi, interview.

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<sup>74</sup> See endnote 61.

<sup>75</sup> See scope justification in “Introduction” section of this paper.

<sup>76</sup> Al Muslimi and anonymous sources, interviews with the author.

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<sup>78</sup> Baraa Shibani, “Struggling for ‘Justice’: Palestine, Syria and Yemen” (panel discussion, Doha Forum, Doha, Qatar, December 16, 2018).

<sup>79</sup> Dana M. Moss’ paper on this issue is an important starting point for such discussions. See endnote 3.

<sup>80</sup> Alwazir, interview.

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<sup>83</sup> This, of course, does not mean that all Yemenis are against the idea of a military solution. As explained earlier, this sample of the Yemeni professional diaspora is not representative of the entire Yemeni diaspora.

## ABOUT THE AUTHOR

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**N**oha Aboueldahab is a visiting fellow at the Brookings Doha Center. Her research focus is on transitional justice in the Arab region. Her book, *Transitional Justice and the Prosecution of Political Leaders in the Arab Region: A comparative study of Egypt, Libya, Tunisia and Yemen* (Oxford, Hart Publishing: 2017), challenges mainstream transitional justice practice and scholarship using original material from interviews she conducted in Egypt, Libya, Tunisia, and Yemen between 2011 and 2017.

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