Changing Seasons

The Arab Spring’s Position Within the Political Evolution of the Yemeni State

Alexandra Lewis
PRDU Working Paper Series

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Preface
This paper emerges from continuing doctoral research on violent crime and youth aggression in Yemen. It is influenced by three years of independent research on the Yemeni development context, fieldwork conducted in Yemen in 2010 with the Post-war Reconstruction and Development Unit (PRDU) at the University of York, consultations with governmental and non-governmental stakeholders obtained through such fieldwork, and independent distance research conducted through online surveys and social networking sites in 2011.

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Abstract

On the 17th of December, 2010, an unemployed graduate named Mohamad Bouazizi set himself on fire in protest against police harassment in Tunisia. His actions sparked uprisings across the Middle East and North Africa that brought rapid regime change to multiple nations. The Arab Spring of 2011 thereby emerged as the product of hundreds of thousands of people striving to have their voices heard. Yet it has largely been analysed as a phenomenon akin to a force of nature, and much of the resulting comparative research conducted in 2011 and 2012 has therefore been lacking in the kind of causal critique that would grant demonstrators real agency and unique identities. The unifying language of the Arab Spring, while it has offered a useful analytical paradigm, has masked the distinctiveness of political processes of change in individual contexts. It has therefore generated a dangerous analytical process, which can obscure the long-term continuity and entrenchment of political crises within given contexts, as is particularly evident concerning readings of change and transition in Yemen.

Introduction

The iconic death of Mohamad Bouazizi on 17 December 2010 is an historic event now associated with a period of phenomenal political change in the Middle East and North African region, which marked 2011 as a year of protest, sacrifice and transition. As the Tunisian Jasmine Revolution triggered by Bouazizi’s death spread from country to country, deposing leaders in Egypt, Libya and elsewhere, it was not long before the phenomenon became known in popular media as the ‘Arab Spring’ – a movement that allegedly marked the unifying pan-Arabic appeal of revolutionary fever, brought about by similar crises of protracted development challenges and entrenched authoritarianism in multiple contexts. As an analytical framework, the Arab Spring allowed for the discussion of change and reform within countries which hitherto had had little in common, with places like Cote d’Ivoire, Syria and Yemen not only constituting a massive geographical spread and representing two entirely different continents, but also holding positions that are between 16 and 51 places apart on the United Nations Development Programme’s Human Development Index. In fact, their rankings suggest such a huge difference in socio-economic and political conditions that it would have been extremely unlikely that these countries could at all have been studied comparatively under normal circumstances prior to the 2011 revolts.

Of course, it should also be remembered that the manifestations of the Arab Spring in each one of these contexts was likewise unique. United by mass protests at their onset, each country experienced the Arab Spring in their own way, with some, like Jordan, quickly placating demonstrators with the removal
of several notable public officials, and others, like Libya, attempting forceful repression and descending into all-out civil war. In light of these serious discrepancies, it remains questionable to what extent the Arab Spring offers a useful analytical lens for the study of given contexts. As shall be discussed further below, in relation to the Yemeni case study it is equally debatable how far 2011 can be taken as a step away from past continuities in the contemporary history of Arab Spring countries. In order to better understand the full implication of these analytical limitations, this paper aims to provide an overview of the evolution of the Arab Spring label and its use as an analytical framework within academic and practitioner research while striving to understand the root causes and varying manifestations of the Arab Spring in Yemen.

Yemen was hit by the Arab Spring particularly hard, and it is easy to forget that the causes of demonstrations in 2011 were strongly correlated with long-standing development-based grievances and security concerns. Demonstrations became firmly intertwined with existing struggles for power and representation, making them difficult to disentangle from local conflicts. While coverage of the Yemen crisis rightly focused on calls for institutional reform (as resulting from governmental corruption and a failure to incorporate competing narratives into the mainstream political sphere), one severe limitation of the Arab Spring framework is that it underplayed Yemen’s history throughout this time, which sets the country apart from other states in the region. The focus of much Arab Spring and post-Arab Spring research in Yemen has therefore remained on the urgency of the present: the sensationalism of democratic reform, a tendency that has been escalated by Yemen’s new mass-strike crisis in 2012 – dubbed the Revolution of Institutions – and emerging struggles between a post-Saleh state and a resurgent Al Qaeda in the Arab Peninsula (AQAP). Yet, as a result, both media and academic reports have often failed to touch on the viability of the ruling regime’s removal as a solution to the country’s on-going unrest, with President Saleh’s departure in 2012 now marking a new period of uncertainty for Yemen, and with little investigation into new potential political crises further down the road. This paper will therefore address issues of change and continuity in Yemen in order to determine whether the Yemeni Spring was a product of cross-national revolutionary fever, or whether it was in fact merely a new manifestation of old challenges.

The paper is divided into five sections. The first analyses the Arab Spring framework itself and is followed by a background of the Yemeni development context and its evolution. The third section provides an overview of events in 2011 and the fourth maps other on-going conflicts and political crises. The final section concludes by assessing the utility of the Arab Spring as a framework for the analysis of Yemen’s process of transition. Ultimately, the author finds that the Arab Spring framework is severely limited in its ability to interpret political events in Yemen, which are in fact inseparable from entrenched grievances and on-going struggles for increased access to resources and representation.
The Language and Framework of the Arab Spring

The defining image of the Arab Spring protests is that of self-immolation; the first case in this context being that of Mohammad Bouazzi, which was later to be repeated by young people and the unemployed in almost every country subsequently affected by mass public demonstrations. Shane S. Kazarian and Emmanuel Persad note that ‘suicide has been in evidence in every time period in recorded history and in almost every culture around the world’ (2001, p. 275), with numerous countries using suicide as a parable for self-sacrifice evoking a restoration of honour, an effort to bring about a turn in the progress of war through unanticipated self-destructive attacks on an enemy, or a call for political change. This has been evident in the self-immolation of Buddhist monks in the Vietnam War of 1955–1975 and that of students in Czechoslovakia and elsewhere in 1969. Nevertheless, the violent and painful act of self-annihilation through fire chosen by random citizens of Arab Spring countries as a way of demonstrating their frustrations with a repressive status quo seems to go against many of the pre-dating behavioural trends, particularly in its appeal and popularity.

Choosing an agonising end for themselves, with no guarantee of ensuring political change, these martyrs of the Arab Spring have effectively triggered wide-scale uprisings and political upheavals in countries where opposition throughout 2011 failed to be discouraged by overwhelmingly repressive government responses which, in the cases of Egypt, Libya, Syria and Yemen especially, have led to the deaths of hundreds of thousands of civilians. The language and label of the ‘Arab Spring’, as coupled with the broad analysis of political events that have occurred in the Middle East and North African region in 2011, have been developed in recognition of the fact that this period of violence, self-sacrifice and political change is historically unique and deserving
of new pathways of analysis. After all, as Randall Khun argues in his study on *The Role of Human Development in the Arab Spring*, ‘As we move further away from those initial events, we can look beyond the precipitating causes and consider the forces underlying the revolutions’ (2011, p. 1), and, as scholars of international development, it is very much our duty to do so.

As argued in the introduction to this paper, however, comparative analyses of Arab Spring countries come neither easily nor naturally, with many analysts, including Khun, striving to determine regional commonalities within a diverse set of development contexts that could have led to the rise of revolutionary fervour in 2011. Paradoxically, many identify positive socio-economic development as an important precursor of change, rather than a decline or shared worsening in living conditions, as may have been expected in times of nationwide calls for reform. Thus, Fouad Ajami notes that the Arab Spring ‘erupted in a small country on the margins of the Arab political experience, more educated and prosperous and linked to Europe than the norm’, before spreading to Egypt, a country that is significantly more prosperous than Yemen, for instance, and other states to later be affected (2012).

Similarly, Khun links the emergence of the Arab Spring to ‘the quiet but exceptional achievements of Arab nations in reducing mortality’ and ‘early childhood morbidity’ while generating improvements in ‘nutrition, schooling, and other dimensions of human capability’, so that there now exists ‘quantitative evidence linking human capability expansion to political mobilisation’ (p. 1). His analysis is supported by the work of multiple cultural psychologists, including David Matsumoto and Linda Juang, who have connected sudden socio-cultural change with the increased prevalence of suicidal behaviour, particularly within cultures ‘that foster high perceptions of external control’ (2004, p. 214), perhaps putting a different spin on the emergence of self-immolation as a form of political dissidence in 2011. Meanwhile, on the other side of the debate, Adeel Malik and Bassem Awadallah attribute the Arab Spring to ‘a clear economic underpinning’, writing that protests ‘were fuelled by poverty, unemployment and lack of economic opportunity’ (2011, p. 2), with increased unemployment across the region aggravated by the latent effects of the 2008 Global Economic Crisis, as well as by consistent population growth and rising resource scarcity.

While a gradual improvement in development indicators across the region is indeed evident in an analysis of *Human Development Index* data gathered over the past two decades (and a simultaneous increase in unemployment among young people and qualified graduates is reported in government surveys of many Arab Spring countries), both sides of the Arab Spring debate are supported by claims of increased access to social media in the Arab World. These claims have included Albrecht Hofheinz’ interpretation of rising internet usage across the region, which has been used to argue that increased awareness of the growing inequality between the global West, Far East and the rest of the world. This has helped aggravate existing tensions and frustrations in the Middle East and Africa, despite gradual socio-economic improvements, leading to a rejection of existing government programming and institutions.
Yet, despite the prevalence of such analyses, writers such as Lisa Anderson emphasise that:

*The important story about the 2011 Arab revolts … is not how the globalization of the norms of civic engagement shaped the protesters’ aspirations. Nor is it about how activists used technology to share ideas and tactics. Instead, the critical issue is how and why these ambitions and techniques resonated in their various local contexts (2011, p. 2).*

Contextualisation here seems to be the key and an important issue of disagreement between different researchers. Anderson argues that ‘Tempting as it is to treat the Arab uprisings as a single movement, their causes and future missions demonstrate the many variations between them’ so that a ‘nuanced understanding of the historic circumstances of the uprisings’ is central to determining their appeal in each individual country. While all analysts recognise the importance of historic circumstances in evaluating the Arab Spring, Anderson is fairly unique in the emphasis she places upon local contextualisation, with many other writers utilising the Arab Spring framework to draw out common regional contributors to the 2011 demonstrations. Eitan Y. Alimi and David S. Meyer perhaps summarise this position best when they write that, ‘Bouazizi’s self-immolation was not necessarily the single spark that would provoke an Arab Spring’ in 2011, and the idea that self-immolation could trigger upheavals at any point in history is fallacious. This leads them to conclude that it was rather the shared ‘conditions across the Middle East and North Africa [that] had made it possible for such sparks to create contagion at this time’ (2011, p. 476). Among important determining factors, Alimi and Meyer include authoritarianism, the unity of the ruling elite and the availability of political opportunities to average citizens for participation in governance processes. This is a difficult position to maintain in light of the huge diversity of political systems affected by the Arab Spring, but their use of generalizable indicators allows for greater ease of comparison.

The wide range of often contradictory interpretations provided by analysts of the Arab Spring reflects both the difficulties of striving to understand fluctuating contemporary events as they unfold and the complexity of frameworks that encourage comparative analysis. Each reading is influenced by its case studies, which, reflecting a wide diversity of different development contexts, can yield a huge variety of conclusions, often based on the research interests and pathways adopted by onlookers in this field. That each of these positions can be argued to be empirically valid and proven to be supported by available data speaks to the strong limitations of the Arab Spring framework itself and its tendency to encourage broad, generalizable assertions on the causes of regional demonstrations.

With the strong likelihood that the Arab Spring will yield far-reaching implications for future socio-economic development, both within the region and the wider world, it is entirely likely that scholars and practitioners of international development will be striving to understand the phenomenon for several
decades to come. However, for this reason above all others, it is crucial that we now strive to better understand these events as they have emerged on a country-by-country basis. In-depth contextualised analyses hold greater potential to yield localised lessons that might be more adaptable to a regional setting than comparative research designed to deliberately identify universal development forces.

The Yemeni Background

In light of the severe limitations of comparative research in generating concrete conclusions about the causes of the Arab Spring, this paper has opted to provide an in-depth analysis of development within one context affected by this phenomenon: Yemen. In doing so, it looks at both the emergence of this latest political crisis in the country and the historical continuities and existing development challenges that have contributed to it. Implicit within this analysis is the question of whether or not the Arab Spring in Yemen does represent a move away from pre-existing political trends. In order to pave the way for the answer to this question, this section offers a background of the Yemeni development context, which includes an overview of the country’s geographic and demographic composition, as well as an introduction to the evolution of its infrastructure.

Geographic and demographic composition

Due to its geographic location and development status, the Republic of Yemen is today directly affected by the political and economic fluctuations of both the Middle East and the Horn of Africa. As a result of its location, and due to its comparative stability and weak border management capacities, Yemen has attracted numerous refugees and (usually irregular) labour migrants from the North-East of Africa through shipping and sailing lanes, the majority of whom arrive from Somalia and Ethiopia. At the same time, unemployed Yemenis tend to look to their wealthier Middle Eastern neighbours for employment opportunities, travelling to Saudi Arabia, Qatar, Kuwait, Oman and other places, often illegally, in search of work. Relations with its immediate neighbours have therefore historically proven to be of crucial importance to Yemen. In fact, many of its most recent governmental development priorities, as listed in the Ministry of Planning and International Cooperation’s National Reform Agenda (2010) and 10-Point Plan (2009), have involved building stronger regional relations within the Gulf Cooperation Council (GCC) in order to boost Yemen’s struggling economy and business sector.

Development across Yemen has always been uneven, with the North occasionally benefiting from trade routes with Saudi Arabia (particularly during the 1980s) and the South receiving strong material backing from the Soviet Union in the late 1960s and early 1970s. However, despite fluctuations in inequality, governmental development programmes have traditionally favoured the centre over the periphery, both before and after the formation of what is today the Republic of Yemen.
Contemporary Yemen is divided into 21 governorates, which include: ‘Amran, Ad Dali, Al-Bayda’, Al Hudaydah, Al Jawf, Al Mahwit, Amanah al-’Asmah, Dhamar, Hajjah, Ibb, Ma’rib, Raymah, Sa’ada, Sana’a and Ta’izz in the former Northern Yemen Arab Republic territory; and ‘Adan, Abyan, Al Mahrah, Hardamaut, Lahij and Shabwah in the former Southern People’s Democratic Republic of Yemen area. Infrastructure is strongest in Sana’a and its immediate surrounding governorates, while the peripheral regions, which are mainly comprised of rural areas, are extremely poor. In fact, the World Food Programme reported in 2010 that although 42.8% of the population in Yemen was classed as living below the poverty line, 29.9% of the country’s urban population was considered to be poor, as compared to 47.6% of the rural population (2010, p. 25), with ‘Amran, Abyan, Ad Dali, Al Jawf, Al-Bayda’, Hajjah, Lahij and Shabwah all reporting a poverty prevalence rate of over 50% and ‘Amran reaching 66.4%. Only 31% of the population of the country is urbanised, according to the CIA World Factbook, and the vast majority of the rest live in small rural communities with little access to government services. In 2011, meanwhile, the overall rate of poverty across the country was said to have increased to 60% due to widespread disruptions in the labour market and government services.

Yemen’s extreme poverty and underdevelopment are exacerbated today by increasing competition for resources and employment opportunities, which emerges both as a result of nation-wide resource mismanagement and more directly as a result of the country’s rapid population growth. According to the Yemeni Central Statistical Organisation’s Statistical Yearbooks of 2003 to 2010, the population of Yemen has grown from 14.59 million in 1995 to 22.49 million in 2010. The population is expected to grow further to approximately 25.96 million by 2014, although the estimated total fertility rate has recently fallen due to massive governmental awareness raising campaigns from an average of 8.7 children being born per woman between 1985 and 1990 to 5.3 per
woman being born between 2005 and 2010 according to the United Nations Department of Economic and Social Affairs (though the accuracy of such data is difficult to assess in light of Yemen’s very weak rate of birth registration). The chief demographic implication of Yemen’s rapid population growth is an emerging youth bulge, whereby the median population age in 2010 was 17.9 years according to the CIA World Factbook and 43.9% of Yemenis were aged under 14 years.

The vast majority of Yemenis are ethnic Arabs who fall into either the Shaf'i Sunni or Zaydi Shia religious groupings, though a small number can be found who are members of the Jewish, Christian or Hindu faiths. However, Yemeni society is extremely tribalised, so that tribal allegiances often take precedence over ethnic and religious identities. The strength of these tribal structures has offered a communal support net to those living in hard-to-reach areas of the country in times when government infrastructure has been particularly weak. However, these same tribal structures have proven remarkably resilient to centralisation, leading to repeated incidents of conflict between state authority and tribal self-administration, which have held important implications for Yemen’s history and progress.

In this regard, it is tempting to think of the country’s strong tribal system as one of the primary obstacles for the Government in its quest to secure legitimacy and sovereignty. However, the relationship between tribes and the state is not quite so clear-cut. So, in his *Tribes, Government and History in Yemen*, Paul Dresch notes that:

> the tribes themselves are the basis of what power most governments have ever held. Not only have many prominent figures in recent national politics been of tribal background, but the tribes themselves remain important, and one cannot follow the events of the last few decades, any more than those of preceding centuries, without some grasp of what the tribes amount to. In the midst of which the assumption is widespread that they will all one day disappear. (1993, pp. 28 – 29)

The tribal system in Yemen has often been used by Yemeni governments as an administrative tool, particularly in more isolated areas that have proven difficult for state forces and bureaucracies to access. Where local reliance upon such systems has been very high for a protracted period of time, tribal identities have solidified and tribal structures have become entrenched. On the contrary, however, where local reliance has instead shifted toward governmental services, tribal identities have gradually been eroded. As Barbara Bodine recently observed in an interview with Riz Khan, tribes in Yemen are not therefore organised into one collective social unit that can be easily appealed to or accessed (2010). They do not have similar aspirations, goals, customs or philosophies, though they do have limited organisational sub-structures, with some supra-tribal groupings, like the Hashid and Bakil federations, exerting considerable influence over national politics. Depending upon where a tribe is located, tribal allegiances and intra-tribal connections therefore become ei-
ther trivial or hugely relevant, while tribes themselves are either broadly socially intermixed or incredibly isolated from one another.

The Evolution of the Yemeni State

The contemporary Yemeni State is extremely young, having been formed in 1990 after a merger of North and South Yemen. The achievement of national unification was by no means easy for a people long dominated by competing colonial interests and manipulated by antagonistic global powers, such as the British and Ottoman Empires, and later the Soviet Union. Brain Whitaker notes that, ‘Yemen – almost throughout its history – lacked the kind of single, centralised control that would qualify it to be described as a unified state’ (2009, p. 5). Although it eventually succeeded in forming one government to preside over its entire people and can be considered a relatively new country, Yemen remains ‘a land with a long history’ whose emerging tensions and divisions continue to be visible in the twenty first century.

While Yemen lacked political unity for the majority of its history, one of the single most important determining factors in its contemporary development was its formal partitioning by the British and Ottoman Empires in the late 1800s and early 1900s. In the North of Yemen, a long, costly and ultimately futile struggle to enforce control over Yemeni tribesmen eventually led the Ottoman Empire to retreat from the area, establishing an Imamate in its place in 1918, which was overthrown in 1962 when the Yemen Arab Republic was formed. In South Yemen, meanwhile, British rule continued until 1967, when the People’s Democratic Republic of Yemen was created in its stead, under a communist leadership with strong economic ties to the Soviet Union. Inspired by growing regional pan-Arabic sentiment, the Yemeni people retained a strong sense of national unity throughout this time, with many believing that unification would bring back a golden age in their history. However, both Yemens had evolved according to radically opposing ideological models, and both had radically different visions of their shared futures. The boundaries between them would therefore prove almost impossible to erase and are still visible in a united Yemen today, which, according to Bryce Loidolt et al, ‘reflects a series of nested divides – geographic, demographic, political and ideological’ (2010, p. 19).

While Yemen was arguably free to pursue its dreams of unification from 1967 onwards, with both governments openly advocating for the principle with the popular backing of their people, dialogues aimed at increasing unity were often of a more ideological than a practical nature. In practice, both states wanted to shape a new Yemen in their own image, preserving their own authority and leadership. This led to twenty years of political and economic competition, during which each country strived to undermine the other by funding each other’s oppositional movements, triggering open warfare in 1972 and again in 1979. Unification was only considered a real option after 1988, when both countries began to face political and economic challenges that threatened the safety of their ruling regimes. A phased process of border relaxation began between North and South Yemen, but calls for faster paced change erupted
across both countries as the economic disparity between them became apparent (the South being considerably poorer than the North). When unification programming was finally launched, it was very rushed. While it succeeded in merging the Yemeni territories, it failed to set provisions for the integration of the leading General People’s Congress (GPC) in the North with the Yemeni Socialist Party (YP) in the South, effectively leaving two administrative units bidding for internal dominance.

Provisionally, the two parties adopted a pluralist political system that maintained rival ideologies and offered representation to discontented groups. Thus, in 1990, Yemen became the very first democratic country in the Arab World: a legacy for which it is seldom remembered. However, in practice, democratic politics accentuated existing rivalries by fostering direct political competition, eventually triggering civil war. National elections, which took place in Yemen for the first time in 1993, were seen by the GPC and the YSP as a mechanism through which to legitimise the existing state. However, both used the run-up to the elections as a conduit through which to re-ignite their struggle for domination, failing to consider the potential threat of new emerging parties in capturing popular votes. One new competitor in particular, the Yemeni Alliance for Reform, or Islah, was therefore able to emerge as a prominent rival to both ruling parties, securing 62 of 302 seats in the election, with the GPC and the YSP winning 123 and 56 seats respectively (Witaker, p. 130).

Rather than merging with the YSP to secure its position of authority or handing proportional representation to Islah, the winning GPC, under the authority of President Ali Abdullah Saleh, chose simply to integrate Islah into the existing coalition, which vested power above all in the GPC, followed by the YSP, irrespective of election results. The positions of Prime Minister and Deputy Prime Minister were awarded to the YSP and Islah respectively to reflect this chain of command, much to the anger of Islah’s many supporters. To this day, national confidence and participation in Yemen’s electoral processes has dramatically diminished as a result of this move. In fact, in December of 2010, the Yemen Times reported that one Minister of Parliament, Ali Al-Ansi of the Islah Party, recognised widespread disillusion among Yemeni voters in the run-up to the 2011 election (which was later cancelled due to emerging protests). He claimed that Yemen ‘suffer[s] from a severe crisis of confidence in government’ (Sadeq Al-Wesabi), a crisis that has arguably been only very mildly dulled by the forceful removal of President Saleh in 2012.

As was perhaps to be expected, the GPC’s republicanism, the YSP’s socialism and Islah’s Islamic revivalism did not blend together well in the new coalition, effectively crippling the state’s decision-making capacity and stalling all development programming across the country. Although numerous efforts were made by the GPC to produce legislative requirements on all parties to act in union, the YSP in particular began to act as a strong oppositional party, eventually breaking away in an attempt to form an independent Southern state and thereby triggering the 1994 Civil War. Most of the actual fighting in this conflict took place in the South, which was quickly overrun by Northern forces. By July of that year, the YSP had surrendered to total Northern control,
and unification was imposed on them externally. It was a devastating blow from which the South never truly recovered. While the YSP survived the war as a political party, its position within the Yemeni political sphere was severely weakened. Meanwhile, President Saleh was elected by his new Parliament to serve another five year term in October of 1994, remaining largely uncontested in his seat of power until the Arab Spring of 2011.

The impact of these events on the evolution of the Yemeni state was such that its Government had to develop in a very careful way in order to avoid being overthrown or dismantled from the very beginning. Money earmarked for the creation of one single state was instead funnelled into the military expenses of two parties that continued to see each other more as rivals than as allies post-unification. After the 1993 election, the GPC, perhaps sensing the threat of renewed separatism from the South, made sure to retain crucial control over Yemen’s Ministry of Finance and began developing newly discovered oil reserves in the territory of the former People’s Democratic Republic of Yemen, exacerbating complaints in the South that Northerners were sapping their resources dry to develop their half of the country. In the meantime, these resources failed to bring about any significant benefit to the rural Northern poor, pushing them to arrive at the opposite conclusion. Accusations of rampant corruption within the central administration only worsened nationwide hostilities. As President Saleh’s regime fought to develop its seat of power, it failed to bring about a substantive change for the people of Yemen, who quickly lost confidence in the power of unity and democracy to improve their social circumstances.

These challenges have persisted throughout contemporary Yemeni history, so that social fragmentation and a disillusionment with unification and seeming authoritarianism proved to be extremely important mobilising factors in 2011 for both independent protesters and pre-existing parties and elite stakeholders who chose to participate in demonstrations. Yet it is the very nuances of this complex and informative history that are often overlooked by assessments of the Arab Spring in Yemen that place a greater emphasis upon regional similarities between affected countries.

**Yemen’s Year-Long Spring**

The Arab Spring left virtually no country in the Middle East and North Africa untouched by mass protests. It arrived in Yemen on January 27th, 2011, when thousands of demonstrators took to the streets, demanding a change of leadership, with the removal of President Saleh as the head of the Yemeni Government a central and non-negotiable demand for most participants. Such removal, pro-change protesters insisted, needed to be immediate, without allowing for a ‘phased transition that would defer [the President’s] departure until the end of an interim period in which constitutional changes would be agreed’ (Hill et al, 2011, p. 3). While President Saleh is generally acknowledged to have been consistently democratically elected within the country, the de-
mand for his immediate resignation stemmed not only from a popular desire for political change emanating from a wave of sudden pan-Arabic revolutionary fever more broadly, but also from a consistent loss of faith in the Yemeni democratic system. Moreover, this call for his removal from power was accentuated by a history of unrepresentative politics, allegations of multi-level corruption and growing public suspicions that the President would institute a policy of hereditary rule in light of his ailing health, passing leadership of the country down to his son. In an anonymous online survey conducted in May of 2011, one Yemeni citizen commented: ‘I participate in protests because the situation in Yemen is hopeless, corruption is everywhere. Siblings of officials have lots of benefits other citizens do not have’, summarising the growing levels of frustration among Yemeni youth which had spread throughout the country by this point, contributing to an emerging civil war.

As a non-negotiable issue, however, the theme of President Saleh’s immediate departure proved extremely contentious, with the Gulf Cooperation
Council (GCC), and Qatar especially, striving from the outset to broker a deal for a phased transfer of power. Though the agreement has now been signed, with Saleh officially handing over leadership of the country to President Abd Rabbu Mansour Hadi in February of 2012, power transfer negotiations in 2011 and 2012 were left lacking considerably in legitimacy and have remained largely contested throughout the country in the aftermath of the Arab Spring for a number of reasons.

Firstly, they were extremely slow in securing President Saleh’s departure from power, a process that was only successfully negotiated eleven months after protests began, while negotiated peace settlements also left Saleh’s family members in key positions of control over military and state infrastructures. This remaining network of allies and contacts, many observers in Yemen argue, could mean that Saleh could in theory continue to effectively influence the country’s politics long after his resignation. Secondly, the agreement granted the President and key members of the Yemeni Government, including the ruling party, immunity from prosecution by the International Criminal Court, despite the use of hugely oppressive tactics to disband and punish protesters. Thirdly, negotiations largely took place between the Yemeni state and the Joint Meeting Parties (JMP), who, as shall be argued shortly, were not considered to be representative of the majority of demonstrators. Fourthly, the single-candidate election process signalled by the agreement was largely read on the ground as an attempt to prolong Yemen’s emerging system of electoral authoritarianism, failing to bring about democratic reform and being, as a result, boycotted by both Southern and Northern opposition groups alike. Finally, the continued strength of President Saleh’s local support base and the prevalence of pro-Saleh demonstrations, particularly in early 2011, highlighted the extremely questionable position of external interventions in Yemeni politics, particularly as protests were combined with the overall rejection of negotiated peace agreements by both sides in the Arab Spring conflict. Ultimately, the agreement left many unanswered questions as to the scale of democratic reform to follow and, having failed to assuage fears of continuing governmental corruption, eventually lead to the somewhat less glamorous Revolution of Institutions that has largely been ignored by Western media in 2012.

This issue of external intervention (as aggravated by current American military support for President Hadi’s counter-terrorism initiatives) has been rendered more important by Yemen’s historically reinforced suspicion of foreign intervention, which, in the case of the GCC, is enhanced by the fact that Saudi Arabia, a great supporter of Saleh’s regime, holds a place on the Council. The agreement for President Saleh’s removal that was eventually effectively negotiated and signed in 2012 had its roots in these challenges, and while President Saleh then temporarily left the country to seek medical treatment in the United States of America, the suspicion expressed by many Yemeni citizens upon his return to the country in February of 2012 highlighted the fact that there remains considerable concern about the long-term prospects for real regime change and governance reform in Yemen (Al Jazeera, 2012). At a local level, there is also considerable suspicion of the international community’s fu-
ture role in the country, with America having proven to be an important ally of President Saleh’s regime in the struggle against Al Qaeda in the Arabian Peninsula (AQAP), and the United Nations Security Council having taken almost an entire year to issue a formal statement decrying violence against protesters in Yemen, while actively protecting protesters in Libya.

The Origins of the Arab Spring in Yemen

In order to better understand these legitimacy-based concerns, it is useful to look at the progression of the Arab Spring in Yemen as a whole, which began very much as a youth movement, with university students and graduates playing a relatively central role in organising and mobilising protesters. Though they were bypassed quite significantly within peace negotiations in 2011 and 2012, protest organisers inspired by the Tunisian Jasmine Revolution developed a relatively sophisticated administrative and welfare structure for themselves from the onset of demonstrations, particularly in Sana’a, in order to form a collective and unified front in their call for regime change.

Independent online surveys and telephone interviews conducted by the author revealed that between February and April of 2011, student movements established special zones for securing peaceful demonstrations by removing weapons and arms from all participants upon entry. They also established links with the press in order to ensure the monitoring of human rights violations by state and non-state actors, and created medical and legal assistance centres for those injured or harmed during demonstrations. These welfare services proved especially important at the beginning of the Arab Spring as Yemeni hospitals were generally seen by protesters to be compromised and insecure areas, where those injured in the course of demonstrations could easily be identified by the state, arrested and removed without notice.

As Government reprisals against protesters increased, however, those Yemenis interviewed as part of this research reported that these unofficial medical centres became steadily less relevant and less active, due to their significant lack of resources and capacity. When asked why these original members of the pro-change movement had taken to the streets in February and March of 2011 and why they remained on the streets in April after it became apparent that their involvement in the movement was extremely dangerous, one participant answered: ‘We went to the streets because we believe in a better future for Yemen. This will not happen, though, unless we get rid of all members of the corrupted regime’. Another argued: ‘We need change as the situation in Yemen is bad, we need to have better living conditions, economics, etc.’. Meanwhile, a pro-government protester argued that: ‘We need a change, but not through the destruction of the current system. Yemeni people are not like Egyptian or Tunisian people. They are poor, they have war, and there are 50 million guns’ in the country, leading to a heightened risk of civil war.

In February of 2011, protests in Yemen remained fairly small and self-contained, with non-violence being one of the key principles held by demonstration organisers, including Nobel Peace Prize Laureate Tawakkul Karman. Soon, however, participants began to report increased levels of hostility and aggres-
sion, particularly on the streets outside demonstration hotspots. One pro-change protester reported at the time that: ‘We don’t have trouble getting to protests, but the street has been affected. Clashes of opinions turn violent. There is a real passion’. Yet it was not long before the pro-change movement exploded in popularity and therefore began to generate real reprisals by supporters of the state.

Violence increased dramatically and casualties began to soar. One protest organiser, Husam Al-Sharjabi, the head of the Civil Coalition for Revolutionary Youth (one of the largest youth movements in Yemen), commented in interview after the fact that he felt throughout this time that governmental violence was manipulated by President Saleh as a tool for provoking demonstrators into breaking their commitment to non-violence, thereby losing the popular support of foreign observers (Interview conducted March 20th, 2012). He also commented quite candidly, that, while his movement made a concerted effort to institute training programmes aimed at teaching demonstrators to communicate with Yemeni security forces in a respectful manner so as to minimise the risk to their own lives, many ‘kids and teenagers’ in particular began entering into deliberate violent confrontations with state officials. Meanwhile Yemeni bloggers and independent journalists began to refer increasingly to ‘martyrs of the revolution’ and ‘revenge killings’, indicating a steady increase in the glorification of violence flowing just beneath the surface of a more mainstream peaceful narrative, with the continuous tension between these two facets being an extremely important element of the 2011 Yemeni Arab Spring experience.

The mass appeal of the Arab Spring to young people in Yemen, and particularly to young people in Yemen’s major cities, resulted from the country’s growing rate of unemployment, as well as from the high prevalence of unemployment among university graduates (which was estimated as being at 54% by the International Labour Organisation in 2008). It is important to note here, as confirmed in an interview with Kate Nevens of Chatham House, that many youth joined in the protests stating that they had come to Sana’a, for the period of the Arab Spring, as independent citizens, rather than as representatives of their tribes, putting minor tribal conflicts at least on hold for the duration of the demonstrations. However, they were soon joined by various other factions as demonstrations gained in momentum. In particular, the Arab Spring represented the opportunity for various actors who had been in conflict with the Government for the past decade to advance their own individual agendas. In the far North of Yemen, insecurity generated by protests across the country offered the chance for the Houthi insurgency movement to reorganise and secure an operational stronghold, establishing a virtually self-contained and separate governance system in the Sa’ada area that may have now begun to spread its influence into neighbouring governorates (Horton, 2011).

Likewise, the Arab Spring and its explicit call for a change of leadership and therefore a change in the structures of government also reinvigorated the Southern Separatist Movement, who used protests to vocalise their own grievances (though secessionism itself remained a fairly concealed element of their political narrative in 2011). At the same time, the diversion of security forces
towards containing public demonstrations also led to the escalation of Al Qaeda’s activities in the country, with rumours of Al Qaeda in the Arabian Peninsula (AQAP) seizing control of important cities and strongholds in the South.

The Arab Spring Framework, in its applicability to Yemen, has emphasised the role of regional revolutions as a mobilising factor for young people wanting to instigate change through peaceful demonstrations, and at the onset of protests this proved to be a fairly relevant assessment of the emerging crisis. However, by focusing upon regional stress factors like the unifying nature of social media, articles relating to the Arab Spring in Yemen (being more interested in the causes of the Arab Spring than in its extremely diverse manifestations) often failed to capture the nuances of these struggles between violence and non-violence, as well as between unifying protests and self-serving subgroup opportunism, which played an important role in escalating the events that were to follow. Meanwhile, the solutions offered to the problem, as shall be argued in the following section, adopted a radically opposing position, focusing perhaps most strongly on the pre-existing conflicts that had led to the inflammation of local hostilities in Yemen in the first place, while bypassing the new liberal and citizen-empowering national narratives that had arguably made 2011 into a unique turning point in Yemen’s history.

The Role of Elite Stakeholders in the Arab Spring

From April of 2011 onwards, the Arab Spring in Yemen took on a notably different character, as high ranking members of the existing political system began to adopt more overtly anti-Government stances along with popular protesters, so that one interviewee noted at this time that: ‘every day a lot of military are joining us, even high ranking personnel, but especially soldiers’. In particular, the JMP, with Islah and the Yemeni Socialist Party as two of its foundational sub-structures, began increasingly to appoint themselves as the official spokesmen for the pro-change movement, despite the clear cultural, religious and ideological divisions between different groups that had joined in demonstrations. The JMP’s critics, including April Longley Alley, have observed that the JMP’s ‘deep personal, financial, and political connections with the current regime … raise questions about the ability or desire of the JMP to faithfully negotiate on behalf of those protesting on the streets’, though they were nevertheless treated as the voice of the Arab Spring in Yemen in negotiations organised by the GCC and other parties (2011).

Some of these political connections were severed through the mass resignation of JMP officials from the Yemeni Government out of protest against the state’s use of military violence against demonstrators in 2011. However, personal and financial connections remained for many of the JMP’s members. Cynical observers of the situation might have concluded at the time that the JMP’s actions of late indicated, if anything, only a last bid attempt to distance themselves from a collapsing state in order to ensure their own survival. Similar accusations have been directed toward some of Saleh’s previous supporters, who included powerful tribal leaders and military stakeholders. Chief
among these are the Al-Ahmar Family, head of the Hashid tribal federation, and General Ali Al Mohsen, who defected from the military along with several of his units in March of 2011, allegedly to protect protesters from state violence. However, while the Al-Ahmar family eventually opted for all-out war against the Government, with tensions lessening only with the removal of President Saleh from power, General Mohsen and his men were known to have shied away from military confrontation in 2011. This, as Michael Horton summarises, was likely because the General knew that his troops lacked the man power and capacity to engage the Yemeni army directly, as headed by President Saleh’s son, Ahmed al Saleh (2011).

The roles of the Al-Ahmar family and General Mohsen in the Arab Spring soon came to dominate media reports on Yemen with good reason. Sarah Phillips writes that:

*The tribes are the most pervasive social forces in Yemen but their level of influence at the national level varies greatly depending on their proximity to the regime. Saleh’s tribe (the Sanhan), for example, is small but enjoys tremendous access to state resources. … The Sanhan are members of the Hashid tribal confederation, which is the smaller but more internally cohesive of the two major northern tribal confederations … Both the Hashid and the Bakil (to a lesser extent) have disproportionate influence at the elite level, and at the lower levels of the tribal hierarchy (2011, p. 51)*

The Yemeni Government has been based since its formation on extensive systems of patronage that are designed to ensure tribal loyalties to the existing regime. To this end, the Hashid and Bakil Federations have previously acted as a major support structure for the Yemeni state and have therefore maintained a vested interest in the state’s survival. These allegiances, supported, as Phillips claims, by financial stipends paid through ‘the Department of Tribal
Affairs, an opaque organisation that is officially attached to the Ministry of Local Affairs’ (pp. 52–53), function to all effects and purposes as a shadow state, whose undemocratic foundations have been a central motivating factor of general unrest in Yemen for several years, as well as a prominent element of the early 2011 protests. It is a system that various tribal groupings are said to have a direct vested interest in maintaining. Yet in May of 2011, the al-Ahmar family, headed by Sheik Sadiq al-Ahmar, openly ended its alliance with President Saleh, representing a break of the Hashid Federation from the Government for reasons that are largely unknown. In June, the Government of Yemen began a direct military campaign against the al-Ahmar family in Sana’a (Johnson, 2011), sparking what historians will undoubtedly come to refer to as a second Yemeni civil war.

The abandonment of the Saleh regime by the al-Ahmar family has not been directly correlated with the defection of General Mohsen from the Yemeni army, though the two are sited as being next door neighbours in Sana’a as well as close allies (Johnson, 2011). However, General Mohsen was originally tipped as a likely candidate to take over after President Saleh’s departure from power. He quickly gained in popularity, particularly in the capital, though he never quite succeeded in living up to his promise of offering physical protection to Yemeni civilians. Ahmed al Saleh also remained a favourite of pro-Government supporters to take over leadership from his father, particularly after a bomb attack on President Saleh forced him to leave Yemen between June and September of 2011 to seek medical treatment in Saudi Arabia. While both of these figures have been bypassed by the February 2012 election process, along with all other party leaders, to make way for the ascension of Abd Rabbu Mansour Hadi to power, any one of them could reignite a military confrontation in a bid to take over leadership of the country. At the same time, Saleh’s participation in President Hadi’s inauguration ceremony has led to concerns by some, including Prime Minister Mohammed Basindawa, that Hadi’s rule will be delegitimised by Saleh’s continued influence over the new President. Such suspicions have been aggravated by Saleh’s power-handover speech itself, in which he famously concluded that: ‘The responsibilities on the shoulders of the new president are immense, but we are confident that with our support he will succeed’ (Al Jazeera, 2012). Of primary concern here is that the struggle between these and other elite stakeholders has overshadowed the youth movement that began the Arab Spring in Yemen, leading to the strong possibility that their grievances will once again be overlooked in the phased transition negotiated in the peace agreement with President Saleh’s regime, which may continue to dominate the country even after the alleged removal of their figurehead.

These developments hint to a tension within the literature on the Arab Spring in Yemen, which at once over-emphasises the role of these elite stakeholders in acting as representatives of the revolution while undermining the importance of the on-going pre-existing conflicts that they encapsulate, by analysing the protests as a self-contained moment in history that began in 2011 and ended, arguably, with the removal of President Saleh in 2012. How...
ever, growing frustration with the fact that the Arab Spring, while successfully resulting in a change of President, failed to instigate a substantial regime change, has led to the continuation of existing grievances, with strikes now spreading through Yemen’s institutions and affecting the health, education, judicial and military sectors in particular.

Pre-Existing Conflicts and Security Challenges

As demonstrated in the previous section, the Arab Spring in Yemen has not represented an altogether unified call for democratisation or regime change and has instead reflected a series of nested divides and pre-existing conflicts within the national political order. While these interests have generally taken a back seat for the sake of the removal of President Saleh’s regime in 2011, they have by no means been settled and many of them are extremely likely to re-emerge with full force in 2012 and beyond. Furthermore, many interested groups within these conflicts, as has already been alluded to in this paper, have used the Arab Spring as a diversion which they can exploit to achieve key strategic aims like the establishment of self-administration and informal federalism in previously disputed territories of the country.

There are two main unresolved political crises in Yemen: the emergence of the far-Northern Houthi insurgency and the Southern Secessionist Movement. These crises have both predated and become integrated within the Arab Spring uprisings. Both conflicts are rooted within resource competition and struggles for increased representation. They encapsulate significant challenges for security and legitimacy within the state, challenges which are aggravated by regional political and criminal threats like terrorism and piracy. When striving to understand the evolution and interaction of these phenomena, it is above all important to remember that the cyclical relationship between public demonstrations, government reprisals and war in Yemen is not new and has been evident throughout the contemporary history of the country.

The Sa’ada Wars

Economic competition between North and South Yemen before and after unification – culminating in the 1994 civil war and followed immediately by a need to consolidate a new government leadership – meant that for a prolonged period in Yemen’s history, the Northern peripheries of the country were marginalised by state development programmes in favour of building a strong capital city with a solid administrative base. The resulting situation of chronic underdevelopment that emerged in the North, particularly within the areas that bordered the Kingdom of Saudi Arabia, contributed to overall increases in levels of hostility among local communities towards President Saleh’s Government. When combined with historic grievances, the formation of new identities and increased social mobility, all of which came to the fore in the late 1990s and early 2000s, such hostility eventually sparked a wave of public demonstrations.
Once the Government of Yemen intervened to subdue protesters in 2004, a series of military clashes began between the state and emerging groups of combatants known as the Houthis and the Believing Youth. Since then, six consecutive wars have enveloped Sa’ada and its surrounding governorates, Hajja, Amran and Al Jawf. While the Houthis and the Believing Youth are followers of the Zaydi Shia faith (the same religion as that of former President Saleh, though an under-represented religion in Government as a whole), and while they have adopted a strong Zaydi Revivalist narrative, the conflict in the North was not initially thought of as a religiously motivated one.

Yet, in recent years, the conflict has begun to move away from its roots to become more ideological in nature. This development has occurred mainly as the conflict has spilled over Saudi Arabian borders, becoming embroiled in an alleged regional cold war between a predominantly Sunni Saudi Arabia and a Shia Iran and, moreover, gaining an international dimension through the involvement of the United States of America. In this regard, Saudi Arabia has openly provided military assistance to President Saleh’s regime, while Oxford Analytica, among other organisations, note that there is an unverified ‘suspicion, encouraged by the regime, that Iran and perhaps Hizbollah are assisting the Huthis’ in the fulfilment of what they perceive to be common Shia interests (2009, p. 8). The conflict in Sa’ada is now entrenched and multi-faceted, leading to a state of protracted emergency in Yemen.

The Southern Secessionist Movement

The origins of the Southern Yemeni secessionist movement have already been alluded to in some detail in the background section of this paper. To summarise, however, it is important to note that the first three years of Yemeni union after 1990 did not bring much material benefit to the former People’s Democratic Republic of Yemen. On the contrary, in the aftermath of their democratisation, Southern communist government structures were slowly dismantled, privatising services and bringing an end to severely subsidised healthcare and education in that half of the country, among other funding cuts. These cuts only reinforced rumours spreading among the local population that Southern resources, and particularly Southern oil and gas, were being siphoned by Sana’a to promote Northern interests.

Together with the gradual reduction of the Yemeni Socialist Party’s authority and influence across the country, this growing Southern dissatisfaction with the new status quo eventually lead to the 1994 Civil War for separatism, in which Southern forces were quickly overwhelmed by the North, despite military assistance from countries like Saudi Arabia (which saw at the time a unified Yemen on its border to be a potential strategic threat). The aftermath of that war has not yet been fully analysed, yet following the unquestionable victory of the North of Yemen over the South, President Saleh’s regime set about a process of purging YSP leaders from key positions in the South and replacing them with Northern officials, in order to ensure that a second war would never occur. Simultaneously, write the Human Rights Watch, ‘an estimated 100,000 military and civil employees’ were also ‘forcibly retired’ (2009b, p. 15).
While President Saleh therefore succeeded in crushing the ability of the former Southern leadership to mobilise any significant forces against the Sana’a Government by integrating the Southern and Northern armies, he failed to effectively address Southern grievances, leading to prolonged and continuing hostility towards his regime after 1994. In the ten years that followed, Southern Yemenis for the most part found few outlets in mainstream politics for voicing their discontent, pushing them to protest frequently against the Yemeni state. Yet, ever fearful of budding revolutions, the Government of Yemen responded to these protests with brutal reprisals, inadvertently sowing the seeds of what would become a flourishing secessionist movement.

The Southern Yemeni secessionist movement today, sometimes referred to as the *hiraak* (or Southern Mobility Movement), is most commonly connected to groups of disaffected military personnel, known as the Society of Retired Military Officers, who put together a large public demonstration campaign in 2007, decrying their unfair dismissal and poor pension arrangements. Due to the popularity of thematic linkages in their protests to issues of unemployment and extreme poverty, their movement served quickly to radicalise the local population, drawing new participants to public demonstrations from all sectors of Yemeni society, many of them from the Yemeni Socialist Party, but some also from other parties, including Islah.

By 2009, calls for increased Governmental development of the South had merged with demands for outright separation from the North, and these have only grown in intensity and popularity in recent years. Oxford Analytica explain that ‘Demonstrations have since taken place in many major cities in the South, including Aden, Zingibar and Mukalla’ (2009, p. 5). Due perhaps to their significant defeat in the 1994 Civil War, however, representatives of the Southern secessionist movement have at all times maintained a passivist narrative, heralding dialogue and understanding as the keys to achieving their goals. Recently, unfortunately, they have been linked to growing terrorist activity and armed combatant movements, but, as with the Houthis, their ties to terrorist groups are yet to be confirmed. Oxford Analytica further report that clashes between armed combatants and Government forces have thus far occurred in the governorates of Lahej, Dhala and Abyan – Dhala, they argue, being the point of origin of the 2007 protests (p. 5).

**Terrorism, Piracy and Radicalisation**

The Yemeni Government’s responses to Southern protests and the Houthi insurgency have been immediate and violent, with both movements being perceived as substantial threats to the integrity and continued legitimacy of the state. Casualties from both struggles are yet to be fully and systematically counted, but are likely to range, combined, in the hundreds of thousands. The diversion of military and security resources to these areas has also allowed for other opportunist groups to establish a base of operations in the country. As a buffer between the Middle East and the Horn of Africa, Yemen plays an important role in regional security, which is affected by a number of strategic issues, including an ongoing regional struggle between Shia and Sunni...
domination, increased Islamic radicalisation and terrorism and rising levels of organised crime and piracy.

Most famously, Yemen is the home of the late Osama bin Laden, founder of the Al Qaeda terrorist movement, and the new operational centre of AQAP; a group that easily rivals its parent organisation in scale and operational capacity. In recent years, AQAP has probably proved to be the most important of these regional dimensions in determining national and international policy frameworks for development in the country, which have reflected an alarming shift towards the securitisation of foreign aid under the auspices of so-called ‘stabilisation’ programmes and that favour a risk-containment philosophy over a humanitarian one (Lewis, 2011). The US $150 million stabilisation strategy launched for Yemen in 2009 is a key example of this trend in programming priorities (Barakat et al., 2011). In practice, the threat of AQAP has therefore acted as one of the main determining factors for continuing American and Saudi Arabian support for the Yemeni government, which has proved crucial for President Saleh’s regime in determining domestic military policy over the past five years, particularly in relation to the war against the Houthis.

In reality, however, rumours of Al Qaeda’s movements in Yemen are often greatly exaggerated by the state among others, who have traditionally relied upon predominantly American security concerns to rally financial and military support to the Government in times of heightened conflict and political unrest. Thus, during the Arab Spring of 2011, both President Saleh’s regime and the opposing Joint Meetings Party played upon the theme of a resurgent AQAP to enlist foreign support for their causes: President Saleh claiming that his departure would see Yemen overrun by terrorists, and Abdel Rahman Ba Fadel of the Islah party claiming that Saleh was in fact secretly supporting AQAP in order to increase their profile and justify his argument in the eyes of the international press (Al Jazeera, 2011).
Due to the wide-scale manipulation of these issues by multiple actors in Yemen, it is therefore often difficult to assess their physical impact on the country and its implications for regional security, particularly in light of the fact that leading experts on the situation, including Sarah Phillips, cast doubt on the assertions of actors like Ba Fadel by stating that AQAP’s mission in Yemen has always been ‘to destroy the existing political system and establish its own’ (2010, p. 3). Quite possibly, the only regional dynamic that has not been thus manipulated and over-inflated for political reasons is the piracy phenomenon. Piracy off the Yemeni coastline is analysed as a Somali issue, and whenever it is seen to affect Yemen directly it is often blurred with the theme of maritime terrorism, which saw the attempted destruction of the USS Cole by Al Qaeda bombers and the French Limberg oil tanker in 2000 and 2002 respectively, leading to the vast withdrawal of shipping from Yemeni ports at a significant cost to the country’s economy.

Conclusion

Yemen is often categorised as a text-book example of a fragile state due to its severe lack of institutional capacity, persistent conflicts and entrenched obstacles for positive progress towards the Millennium Development Goals. It has been classed by the World Bank and other institutions as having a ‘least developed country’ status since its formation. Stresses on Yemen’s socio-economic environment stem from its continuously shrinking resource base, whereby food, fertile land, water and oil are all being consumed at a rate that dramatically exceeds their realistically sustainable usage. Weak resource management and wasteful resource extraction practices compound these challenges, resulting in nationwide conflicts over resource distribution between North and South Yemen, increased intra-tribal competition and violence, uneven development between urban and rural areas and physical confrontations between and within families. Oxford Analytica conclude that in spite of the prevalence of political confrontations within Yemen, ‘the most pressing issues that Yemen will have to deal with in the near future are the loss of oil reserves and the depletion of its water table’, with underground water reserves shrinking by a total of eight metres per year in some parts of the country (2009, p. 16).

The question now remains as to where the Arab Spring of 2011 is situated within these challenges, as well as to the extent to which the process of regime change instituted by this recent political development genuinely represents a new period of political transition, deserving of separate analysis under a unifying Arab Spring framework. An overview of the contemporary history of the Yemeni state reveals that protests and violence are not new to the country, and neither are calls for political transformation and regime change. What is unique in 2011, however, is the scale and composition of such protests, with young people, students and graduates with no prior history of strong participation in opposition movements drawing inspiration from pan-Arabic calls...
for reform in order to launch similar movements in their own country. The targeting of the themes of such protests onto the central issue of the removal of President Saleh from power is also a departure from a more traditional reliance upon region-specific, single-party policies towards a broader nationally-appealing oppositional narrative.

Yet this unifying narrative, as it has appealed to multiple sectors of Yemeni society and absorbed previously isolated stakeholders, is relatively deceptive, and will likely prove to represent only a temporary truce between tribes and governorates who are already beginning to turn their attention to their own priorities for Yemen’s future. Having at this early stage failed to grant increased representation to Southern secessionists or Northern Houthis, for instance, the removal of President Saleh through the conduit of the Arab Spring has failed to bring about the kind of wide-scale institutional reform that could contribute towards the resolution of these integrated yet separate local grievances. Existing patronage systems and networks of corruption are likewise unlikely to be addressed through this reshuffling of the Yemeni political system, while the important role given to the Joint Meeting Parties in this transitional period has once again side-lined informal opposition movements and the Yemeni youth from mainstream political processes. The implicit focus of the Arab Spring framework upon the removal of authoritarian regimes is therefore likely to be too broad to generate a genuine appreciation for the political challenges Yemen is now likely to face post-2011, which are rooted within multiple levels of the country’s system of governance, already having triggered the Revolution of Institutions in early 2012 alone.

While it would be interesting to analyse the Arab Spring in Yemen from a regional perspective in order to strive to better understand its timing and appeal, it is not currently possible to develop a full, precise picture of the way in which protests have evolved and become integrated into pre-existing political crises without conducting an in-depth investigation of the country’s history before 2011. Also yet to be determined is the extent to which youth protests and Arab Spring demonstrators have been able to maintain their independence from pre-dating formal opposition groups in Yemen and, therefore, the extent to which they ought to be analysed as new and separate entities from these. This difficulty is enhanced by Yemen’s strong history of restricting access to representatives of foreign media, as described by Jeremy Scahill in a recent interview with Terry Gross (2012). While there can be no doubt that the Arab Spring framework may be instrumental to uncovering the answers to these and other questions, this regional mode of analysis is likely to prove to be too general to achieve this goal now that Yemen’s period of transition is still unfolding and its outcomes are still unknown.
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