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YEMEN'S FAILED TRANSITION

From peaceful protests to war of 'all against all'

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In 2011, tribesmen and fighters left their guns at home to join peaceful protests against the then president, Ali Abdullah Saleh. Today, Yemen's writers, poets and painters are putting down the tools of their creativity and instead picking up steel with which to fight.

(Fareā al-Muslimi, 27 May 2016, al-Jazeera)

Introduction

In 2010, Ahmed, then in his early twenties, was learning foreign languages. After quitting university, he tried his chances in the tourism industry. In his makeshift office in Old Sana'a – among the posters of beautiful Yemeni landscapes from Soqatra Island to the Haraz Mountains and the Marib dam – hung a faded poster of then president Ali Abdullah Saleh. Ahmed was not a big fan of Ali Abdullah Saleh, nor was he particularly against him. He was into business, not politics; but as the president enjoyed genuine support in the quarters of the old city and his images were displayed in abundance there, Ahmed, without giving it much thought, had put up the picture too.

About one year later, the doors of his office were shut and the work of the new travel agency suspended. For several months Ahmed was busy on the streets of Sana'a, having joined, after initial doubts, the popular protests against the man whose portrait had decorated his office. In our correspondence, in mixed Arabic and English, Ahmed described the feeling of joining the crowds and chanting slogans as empowering and joyful. He compared the revolution to a holiday (*al-thawra kanat zay al-'aid*). With the statement, 'I was a boy now I am a man', he also described how his continuous presence on the Changes Square led to his gradual politicization.

After 11 months of protests, when the transition agreement was reached and Saleh resigned from power, Ahmed – unlike the majority of more radical members

of the youth movement – happily accepted the terms of the deal. He was impatient to return to his business and was hoping the new stability, peace, and capital brought by the transition process would help him in the long term to attract tourists and finally earn some money. Indeed, in early 2013, when the National Dialogue Conference was announced to pave the way for what many called ‘the new Yemen’ (*al-yemen al-jadida*), small groups of foreign travellers were visiting the country again. Ahmed’s hope reflected the attitudes of many ordinary Yemenis: tired after months of protests, deteriorating security, and living conditions, they expected the new government to bring order, justice, and law, but also better employment opportunities, increased salaries, and other tangible improvements. They were yearning for the goals of the revolution to finally materialize. However, as time passed Ahmed grew frustrated with the transition process that left things in Yemen largely the same as before. This looked to him like a mere political game (*la’aba*). Thus, in summer 2014, when the Houthis (Zaydi militants from the northern Saada province) attuned to the anger of people, returned to protests, and soon after seized and took control over Sana’a, Ahmed saw it as a move towards realizing the objectives of the popular uprising. The Houthis, however, did not stop at protests, and moved to expand their territorial control and power, with the country descending into violence and further fragmentation.

‘Yemen is in mess’, Ahmed told me when his initial enthusiasm cooled down, explaining the bizarre alliances and multiplicity of actors involved in the conflict. There were the Houthis allied with ex-President Saleh, new President Hadi supported by the Islamist party, Islah, but also al-Qaeda, Saudi Arabia, and the United Arab Emirates, according to Ahmed.

After months without communication, by the end of March 2015, Ahmed’s messages started to arrive more frequently than ever. This was about the time when Saudi Arabia responded to President Hadi’s call for assistance and started an airstrike campaign on Yemen, targeting the Houthis and their allies. Ahmed described the bombardment Yemenis were facing and complained about the international silence, ‘bought with the Saudi money’, as he put it. With every message, and every death of a family or community member, Ahmed’s anger grew. He was also proud of what he called the ‘resistance movement’ led by the Houthis, sharing photos on Facebook of large-scale demonstrations in Sana’a against the Saudi aggression. The pictures of men marching with Kalashnikovs, little boys and girls dressed in military uniforms, and hardly any women present, stood in striking contrast to the images of peaceful protests in 2011. Eventually, almost every message from Ahmed, known among his friends as the most gentle and peaceful person, expressed his desire to take up arms and join the fight. The last time I heard from Ahmed, he told me his younger brother had already joined, and he was hoping his mother would allow him to do so as well. It was impossible to continue with normal life, the country was in pieces, divided more than ever, and the dignity of Yemenis was at stake, he wrote in his last message in early 2016. I later learnt from his friends that Ahmed had acted on his plans. He first did some military training, and soon afterwards quit and went to fight alongside the Houthi rebels in Jawf

province. He phoned his family once to say he was well, but since then his whereabouts have been unknown.

I recall Ahmed's evolution from tourist guide, to peaceful protestor, to finally an armed fighter, not necessarily as an illustration of how peaceful protests turned into bloodshed in Yemen. On the contrary, I acknowledge that his perspective is partial and easily contested by competing narratives of what has happened in Yemen since the 2011 uprising, who is at war, and which actors are to be blamed for what is today the biggest humanitarian crisis in Yemen's history. Nevertheless, the seemingly unique trajectory of Ahmed and his reading of contentious events point to some traits of the process of radicalization into violence in Yemen that we will address in this chapter in detail. First, Ahmed's story reveals that a move from social movement to civil war is not necessarily linear, but maybe – as is the case here – long, contingent on various often unexpected shifts and realignments, and paradoxically preceded by an elite-led transitional process. Among those who fight in Yemen today are rebels, various regime factions, but also international actors, and many individuals like Ahmed who first participated in peaceful protests and later took up arms to defend their dignity or local territory. As this vignette shows, radicalization is related to the particular (domestic and international) context, the interpersonal dynamics, but also, on the individual level, the affective processes whereby a sense of insecurity or desire for revenge justifies recourse to violence. This means that in order to fully understand how peaceful resistance has descended into civil war, the micro, meso, and macro levels of analysis must be taken into account.

Some students of Yemeni politics have argued that the structural features of the weak state, its corrupt elites and divided, heavily armed society made civil war in Yemen inevitable. Indeed, military coups and violent repertoires had been part of Yemen's recent history. Others, however, have praised the popular mobilization as a moment of rupture, which could annul tribal and sectarian identifications and pave the way for a new democratic Yemen. Avoiding the shortcomings of these two perspectives, we adopt here a dynamic and processual approach that, through systematic analysis of the mechanisms at work, aims to showcase how and why the peaceful uprising happened in the first place, how it changed its path, and how it culminated in a war that has resulted in thousands of deaths from violence and famine. In other words, we seek to address the puzzle articulated by Farea al-Muslimi, a Yemeni activist and political analyst, in the opening quote of this chapter: why are those who made the peaceful revolution now 'picking up steel with which to fight'? In order to answer these questions, the chapter traces how the regime's brutal response to peaceful resistance made the numbers of protestors grow but also led to the split in the military and defections of the regime's core members, who joined the opposition forces. The activation of military networks changed the course of the protests, marginalizing the youth movement and gradually transforming the popular mobilization into an armed conflict between warring elite factions. This brought an end to the movement's unity, and further led to social fragmentation around sub-national identifications.

While the transition deal brokered at the end of 2011 by the neighbouring Gulf countries briefly averted a further escalation of violence, it did not end it, nor did it solve any of the conflicts haunting Yemen. On the contrary, despite procedural advances, old animosities remained in place, new divisions (mobilized around sectarian language) came into play, and finally a strategic alliance was made between the old enemies – the Houthi rebels and the fallen president Ali Abdullah Saleh – united against the common enemy and for the pursuit of power. As a result of the deal drafted by international actors, the youth who had demanded democratization were further sidelined and the status quo in the country remained largely intact.

Against this backdrop, Yemen-in-transition was torn by political destabilization, economic deterioration, and a security void. All of these triggered multiple 'small' wars fought on the local level, which escalated into a civil war in March 2015 when the Houthis advanced southwards to overthrow President Hadi and his government. The Houthis' expansion was followed by the involvement of the Saudi Arabia-led coalition, turning the Yemeni conflict into a war with domestic and regional dimensions. It has been marked by heavy sectarian undertones and a multiplicity of armed groups, whose fighters joined for a variety of reasons: ideology, self-defence, frustration with the failure of peaceful resistance, and financial rewards. The latter should not come as a surprise in a ruined country, where hunger today is as big a threat to people's lives as are bombs and bullets.

While developments in Yemen may seem particular and rooted in the country's unique features, in fact, the mechanisms that were activated at consequent stages of mobilization and civil war speak forcefully to the theoretical framework elaborated by Donatella della Porta in Chapter 2. To give a comprehensive picture of how Yemen – infamous for tribal, often violent politics – turned towards popular peaceful mobilization to finally end in civil war, the chapter is divided into four main sections that shine light on the relevant causal mechanisms. The first introduces Yemen's structural context and the particular make-up of Ali Abdullah Saleh's regime that set the stage for the 2011 revolution. In particular, it shows how Saleh's rule weakened the state and undermined the country's fragile unity by further dividing society – all of which was later exploited and exacerbated by the entrepreneurs of violence. The second section examines the dynamics of popular mobilization for regime change that began in early 2011. It starts with a description of the peaceful revolution led by the youth, and then traces the transformation of the uprising, in light of the regime's use of violence, splits in the military, and the emergence of new armed actors at the protest sites. It shows how, several months into mobilization, the actors who came to dominate the scene had little to do with the youth, or with ideals of revolution and peaceful tactics. The third section describes what is called here the 'transition to civil war', underlining the formal proceedings of the transitional process and the parallel developments that paved the way to what some observers call the 'war of all against all' in Yemen. This part highlights how the actors, who in 2011, mobilized collectively for regime change fragmented into opposing camps in pursuit of power, sectarian interests, and territorial control, rather than social justice and democracy. The final section

scrutinizes the dynamics of the civil war, particularly the emergence of various armed actors and the framing they used to justify their recourse to violence.

Yemen: in the state's void

Divided until fairly recently into North and South Yemen, the history of unified Yemen is quite short. North Yemen was a conservative imamate until 1962; in 1970, after a military coup and a long civil war, the Yemen Arab Republic (YAR) was established. The South was a British protectorate, which became the socialist People's Democratic Republic of Yemen (PDRY) after liberation in 1967. The two states, committed to radically different ideologies and run by different economic systems, merged into one in 1990 under the leadership of Ali Abdullah Saleh, who had previously ruled the YAR since 1978.

Since unification, Yemen has been characterized by relative openness and a vibrant civil society, making its political landscape quite unique in the region. While life in authoritarian security states such as Syria or Libya was marked by fear and public displays of obedience (see, for example, Wedeen 1999), in Yemen, public spaces have often been sites of dissent and debate. Scholars have pointed to the existence of democratic practices in Yemen that could be found anywhere from civil society activism to collective *qat* chews¹ (Carapico 2007; Wedeen 2003; 2008), thus reaching far beyond formal institutions. In the early years of the unification the levels of repression were low, and a large number of new private media outlets emerged, often overtly critical of the regime's failures and excesses. Ali Abdullah Saleh himself would not escape harsh critique, especially in English-speaking magazines such as *Yemen Times*, which accused him, for example, of bribery and buying people's loyalty (Al-Bab 2015).

In April 1993, 'relatively fair, peaceful multi-party elections' (Carapico 1993) were held. Saleh's General People's Congress (GPC) won the majority of the seats in the parliament, followed by al-Islah, a new Islamist party from the North, and the Yemeni Socialist Party (YPS), whose stronghold had been traditionally in the South. Until the 2011 uprising, this constellation of power remained largely intact, with the GPC the governing party, and al-Islah and the YPS acting as the main opposition parties. Importantly, the Islamists had been a crucial ally of the president and its leader, Sheikh Abdullah al-Ahmar, was commonly regarded as 'the second most powerful person in the country' until his death in 2006 (Durac 2013, 179).²

The early years of the new republic witnessed a huge increase in the number of civil society organizations operating in the country, many of them funded by foreign money. This financial support reflected the larger efforts of the United States and other Western governments and NGOs to spread democracy in the Middle East (Carapico 2002). The new organizations, working largely in the fields of charity, development, human rights, women's empowerment, and social work (Bonney and Poirier 2009, 11), were designated as agents of social change on the ground, and took up many of the responsibilities of the shrinking state (Carapico 2002). In the 1990s, the United States reportedly spent \$6.6 million

over a period of eight years to advance their democratization mission in Yemen (Lackner 2016, 151).

However, Yemen does not serve as an example of a successful democracy. The formal liberalization that characterized the early years of the new republic turned out to be a short episode, and repression was soon added to the state's repertoire. The Yemeni state from its birth has been characterized by observers as 'weak', with the central government having little control over the country's remote regions, and definitely lacking the monopoly on violence (Saif 2013). While in other authoritarian countries in the region the state seemed omnipresent, reaching the most private spheres of people's lives (for example, through the infamous intelligence services, *mukhabarat*), in Yemen, it has been more common to hear complaints about the state's absence. '*Ma bish dawla*' ('there is no state') was an oft-repeated complaint of Yemenis lamenting regular power cuts, rubbish lining the streets, or overcrowded schools. People in Sana'a casually complained that there was no law (*qanun*) or system/order (*nithaam*) in Yemen; instead, the country was dragged down by corruption (*fasaad*) and chaos (*fawda*). The parliament was seen as merely a façade and the entire political class was distrusted, perceived by ordinary people as serving only the elites. Most Yemenis regarded them as inefficient, unable to address people's grievances, and hence largely redundant (Durac 2013, 183–4).

At the same time, following the Gulf crisis in the early 1990s and later the economic reforms introduced in 1995 under pressure from the World Bank and the International Monetary Fund, Yemeni society has been undergoing gradual impoverishment. Reforms that were supposed to give more power to the Yemeni private sector have meant in practice an end to subsidies on food and fuel, cuts in public sector employment, and, as a consequence, increased costs of living and higher rates of unemployment (de Regt 2008, 160). The privatization of agriculture and what had previously been public services further contributed to the impoverishment of peasants and limited access to healthcare and education for the poor (Seif 2003, 11).

Add to all this the spread of al-Qaeda in the country since the 2000s, and it comes as little surprise that commentators have repeatedly described Yemen as being in 'chaos' (Blumi 2012), in 'permanent crisis' (Philips 2011), or 'on the brink' of failing (Boucek and Ottaway 2010). In fact, in 2009, al-Qaeda announced that Saleh's regime was so weak that it was not worth targeting as its collapse was imminent (Phillips 2010, 3).

Ali Abdullah Saleh's statecraft: co-opting, dividing, repressing

If the state was as weak as it appeared to most external observers and Yemenis themselves, why then did it take so many years to challenge Saleh's one-man rule? One answer may be that what constituted the 'weakness' of the state was a 'strength' of Ali Abdullah Saleh. Or in other words, Saleh's mode of governance, based on control and co-optation through extended patronage networks, served to secure

his personal power and wealth, while at the same time eroded the state's structures. As Khosrokhavar (2012, 135) put it, in Yemen, 'The state is at the service of the ruler, not the opposite.'

When Ali Abdullah Saleh was installed as president of the new republic in 1990, nobody expected he would stay in power so long, especially given Yemen's infamous history of assassinations and the exile of the country's rulers (Lackner 2016). Yet, systematically and skilfully, Saleh from the beginning built a highly personalized system of rule whereby politicians, military men, tribal sheikhs, and religious figures were paid with privileges for their loyalty (Alley 2010; Thiel 2012). The core of the regime was ethnic in nature and built around his family and tribe (Sanhan) members, who occupied the most important military and state security positions. His son Ahmed was the commander of the Republican Guards, his two nephews commanded the Central Security Forces, and his half-brother was a chief in the Air Force (Durac 2013; Phillips 2011; Thiel 2012). Choosing 'co-option, compromise, and divide-and-rule tactics over exclusion and direct confrontation', as Alley observed (2010, 392), Saleh was able to gather around him a vast patronage network of elites who knew very well that their position was predicated on their support for the president. Those who failed to exercise it were punished with violence, or political and economic marginalization. Saleh himself described his ruling technique as 'dancing on the heads of snakes' (Clark 2010), referring to the myriad of alliances he had to make, and forces he had to control, to make his reign possible. In practice, this meant exploiting and deepening tribal and sectarian divisions in the country, fighting for survival, and exploiting (domestic and international) fears of the state's collapse to remain in power (Manea 2015). Besides Saleh's personal skills, the ruling GPC played an important role in Saleh's extensive patronage networks, rewarding the loyal ones and co-opting adversaries (Poirier 2011; Schwedler 2004; Transfeld 2016). The party, which was established in theory as a centre-right organization, lost any ideological coherence and gathered all sorts of personas of different backgrounds, who simply sought privileges, protection, and careers.

Through these techniques as well as personal charisma, Saleh enjoyed a certain popularity.³ While public displays of popular support such as marches or other public gatherings were largely 'national spectacles' (Wedeen 2003, 692) scripted by the regime, people in private settings often expressed their sympathy for the leader. At least in Sana'a, his pictures decorated people's houses, and a popular story circulated that the president was from a poor family and spent his childhood selling cigarettes – a fact that made him seem closer to ordinary people. One could also hear women praising his manliness (*rujuliyya*) and the urban poor contrasting his alleged honesty with the corruption of the rest of the political class. Many residents of the informal settlements in Sana'a refrained from protesting against him in 2011, arguing that they were for change but not for revolution that betrayed the ruler.⁴

While patronage, bribing, and posing as a friendly figure were part of Saleh's survivalist techniques, repression and control were no less important elements of

his statecraft. The despotic elements of Saleh's rule had grown since 1994, when the government defeated the Southern secessionists during the short civil war.⁵ Saleh's victory consolidated his rule, which, from that point on, became gradually less democratic. For example, in order to control the South of the country and repress dissent, Saleh made amendments to the Constitution that gave him the power to appoint the vice president, dissolve the parliament, or announce a state of emergency (Phillips 2008). By the mid-1990s, Yemenis' civil liberties had been undermined, freedom of speech was restricted, and human rights activists were regularly intimidated, beaten up, threatened, and arrested without charges (Lackner 2016, 150). In addition, Saleh's rule was marked by deaths and disappearances of military and security men who had broken the rules of the patronage game and shown signs of disloyalty (Alley 2010, 403–4).

The growing repression and attacks on personal freedoms were conveniently framed by Saleh in security terms, necessitated by the threat posed to the nation by Islamist terrorism, perpetuated by groups such as al-Qaeda. The Yemeni branch of Al-Qaeda (known since 2009 as al-Qaeda in the Arabian Peninsula or AQAP) has been active since the 1990s but first made global headlines in 2000 with the attack on the *USS Cole* in Aden harbour, and later in 2009 when one of its affiliates tried to blow up a plane on Christmas Day. Saleh, who officially declared his commitment to the US-led 'War on Terror', became an ally of the Bush and Obama administrations, both of which provided the regime with large amounts of money, training, and logistical support (Carapico 2011). In the meantime, it was not a big secret in Yemen that the US money and equipment were deployed to improve the coercive apparatus and fight internal political opposition rather than al-Qaeda. Jokes and anecdotes mocked Saleh's commitments to combat terrorism and indicated that many Yemenis believed that Saleh needed al-Qaeda and terror to maintain power. This is what Sarah Phillips (2010) has referred to as 'the politics of permanent crisis', whereby Saleh's regime actively undermined the security situation in the country in order to receive external financial support. The latter was used to fund his patronage networks, whose functioning further eroded security and the rule of law in Yemen.

Yemen's fragile unity

In Yemen, marked historically by tribal loyalties and other traditional categories of belonging such as sect, region, descent, or occupation, fostering national identity was a challenge for the unified republic. The first attempts to promote national identity in North Yemen began when hierarchical status distinctions were banned after the collapse of the imamate in 1962. The republican leaders, among other actions, abolished slavery and introduced a Constitution that proclaimed the equality of all citizens (Carapico 1996). These efforts to strengthen, or rather project, a sense of national belonging, were taken up by the regime after 1990 in an ambiguous manner. They often took the form of celebrations that accompanied anniversaries of the North-South unification in which, for example, regional dances

were blended into one in an attempt to signal the nation's unity (Wedeen 2003). However, the unity represented in these spectacles was far from being achieved. On the contrary, the regime had acted in a manner that fragmented society, through the patronage and divide-and-rule politics described previously. Furthermore, weak state institutions, which seemed detached and ineffective, meant that for many affiliations with a tribe or region were more important than loyalty to the state (Saif 2013, 141).

Regional identifications have been crucial in Yemen, whereby during introductions people are usually asked for their family name, from which the interlocutor can trace a person's tribe and place of origin. Traditionally, much of the collective claims-making in Yemen has been place-based, and those who articulated grievances and staged demands did so as 'Southerners', 'Hadramis', 'tribes of Marib', and so on. Most often, their demands focused on material improvements in their particular localities. While Yemen is also divided into two main religious groups – the Zaydis (an offshoot of Shiite Islam) in the North, and the Sunnis in the South and East – sectarian identifications were of little significance until recently. Even if efforts to exacerbate them were systematically undertaken both by the Saleh's regime and by Saudi Arabia (which spent large sums of money building Salafi mosques and schools in Yemen), until the late 2000s, sectarian language was rarely used in Yemen (al-Muslimi 2015). On the contrary, people frequently dismissed the importance of religious differences, proudly stating that Yemen was not Syria, or that the only difference between the Shias and the Sunnis was a praying technique. Even the distinction between Shia and Sunni mosques came late to Yemen, and was largely influenced by Saudi Arabia.

While ordinary Yemenis cared little if one was a Zaidi or a Sunni, the regional differences – in particular between the North and the South – were very clear and emphasized by people, often in the form of jokes. For example, southerners have traditionally been regarded as more open and better educated than the tribal people (*qabail*) from the North, whose supposed backwardness they casually mocked. 'Dahbashi', a character from a popular TV show, who represented an arrogant fool, became a synonym for a 'northerner' among Yemenis from the South. People from Sana'a, on the other hand, argued jokingly that they were the real Arabs, while people from the South were closer to Indians.

The actual tension between the North and South is, however, not merely about cultural differences, but rather reflects tangible power struggles and southerners' experiences of marginalization. The unification of two previously separate entities that took place in 1990, sold by the Saleh's regime as a success story, for many Southerners became a synonym for the occupation. The concentration of power in the hands of northern elites (with Saleh's control over the presidential council and the Ministry of Finance) meant, in practice, the unequal distribution of wealth and exclusion of southerners from the decision-making processes. Frustrated further by Saleh's corruption, repression, and patronage politics, the southern leaders pushed in 1994 for secession, which led to the outbreak of a civil war. The victory of the northern army, accompanied by tribal militias and jihadi returnees from

Afghanistan, consolidated Saleh's grip over the state and the South's subordination (Carapico 2011; Dahlgren 2010). In the following years, Southerners had to witness economic disenfranchisement and repressive rule but also the imposition of what was regarded as tribal mentality and customs. It is against this backdrop that, in the summer of 2007, the Southern Movement (*al-hirak al-janubi*) emerged, when a group of military officers, who were forced into early retirement after the 1994 civil wars, organized to demand better pensions and job opportunities. When the peaceful sit-ins were crushed by the authorities and people's grievances were left unanswered, the movement grew in numbers and issued more radical demands, calling for secession and independence. Since then, the Southern Movement, although divided over its agenda, has been engaged in anti-Saleh activism, because of which in turn it has been depicted by the regime as a threat to the country's stability and unity, and accused of affiliations with al-Qaeda (Day 2012).

The South-North conflict was not the only one haunting pre-revolutionary Yemen. From 2004, the government was also engaged in six rounds of wars against the Houthis, a revivalist Zaydi movement, which emerged in the northern governorate of Saada in the 1990s. The Houthis, known also as Ansar Allah, organized to protect Zaydi traditions against the growing influence of Salafism and Sunni Islam (spread by Saudi Arabia and the Islah Party respectively), but they soon developed political and military wings and were openly critical of the Yemeni government. Under the leadership of Hussein al-Houthi, the movement attacked the regime's systemic neglect of their region, corruption, and Saleh's plans to transfer the power to his son.⁶ In the early 2000s, the Houthis organized a series of demonstrations protesting against Yemen's close alliance with the United States and its active support for the so-called 'War on Terror'. The government responded with repression, and heavy fighting broke out in the Saada province in 2004 when security forces attempted to arrest the group's leader. The armed conflict between the insurgents and the government continued on and off until 2010, leading to deaths, displacement of the population, and severe destruction of the Saada governorate (Durac 2013; Transfeld 2016).

In summary, Yemen on the eve of the 2011 popular mobilization was in chaos – with some even referring to it as a 'failed state'. The Yemeni state was palpably weak due to the rampant corruption of the ruling elites, economic disenfranchisement, the security void, calls for secession in the South, and localized war in the North. However, it was the weakness of the state that enabled Saleh's regime to survive. Saleh's regime relied on the state's coercive apparatus but even more so on patronage networks and personal exchanges of favours. In such a context, alliances within the regime could shift easily, as they were not based on shared principles or ideology but rather on received or expected benefits. Furthermore, the regime's undermining of state institutions and its politics of 'divide and rule' worked against the process of formal 'unification', strengthening instead tribal and regional allegiances. These structural features, as we will see later, all played a role in changing the course of the uprising and of the transitional process. Although society's fragmentation, the 'fluidity of alliances and oppositions' (Khosrokhavar 2012, 136)

and sub-national identifications were not the causes of the conflict, they were mobilized in the process of violence radicalization and fuelled the civil war.

The 2011 uprising: from popular mobilization to hijacked revolution

While the South and Saada were major concerns for the regime, being in overt conflict with the central government for many years, grievances and the sense of marginalization articulated by the Houthis and the Hirak movement were not unique. They resonated strongly in all provinces that suffered from underdevelopment, unemployment, and continually rising prices for basic commodities. No matter from which region, the educated youth could not find jobs, the sick could not access healthcare, workers were exploited, farmers lacked water, drivers could not afford fuel, and everyday life was a struggle for the majority of Yemenis, with the exception being the secluded elites.

Protests organized around material grievances and labour rights have recurred in Yemen since the 1990s. In particular, in 1996, 1998, and 2005, Yemenis took to the streets in large numbers to oppose price rises in basic commodities. The protests were labelled by the regime as 'riots' and repressed with armed force (Lackner 2016, 151). For example, in 2005, thousands of angry Yemenis protested in Sana'a against the cuts in fuel subsidies, openly blaming Saleh for the state of affairs. Pictures of the president were burned on the streets, and protestors were heard chanting 'no Sanhan after today', referring to Saleh's tribe (Phillips 2006). The late 2000s also witnessed country-wide mobilization of trade unions demanding labour rights and fair salaries. In 2008, a number of strikes took place, organized, among others, by port workers, teachers, labourers, and professors. Throughout 2009 and 2010, oil workers managed to shut down the oilfields and refineries. Finally, in May 2010, a nationwide general strike was organized by the Yemeni Labour Union, forcing the regime to offer concessions to the workers (Alwazir 2012). When in January 2011, protests were organized to decry the regime's corruption and demand higher salaries and better living conditions, they seemed to constitute just another cycle of contention in Yemen. Yet this time, the dynamics of popular mobilization did not follow the usual path.

The peaceful and popular youth revolution ('Al-Thawra al-shababiyaa al-sha'biyya al-silmiya')

Encouraged by the popular uprisings in Tunisia and Egypt, Yemenis took to the streets in mid-January 2011. In the initial stages, protests were small, their participants not overly enthusiastic, and their claims relatively moderate: they demanded jobs and better living conditions, and they opposed the government's attempts to modify the Constitution in order to prolong Saleh's rule. While some thought the Yemeni protests were slowly moving towards an end, things gained new impetus in February 2011, following the victory of the Egyptian revolution.

On 11 February, when news about Mubarak stepping down and live celebrations from Cairo were broadcast by Al-Jazeera, thousands of Yemenis gathered in the evening in front of the gates of Sana'a University. Inspired and excited by Mubarak's resignation, crowds were heard chanting for the first time well-known slogans from the Egyptian and Tunisian revolutions: 'Down with the regime!' and 'The people want the regime to collapse!' Over the coming days, the demonstrations continued and new slogans were added, expressing the peaceful and popular character of the revolution, calling for Ali Abdullah Saleh to step down, and proclaiming the national character and unity of protestors (with slogans such as 'Revolution oh, Yemen from Sana'a to Aden!', 'Revolution oh, people from north to south!'). While the central Tahrir Square was from early on strategically seized by Saleh and filled with his supporters and thugs, the square near Sana'a University, symbolically renamed by activists as 'Taghyir' (Change), became the main site of protests for the next several months. In addition to the Sana'a protests, demonstrations were held across the country in cities such as Ta'iz, Ibb, Aden, Hodeida, and Mukalla, as well as smaller towns, including Dhamar, Hajja, Lahej, Al Ghaydah, and Mareb (Lackner 2016).

Among those who organized demonstrations and sustained the mobilization, the youth movement (*hirak al-shababi*) played a pivotal role. The 'youth' (*shabab*) did not refer so much to the age of protestors, but rather included all those who shared experiences of frustration, marginalization, and dissatisfaction with the traditional political process in Yemen (Yadav 2015). The latter was well articulated in the revolution's slogan: 'No partisan politics, no political parties, our revolution is a youth revolution' (Alwazir 2016, 171). Although some of the youth had been part of the pre-existing networks of the opposition alliance, the Joint Meeting Parties (JMP), the majority of the '*shabab al-thawra*' had not previously belonged to any political parties or movements, and distanced themselves from established actors related to the old regime. By the end of March 2011, the youth, made up of various independent groups, had formed the Coordination Council for Yemeni Revolutionary Youth (CCYRC). The umbrella organization allowed the *shabab* to unite and articulate a broad but coherent list of demands (Alwazir 2016; Yadav 2011). As soon as the demonstrations erupted in Sana'a and other Yemeni cities, the Houthis announced their support for the revolution and arrived at the Change Square in large numbers. Similarly, the members of the HIRAK movement joined in, organizing protests in Aden and other southern cities that called for the regime's fall, rather than southern independence (Durac 2013; Lackner 2016). What emerged thus was a unique 'movement of movements', composed of divergent groups. They came together not through strategic deliberation and organizing, but rather through what Bayat (2005) has called 'imagined solidarity', which allowed heterogeneous actors to envisage their interests and aims as one and the same.

The popular mobilization led by the youth shook the traditional political process in Yemen, which had usually been characterized by tribal negotiations and bargaining with the regime (Yadav 2011, 557). It constituted a rupture with the

old modes of doing politics in several ways. First of all, the mobilization was sustained for an extended period of time. Unlike in Egypt or Tunisia, protestors were on the streets for 10 months until Saleh resigned, and then continued with sit-ins, occupations of squares, and demonstrations following Friday prayers until mid-2013.

Second, the revolution gave rise to new political engagements away from usual scripts and repertoires of action. Despite the violent tactics deployed by the regime, the youth were determined to remain peaceful, chanting in the face of security forces and regime thugs, 'Our revolution is peaceful, one hundred per cent peaceful!' (Rosen 2012). The squares around Yemen that became the centre of the revolution were occupied by thousands of participants – camping, singing, reciting poems, dancing, and staging plays (Alwazir 2016; Bonnefoy 2012; Fattah 2011). One interviewed activist recalled how protestors mingled in the squares, sharing smuggled alcohol and stories. Among the revolutionaries, women played an important role. While Tawakol Karman became the face of the protest movement in Yemen, thousands of other women protestors camped for months in 'Change Squares' across the country, contributing to the protest organization and sustainability (Yadav 2011, 558). Unusually for Yemen, tribal men marched unarmed (at least in the early stages of the mobilization), the Houthis protested along with the socialists and some Islah members, and men and women shared tents in the squares – all united in the common goal of toppling the regime.

Through these experiences of being together and sharing the same space, new norms were being coined in a festival-like atmosphere. Many participants whom I interviewed remembered the time of mobilization with nostalgia ('these were the real days', as one activist put it), and described their experiences as transformative: as a lesson in political activism, a moment of breaking the fear and speaking out, and an opportunity to meet new friends and comrades. A young woman quoted in a *New York Times* op-ed (*New York Times* 2011) put it evocatively, 'Before, we were sitting at home like pigeons trapped in a cage. When we arrived at the square, we felt the beauty of freedom. We feel proud now and we want a dignified life.'

All these images speak not only to the new creative ways of collective action in Yemen, but also to new alliances and exceptional unity forged at the sites of demonstrations. The old divisions across ideological, sectarian, regional, gender, or tribal lines were suspended and particular claims seemed to have been forgotten, replaced by new, universally shared objectives of the revolution. Among them were regime change, but also economic reforms, ending corruption and redressing injustice experienced by the southerners and the Houthis, among others (Lackner 2016, 154). The change was felt, as one activist told me, when people in Sana'a chanted 'We are all Taizis' (after the regime's crackdown on protests in Taiz), despite the long history of animosities between the two cities, or when members of conflicted tribes met and reconciled at Change Square. The movement of divergent actors, with otherwise divergent agendas, showed that traditional loyalties and divisions were not eternal or did not determine Yemenis' political behaviour, as had been often portrayed in static representations of Yemeni political culture.

As such, it gave hope to many that a new Yemen was in the making, where patronage networks and regional or tribal affiliations would be slowly dissolved.

Repression, regime defections, and militarization of the uprising

Sheila Carapico, writing in May 2011, observed that '[t]he mass uprising in southern Arabia blends features of the peaceful popular revolutions in Egypt and Tunisia with elements of the state repression in Libya and Syria'. From the very beginning, Saleh adopted a mix of strategies in reaction to the protests, combining violence and repression with what looked like concessions to popular demands. Trying to pacify the demonstrators, as he had done in previous years of public unrest, Saleh announced reforms and promised, among other changes, salary increases, tax cuts, the extension of social welfare, and new subsidies (Durac 2013). At the same time, sites of protests were flooded with armed security forces and paid thugs. In Sana'a, as early as in January, Tawwakul Karman, and a number of other activists were arrested, while others were harassed and beaten. In Taiz, as Human Rights Watch documented, attacks on demonstrations began in February 2011, and by March, 'security forces were firing live ammunition directly at protesters' (HRW 2012).

While the regime's violence seemed to be part of the daily ordeal for the protestors, to which they responded tirelessly with peaceful methods, things started to change in mid-March 2011. On 18 March, snipers opened fire on protestors occupying the Change Square, killing up to 52 people and injuring around 200 (HRW 2013a). The event, dubbed by Yemenis as a 'massacre', turned out to be in many ways a turning point in the Yemeni popular mobilization.

First of all, the indiscriminate brutality of the regime, targeting youth and even children, outraged Yemenis, and convinced many that any negotiations with Saleh were not possible. The next day, Yemenis turned their mourning into rage, organizing a march (Day of Rage) in Sana'a, in which around 150,000 people participated. Over the next days, despite the violence and the announcement of the state of emergency on 23 March, the numbers of protestors and the size of squares started to grow, reaching remote areas of the country (Carapico 2011).

Second, the 18 March Massacre was followed by mass defections of members of the ruling party, civilian officers, and military figures, who joined the opposition. Thus, while the youth sustained their mobilization and commitment to peaceful protest, the character of the uprising changed. Among the crucial figures who abandoned Saleh and offered their support to protestors were General Ali Mohsen Ahmar, the ex-key ally of the president and head of the First Armoured Division (FAD), and sheik Hamid al-Ahmar, one of the leaders of the Hashid tribal confederation, but also a prominent member of the Islamist Islah party and one of the richest businessmen in Yemen. Both families had been part of the inner circle of Saleh's regime for many years (Durac 2013; Fattah 2011; Lackner 2016). Now the two united, and supported by al-Islah turned against the president to compete for power. The elite figures-turned-'dissidents' joined the peaceful movement with the heavily armed units loyal to them – namely, the significant section of the army

that followed General Ali Mohsen, and the tribal and Islah militias that backed the al-Ahmar family. The activation of military networks had tremendous consequences for the Yemeni uprising. On the one hand, the fact that key allies of the president withdrew their support for him revealed the shaky foundations of Saleh's rule. Their move to stand on the protestors' side gave the youth hope for the regime's imminent collapse, and their tanks and weapons granted protection from the government's violence.

On the other hand, the new actors in the struggle to remove Saleh from power were not necessarily committed to peaceful resistance, and engaged in violent clashes with the government forces. The radical transformation of the protest's character was visible, for example, in May 2011, when heavy fighting escalated between the republican guards loyal to Saleh and the forces of sheikh Sadeq al-Ahmar, head of the Hashid tribal confederation. The clashes in Sana'a's Hasaba district changed the area into a 'military zone' (Fattah 2011, 82) and killed over 100 people. Around the same time in Taiz, after the government's brutal crackdown on Freedom Square that started on 29 May 2011 and killed around 50 people in three days, armed groups made up of tribal forces were formed to protect the sit-ins. Over the course of the next few months, the tribal militias engaged in clashes with government forces, fighting for control of the city. Taiz, once a centre of peaceful and joyful revolution, turned into a site of violence and destruction.

Thus, by early June 2011, sit-ins and protests led by the youth were overshadowed by clashes between pro- and anti-government tribal forces and military units, and cities had been divided by checkpoints controlled by different factions. For instance, the southern parts of Sana'a were controlled by forces loyal to Saleh, while the neighbourhoods in the north were under the control of the 'defectors' – Ali Mohsen's troops and tribal militias of the al-Ahmar family (Transfeld 2016).

When, in June 2011, the tribal opposition resorted to guerrilla tactics and bombed the presidential palace, seriously injuring Saleh, it became clear that a once peaceful uprising had taken the shape of a war. What we observe thus is the rupture of the seriously weakened regime, the spiralling of violence, and a fragmentation of the protest movement, which lost the unity of its first months. While, in the initial phase of mobilization, divergent actors were committed to the same goal – from the Houthis, southern socialists to tribal men, some al-Islah figures and university students – the regime defectors who joined them had a very different vision of change, and deployed different means to achieve it. The youth movement gained powerful allies on paper, but in reality it lost its independence and its leading role in the uprising (Lackner 2016, 156), which was taken up by the more resourceful actors related to Islah and the First Armed Division. Many youth activists complained that the revolution they had initiated had been hijacked by the regime elites, who were more interested in gaining power than in democratizing Yemen. Similarly, the members of the southern Hiraq movement expressed their scepticism towards the revolution led by Saleh's half-brother, General Ali Mohsen al-Ahmar, and forces linked to the Islamist Islah Party. The unsustainability of such an 'alliance' was obvious: those who were now in the revolutionary camp with

the youth represented the same repression, corruption, and tribal politics against which young Yemenis had rebelled in the first place. As the 'regime defectors' and Islah militias started to dominate the uprising, many, in particular the Houthis and members of the Southern movement, abandoned the squares (Manea 2015, 169).

Political destabilization and the interference of international actors

At the same time, while the weakened regime directed all its energies into the struggle for survival, the security situation in the whole country started to deteriorate dramatically. In order to protect Saleh, the police and loyal army were concentrated in Sana'a, which led to a security void in the southern and northern provinces. Exploiting the opportunity, various non-state actors took control of towns and villages across the country. Among them were the Houthis, who took control of Saada province in the North, and al-Qaeda, who rapidly expanded in the South. In other words, parallel to the clashes between pro- and anti-government forces, and the peaceful demonstrations still taking place, various groups started to fight their own 'wars' for power and territorial control. Against this backdrop of escalating violence and chaos in the country, at the beginning of June 2011, concerns over an imminent civil war in Yemen were common among the observers.

Among those concerned were the neighbouring countries of the Gulf Cooperation Council (GCC) and other international actors. The rich oil monarchies worried first about the potentially contagious effect of the pro-democracy movement, and the possibility of violence from a Yemeni civil war spilling over the borders. Similarly, the United States had been uncomfortable from the beginning with the Yemeni youth uprising. Despite its declared support for democratization, the Obama administration had a friendly relationship with Saleh, who secured American interests in the Arabian Peninsula and had been a loyal partner in the 'War on Terror'. The United States expressed concern over al-Qaeda's presence and feared its expansion in the event of Saleh stepping down (Kasinof and Sanger 2011). In fact, a similar argument was exploited by Saleh himself in his desperate efforts to hold on to power. Saleh warned against the chaos and sectarian strife that would unfold in his absence, projecting himself as the only one capable of fighting the 'Islamists' and maintaining the unity of the country. In March 2011, he had condemned the protestors for steering the country towards a civil war, warning that the uprising was inescapably leading to inter-tribal fighting and the disintegration of Yemen (CNN 2011). The scenario described by Saleh – 'either me or chaos' as Khosrokhavar (2012) put it – did little to convince Yemenis, many of whom believed that Saleh's actions actually strengthened radical Islamists in the country. For example, when, in mid-2011, al-Qaeda started to take control over cities in southern Yemen, many Yemenis claimed that this was done with the tacit support of Ali Abdullah Saleh, who needed a 'terrorist threat' to claim his own legitimacy. Nevertheless, Saleh's argument fed into some people's fears, particularly those of the international community. Against the backdrop of escalating violence in

Yemen, the GCC, beginning in April 2011, worked on an agreement between the formal oppositional coalition, JMP, and the president, that would grant Saleh immunity in exchange for a peaceful transfer of power. The deal was initially rejected by Saleh, who instead called for new elections, while his security forces simultaneously continued to fire live ammunition at protestors and fought his new, armed opponents. In June 2011, following the attack on his palace, Saleh left for Saudi Arabia to receive medical treatment, but he did not resign from power, and the violence in the country continued. Eventually, under international pressure from, among others, the UN Security Council, Saleh signed the GCC initiative in Riyadh on 23 November 2011.

Under the terms of the deal, Saleh had to resign, but remained the head of the GPC Party, and he and his family were granted immunity from prosecution. In December 2011, the national unity government was appointed (formed in equal numbers by Saleh's GPC and the opposition JMP), with Muhammad Basindawa from JMP selected as prime minister. In February 2012, Abd Rabbuh Mansour Hadi, the vice president since 1994, was elected president in a single-candidate contest. The deal also provided for an inclusive National Dialogue Conference (NDC) that would draft a new Constitution and lay the groundwork for elections in 2013 (Brehony 2015, 238; Durac 2013; Lackner 2016). With the transition deal reached, external observers and some Yemenis breathed a sigh of relief that the civil war in Yemen appeared to have been averted.

Transition to civil war

Yemen in the context of this book provides an interesting case: the peaceful mobilization did morph into violence, but before descending into full-fledged civil war, the country was momentarily 'pacified' by a deal drafted by diplomats and signed by Yemeni elites. The agreement brokered by the Gulf countries was, not surprisingly, supported by political parties who were promised parliamentary representation, and by the regime defectors who used the opportunity to return to the centre of power. They were the biggest beneficiaries of the transitional process. For example, General Mohsen, who formally lost his position due to the restructuring of the military, maintained his influence in the armed forces and strategic relationship with President Hadi, to the extent that, in 2015, he was appointed Yemen's vice president. Other Islah-related actors were overrepresented in the government and steadily strengthened their position in the country. The military, for its part, was divided into two camps, one that supported the new president and welcomed the transition process, and the other that remained loyal to Ali Abdullah Saleh (Saif 2013, 155).

It seems evident that despite its lofty declarations, the transition deal sponsored by the GCC and supported by western countries and the UN Special Envoy Jamal Benomar cared little about Yemen's democratization, the dismantling of the old regime, or bringing justice to its victims (al-Madhaji 2016). Rather, it was a way to demobilize popular forces and prevent the radical change they demanded, for

the simple reason that they threatened the interests and stability of Yemen's neighbours in the Gulf. The counter-revolutionary nature of the deal – which excluded the *shabab* from negotiations and ignored its demands – should not be surprising, considering the long history of the engagement of the United States and the Gulf states in 'retrograde politics' in Yemen, as Carapico (2014) put it. With Yemen shifting from the phase of contentious politics to political transition, the unlikely alliance that came together during the uprising – which included secular groups and Islamists, the Zayidis and the Sunnis, the city men and the tribes, as well as senior military figures – was now dead. Put differently, the unity built around the aforementioned 'imagined solidarities' was dispersed by the old divisions and the fragmentation of actors who returned to their narrow interests and agendas. The national unity government was dominated by Islah and other members of established political parties, with no room for the Houthis, HIRAK members, or all those who took to the streets to demand radical change.

As things seemed to be moving towards institutional politics, popular mobilization decreased, but it did not vanish altogether. Unlike established political groups, the vast majority of the youth rejected the transition deal (which they regarded as a betrayal of the revolution's objectives) and continued to demand the prosecution of Ali Abdullah Saleh. While western observers were celebrating the GCC-led initiative, the youth returned to peaceful resistance amidst the growing repression (Alwazir 2016). For instance, to show that the 'revolution continues' until Saleh goes to trial, as one activist put it, the youth movement organized two long distance marches across the country. Drawing on the imagery of Gandhi's famous 'Salt March' in 1930, protestors walked first in December 2011 from Taiz to Sana'a, in what they called the 'Life March', and later in January 2012, from the port city of Hudaydah to Sana'a, in the 'March of Dignity'. Both times, thousands of protestors walked approximately 300 kilometres in the cold for several days to demand justice and the prosecution of the fallen dictator (Yadav 2015). Each time, they were brutally attacked by armed forces still loyal to Saleh, and many were killed. The fact that the spectacular marches attracted very little media coverage in Yemen and outside the country was a sign to the youth that they had been effectively marginalized by the GCC deal and erased from the new power struggles in Yemen.

Similarly, the southern HIRAK movement expressed little faith in the transition process. When, in summer 2012, the peaceful sit-ins in Aden were crushed by government forces, the funerals of the dead protestors quickly turned into demonstrations calling for the South's secession. Brutal violence deployed by the new government clearly showcased that the post-revolutionary Yemen differed little from the one ruled by Saleh.

The National Dialogue Conference

Nevertheless, amidst popular objections, the transition was set in motion and its cornerstone, the National Dialogue Conference (NDC), was finally launched

in Sana'a on 18 March 2013. The date was symbolic, as it marked the second anniversary of the old regime's massacre of the peaceful protestors. Sana'a was covered with flashy billboards announcing that 'Through Dialogue we build the New Yemen' (Steinbeiser 2015, 7), and Yemenis proudly listened to the international observers and policy-makers, who called on other Arab countries to follow the 'Yemeni model' of transition and political inclusiveness (Yadav 2015, 145). The talks that were aimed at the restructuring of the Yemeni political system and the drafting of a new Constitution lasted 10 months and included representatives from the main political parties, the Houthis, some members of the Southern Movement (although the main figures refused to participate), as well as representatives of civil society, women, and youth.⁸ The participants were divided into nine working groups, which addressed the most pressing national issues, including Southern aspirations, the conflict with the Houthis, military reform, and state building.

Despite early optimism and hopes for the 'new Yemen', Yemenis soon became disillusioned with the process. In the end, the NDC came up with some 1,800 recommendations, but consensus around the most contentious issues was not reached (Brehony 2015, 239; Yadav 2015, 161). In addition, new controversies arose when the special committee convened by the president drafted a new map for Yemen, dividing it into six federal regions. The proposed division was widely regarded as unsatisfactory, and confirmed the concerns of many, among them the Houthis and the Hiraq movement, that the transition process would not redress past injustices but would rather lead to a further unequal distribution of wealth, resources, and power (Thiel 2015). At the micro level, the transition processes did not bring any improvements in security or living standards for the majority of Yemenis (Salisbury 2016). On the contrary, water supplies were scarce in cities and power cuts were even more frequent than before. While Yemenis have endured poverty for many years and did not expect radical improvements straight away, they had hoped that the new government would at least attempt to root out the corruption and introduce policies centred on a more equal distribution of resources and social justice. None of that was on the horizon, however, and the old habits and ways of doing 'dirty politics' seemed to be back. Furthermore, with a weakened military, divided into two camps, the security situation steadily deteriorated. The fragility was brutally displayed on 21 May 2012, when a suicide bomber killed around 100 soldiers from the Central Security Forces. While al-Qaeda kept on striking, targeting military hospitals, checkpoints but also city centres, US drone strikes, sanctioned by President Hadi in 2012, killed suspected terrorists but more often innocent civilians (HRW 2013b; 2014).

Against this backdrop, the discontent, chaos, and fighting in the country grew. Behind the façade of an inclusive dialogue held in the rooms of the Movenpick Hotel in Sana'a, and away from the flashes of cameras, there was a fragmented nation, haunted by power struggles between competing factions, unresolved conflicts, outbursts of clashes among various groups, and terrorist attacks (Salisbury 2016, 15). While some, like the youth movement, did continue with peaceful

tactics and civil initiatives (such as, for example, the Support Yemen media collective), others returned to narrowly defined interests and identifications (around tribes, regions, or sects) and localized, often violent, struggles. In 2013 and 2014, the Houthis engaged in a series of fights in different provinces; tribal groups in Marib attacked gas and oil infrastructure; tribes from Hadramaut clashed with government forces, protesting against the presence of northern military units in the region; and finally, members of the Hirak movement in October 2014 called for the South's independence and expulsion of northerners from their territory (Granzow 2015, 165; Salisbury 2016). The regime defectors were again retaining their grip over power, repressing those whom they had allegedly defended in 2011. It was obvious that despite procedural advances in the period between 2013 and 2014, when Yemen was supposed to transition into a democracy, the country was torn by spiralling violence, divisions, and social fragmentation, with the unity forged during the initial stages of mobilization long disappeared. The various conflicts in Yemen seemed to have intensified rather than diminished.

Rise of the Houthis, return of Ali Abdullah Saleh: the rebels' territorial contests

It was in this context that the Houthi militias, exploiting the security vacuum that had existed since late 2011, started to expand their territorial control beyond their traditional stronghold of Saada. Due to the corruption of the new government, packed with old regime members and unable to provide basic services and stability, the popularity of the Houthis – whose rhetoric focused on social justice – grew and this allowed them to recruit new members (Alwazir 2016). Others, often children, were lured simply by the financial rewards they offered. While in 2013 the Houthis joined the NDC deliberations in Sana'a, and thus the formal political process, outside the capital they resorted to guerrilla tactics. The fighting against government forces allied with the Salafi groups, and tribes loyal to the Ahmar family in particular or Islah in general (Transfeld 2016), accelerated in 2013 and 2014. The clashes culminated in the Houthis' destruction of Dammaj, known as the 'Salafi center of power' (Carvajal 2016a), and later in the rebels' victory over the Hadi and Islah forces. They took control over the city of Amran in July 2014. In August 2014, and on the back of a wave of popular discontent with the rising prices of fuel announced by Hadi, the Houthis entered the capital. The initially peaceful protests developed into violent clashes between the rebels and the Islah-linked militias and the military units. On 18 and 19 September, the Houthi forces attacked the Islah supporters and targeted the military headquarters of General Mohsen. Over 100 people were killed in the fighting in Sana'a. By 21 September, the Houthis had taken over the government headquarters and forced the prime minister to resign, gaining control over Sana'a.

It was soon obvious that the rebels' territorial advances and the quick fall of Sana'a were made possible due to the strategic alliance the Houthis had made with Ali Abdullah Saleh, the ex-president who had preserved his influence in the security and armed forces, but also among tribes in the North. This reshuffling of

alliances, which pushed the rebels towards the fallen dictator and against those with whom they had shared protest sites in 2011, is one of the most striking developments that marked Yemen's descent into civil war. The pact may seem paradoxical, considering that the Houthis had been outspoken critics of the president since the 2000s and effectively had engaged in war with his government since 2004. For Yemenis, however, it seemed entirely natural that Ansar Allah and Saleh would unite against a common rival – the allied General Mohsen, the al-Ahmar family, and the Islah Party. All of them had previously been the crucial 'clients' of Saleh and had once constituted the core of the regime until they 'abandoned' the president in March 2011.

For the Houthis, General Mohsen was a personal enemy, as it was his First Armed Division that had fought the insurgents in Saada. Besides the feelings of revenge, the Houthis and Saleh were driven by pragmatic calculations, hoping to undermine the power of al-Islah that was steadily growing in post-revolution Yemen (Transfeld 2016). In other words, the 'rebels' who in 2011 decried the regime's corruption and joined the calls for democratization were now, together with Saleh, targeting al-Islah, motivated not so much by the principles of social justice but rather by their pursuit of power and desire for retaliation. Importantly, the rapprochement between the Houthis – former protestors, and Saleh – former president, annulled the configuration of forces of the popular uprising (opposition versus regime) and put forward new alliances and divisions built around the warring elite factions.

With Sana'a falling into the hands of Ansar Allah and Ali Abdullah Saleh, fears of civil war returned to Yemen. On 21 September 2014, a Peace and National Partnership Agreement was brokered by the UN envoy Jamal Benomar and signed by President Hadi, delegates of the Houthi movement, and leaders of major political parties. The document called for an immediate ceasefire and the formation of a non-partisan 'government of experts', which would include actors marginalized in the transition process, such as the Houthis and the Hirak movement (von Bruck 2014). However, despite the pressure, the Houthis did not withdraw from Sana'a. On the contrary, the rebels cemented their control over the city and started to move beyond the capital. In the first months of 2015, the Houthis, backed by Saleh's forces, managed to gain control over significant parts of the country, justifying their advances as a campaign to bring back security and root out al-Qaeda (Brehony 2015). In some areas the Houthis managed to consolidate their power by providing basic services to local communities and expelling corrupt officials. For example, soon after taking over the city of Sana'a, the Houthis turned the house of their enemy, the exiled General Ali Mohsen al-Ahmar, into a museum that served to expose the lavish lifestyles of the corrupt elites against which they claimed to fight (al-Sakkaf and al-Qalisi 2014). In most cases, however, the expansion of the Houthis and attempts to overthrow the government gave rise to protests. Despite the rebels' rhetoric of social justice and standing up for ordinary people, the Houthis repressed the demonstrations with the same brutality as Saleh used to do (Lackner 2016, 163). The Houthis who had mobilized with the youth against Saleh in

2011 were now allied with the ex-president and shooting at young Yemenis who, unlike them, remained committed to the ideals of peaceful revolution.

Yemen's many wars

The violence in the country escalated further after January 2015, when the Houthis targeted President Hadi and launched a campaign to take control of the entire country. The rebels put Hadi under house arrest and forced him to resign on 22 January 2015, completing the coup d'état in February by dissolving the government and replacing it with the Houthi-led presidential council, known as the 'Supreme Revolutionary Committee' (Salisbury 2016, 24). When Hadi escaped house arrest and fled to Aden, the Houthis followed southwards, fighting tribal militias and peaceful protestors who took to the streets across the country to oppose their territorial advances and takeover of power. President Hadi, in the meantime, retracted his resignation and in February 2011 declared Aden the temporary capital of Yemen and the seat of the legitimate government, calling the Houthis' attempts to govern 'invalid and unconstitutional' (Al-Jazeera 2015). Within a month, however, the Houthis had reached Aden, bombing the presidential palace on 19 March 2015 and taking control of the city a few days later. On 25 March, they took control of Taiz, after the peaceful civil opposition was dispersed by the insurgents with force and the city had to surrender. By that time, Yemen was torn by a fully-fledged civil war, with the Houthis gaining control of numerous towns and cities and attacking those who resisted. As a result of the rebels' takeover, President Hadi fled to Riyadh; upon his request, the Saudi Arabian-led coalition began bombing Yemen on 26 March 2015. Besides airstrikes, 'Operation Decisive Storm', as the campaign was called, included an air and sea blockade of Yemen and the arming of groups opposed to the Houthis, with the aim of reinstating Hadi as president. With the involvement of the Arab coalition, the war was 'internationalized' and several external actors were added to the list of warring parties fighting in Yemen.

Activation of militant networks

While the fighting in Yemen is most often framed as a conflict between two clearly demarcated camps – the Shia rebels allied with Saleh, and the Sunni forces loyal to President Hadi – in reality, as Salisbury (2016, 4) put it, 'Most Yemenis do not support either the president or the northern rebels; rather, they are part of much smaller groups with their own identity, ideology, grievances and political goals. . . .'

The new allies Saleh and the Houthis have relied largely on the rebels' militias, and some northern tribal forces, as well as the skills and resources of the army units loyal to the ex-president. The Houthis are also believed to receive support from Iran, although both the rebels and Iran deny the relationship, and Iran's actual role is probably less important than commonly argued.⁹

On the other hand, the loose network of resistance groups that emerged to oppose the Houthi/Saleh advances, when the central government and the state's

institutions collapsed, is composed of divergent groups with various ideologies and agendas (Al-Hamdani *et al.* 2015). Among them are Islamists, including the Salafis and members of the Islah Party; members of the Hirak movement; military units loyal to Hadi; tribal forces; and soldiers from the United Arab Emirates. They receive financial and military support from the Arab coalition but otherwise have little in common. While some armed groups pre-existed the conflict, others were born during it. The emergence and rapid spread of armed militias aptly illustrate the mechanism of 'the militarization of networks' that fuels civil wars by turning citizens into soldiers driven by ideological reasons, retribution, or financial rewards. For example, the Hirak movement, which had been known for its rejection of violence and peaceful activism since 2007, took up arms upon the Houthis/Saleh intrusion into the South in March 2015. Other groups like the Salafis, who had previously been defeated by the Houthis, gained military strength through patronage and financial assistance provided by Saudi Arabia. The trajectory of the Houthis is also interesting: while, in 2011, the Zaydi insurgents left their Kalashnikovs at home and joined protests calling for regime change, when the violence escalated, they returned to their guns and their original chant of 'Death to America! Death to Israel! A curse upon the Jews! Victory for Islam!'

The range of actors on both sides means that today's conflict is made up of many camps and multiple wars. In addition, the engagement of international actors has caused some commentators to draw a distinction between the internal Yemeni conflict, driven largely by the competition for power between the regime factions, and the proxy war between Saudi Arabia and Iran – all of which makes it difficult to distil the ongoing confrontations into a coherent narrative. What for some constitutes a 'civil war' is to others nothing more than Saudi Arabia's aggression that is supported by the international community. For many in Sana'a, the fight is about defending Yemenis' dignity and sovereignty. In Taiz, Yemen's third biggest city and at the time of writing besieged by the Houthis, the narrative and lived experiences of the war differ dramatically. There, the rebels' snipers and landmines constitute the daily terror, against which militants fight, and from which ordinary residents seek to protect themselves. Further south, it is common to hear that the current conflict is a repetition of the 1994 civil war: yet another invasion of the northern forces – in this case, the Houthis and Saleh – aimed at imposing their dominance over the south. In places like Aden, taking up arms has often been about defending local territory and autonomy. While some of the southerners support President Hadi and by extension the Saudi-led airstrikes, others oppose Hadi and Saudi Arabia as much as they do the Houthis. They fight not for Hadi to return, but to re-establish South Yemen as an independent state.

These deep divisions and contested narratives of war came to the fore on the recent Independence Day,¹⁰ which marked the 49th anniversary of South Yemen's independence from the British. Ex-president Saleh used the occasion to deliver a public speech, calling on the Yemeni people to unite and as a Yemeni nation oppose the 'Saudi aggression' and terrorism (Al-Motamarnet 2016). In Aden, however, where celebrations were held, there were no chants of unity; instead,

people waved flags of independent South Yemen, and some posters read, 'Thank you, Salman, thank you, Khalifa, thank you, the Arab coalition' (Nasser 2016).¹¹

Sectarianism wins

The many perceptions and positions of Yemenis reveal the deep fragmentation of society along regional, tribal, and sectarian lines. If the 2011 uprising was about transgressing divisions and forging new collective identities, the radicalization of political violence brought back old divisions, while new oppositions were formed. Despite the fact that the splits today seem deeply entrenched and perhaps irreversible, it is worth remembering that it was not so long ago that Yemenis managed to put aside their differences and unite for the common goal of regime change. In early 2011, today's enemies – the Houthis, Islah members, and socialists – marched together with young men and women, chanting slogans of popular and peaceful revolution, from 'north to south' (Rosen 2012).

What is most striking is probably not the return to narrow, sub-national identifications, which were common in pre-revolutionary Yemen, but rather the growing use of sectarian language, which was not. Sectarianism, muted during the popular mobilization of 2011, grew with the ongoing conflict, aggravated by all involved sides. For example, in 2013 and 2014, the Houthis started the fight for control over mosques and depicted their opponents as 'Daesh'. Their military advance on Damaj and Amran towns was framed as an attack on hubs of Saudi-sponsored terrorism. Similarly, the rebels' campaign in the South was projected as one targeting al-Qaeda, the Islamic State, and their ally Hadi. The other side of the conflict mirrored the sectarian language, quickly denouncing the Houthis as agents following orders from Iran. For example, the Salafi groups who have become the most crucial allies of the Saudi-led coalition (Carvajal 2016b) referred to themselves as 'lions of the Sunnis' and described the war against the Houthis in terms of 'jihad' (Baron and al-Muslimi 2016). Strikingly, the sectarian language has been used not only by actors driven by clear religious ideologies, but also by the seculars. President Hadi, for example, referred to the Houthis as 'twelver shia' (which is factually wrong), implying their connection to Shiites of Iran, and Yemen's ambassador to the United States stated publicly that the war in Yemen was a struggle between 'the Arabs and the Persians' (al-Muslimi 2015; Baron and al-Muslimi 2016).

Despite this rhetoric, the civil war in Yemen did not start because of the Shia-Sunni conflict, nor should it be read as such. The Zaydi population in the North does not necessarily support the Houthis, and the southerners – especially those affiliated with the socialist party and the Hiraq movement – are not known for religious devotion. As we have seen earlier in the chapter, sectarianism in Yemen used to have little currency. Common low-level conflicts between tribes or families have traditionally been about local hatreds, personal animosities, or struggles for resources (and were exploited and fuelled by Saleh, who used the politics of fragmenting society to strengthen his own position). Even the Houthis, who had rebelled against the government since the early 2000s, did so not only in the

name of Zaydi traditions, but also out of dissatisfaction with the underdevelopment of their region, the regime's corruption, and its support for the US invasion on Iraq and the 'War on Terror'. While sectarian divisions had pre-existed the conflict, they were of little importance in the early stages of the popular uprising. However, they were mobilized around the power struggles that first crystallized in March 2011 with the splits in the regime, and continued well into the transitional period. Since armed confrontations erupted in March 2015, sectarianism has enabled the war belligerents to recruit fighters, delegitimize enemies, and justify violence. As such, sectarian rhetoric, deployed to spread hatred and draw unpassable boundaries between groups, has fuelled the conflict and, as resentments and divisions have intensified, made escape from the vicious circle of violence difficult to imagine.

Conclusion

The multiplicity of actors involved in Yemen's war(s), and the framing that was used to justify their recourse to violence, aptly reveal the social fragmentation, militarization of networks, and mobilization of sectarianism that were put in motion as what began as civil resistance turned into civil war.

As this chapter has described, the radicalization of political violence in Yemen has been a long, and not necessarily linear, process. It first began in mid-2011 when the popular mobilization was overshadowed by armed clashes between pro- and anti-Saleh armed groups. When, in June 2011, Saleh's rule and life were under threat, the once peaceful uprising was more like a war. The escalating violence was eventually quelled by the power transfer agreement brokered by the GCC countries in November 2011. However, while the deal drafted by international actors subdued the violence, it also subverted the goals of the revolution by privileging established political actors and granting Saleh immunity from prosecution. The NDC proceeded, and enjoyed the praise of international observers, but there was a growing sense among Yemenis that little had changed in the country. Armed confrontations again broke out in Yemen when the Houthis, exploiting a security vacuum, popular discontent over economic deterioration, and splits in the military, moved beyond the northern highlands to seize Sana'a in September 2014. The Houthis characterized the move as a continuation of the popular revolution and an attempt to renegotiate the GCC deal that they said had betrayed Yemenis' popular aspirations. However, when the rebels allied with the ousted president Saleh began to steadily advance outside the capital, brutally suppressing any forms of resistance on the way, the negotiations collapsed and gave way to violence. By mid-March 2015, the country had descended into a civil war that was further exacerbated by the involvement of the Saudi-led coalition. This trajectory reveals that what had started as a democratization movement was gradually hijacked by warring elite factions and their allies, along with self-interested regional powers. The forces that stood up together in 2011 have been scattered, with some, like the Houthis, aligning with the 'old regime' of Saleh, and others with the new regime of Hadi.¹²

In this sense, the alliances and oppositions that emerged around the civil war are radically different from those of the popular uprising.

Importantly, behind the main stage of events between 2011 and 2015, Yemen was punctuated by other, less visible episodes of violence, which took the form of local clashes, terrorist attacks, or drone strikes. This continuous, long-lasting crisis, set within the context of a security void, the collapse of the state's institutions, and economic destitution, was also a factor in fuelling radicalization at the individual level. It pushed many ordinary people to take up arms, out of either frustration with the failed political process, the need to defend one's family, or simply financial despair. As UNICEF's representative in Yemen has estimated, approximately a third of all the combatants in Yemen are children who joined armed groups for the sake of money (Pedrero 2015).

Thus, in analysing the country as a 'battlefield', we should not forget that Yemen today is plagued by a humanitarian crisis as much as by sheer physical violence. At the time of writing, there have been over 11,000 people killed, 3.3 million internally displaced, and 14.1 million – out of a population of 27 million – suffering from food insecurity (Keane 2016).

Although all sides bear responsibility for the violence and its impact, the Saudi-coalition airstrikes and its blockade of Yemen have been the most damaging, turning the country's economy, infrastructure, and heritage sites to ruin. The United States and the United Kingdom have also played a role in inflicting suffering on the Yemeni people by providing arms and intelligence to the Arab coalition. Airstrikes are supposed to target Houthi forces, with the stated aim of bringing peace in the country, but the victims are often civilians killed in their sleep or while out shopping in open-air markets, attending funeral processions or wedding celebrations (OHCHR 2016). Not surprisingly, this fuels, rather than eradicates, radicalization and hatred on the ground. Similar sentiments grow on the other side of the conflict, with those who have borne the brunt of the Houthis' abuses calling for retribution, not reconciliation.

For many in Yemen, hunger is their main fear, rather than war. 'The hunger is harder on us than the bombing', as one Yemeni put it (Abdul-Ahad 2016). This is why Ahmed, described at the opening of the chapter, is considered lucky by his friends: because he went to fight with the Houthis, they speculate, he receives money and does not have to worry about food as they do. Securing food, amidst the scarcity of products and rising prices, is the main preoccupation of many young men who remained in Sana'a with their families. Hussein, Ahmed's good friend, told me, 'All I think about each day is how to provide food for my family and make sure my two kids are not hungry.' And yet, Hussein considers himself relatively 'lucky' too, being based in Sana'a and having friends abroad who can sometimes support him with small amounts of money. 'I don't know how others cope,' he said. The 'others' are Yemenis in towns and cities where the Saudi bombardments have been heavy, or where the Houthis have shelled residential areas, indiscriminately killing their opponents as well as women and children. But the worst off, according to Hussein, are those who live in the countryside, where hospitals are

shut down and humanitarian aid cannot reach, due to the Saudi blockade or the Houthis' control. They die of hunger and diseases that could be cured if they had access to basic healthcare.

Yemenis today are torn apart by the war, but they probably agree on one thing: that the world does not seem to care much about their plight. In one of the last messages I received from Ahmed in early 2016, he expressed his frustration with the international community that preaches to Yemenis about peace and democracy, but is silent in face of Yemenis' deaths and suffering. 'We are not humans for them,' he concluded. In one of Ahmed's Facebook posts, he conveyed a similar observation through evocative words:

I don't believe in UN and human right[s]
 The blind UN, human right[s]
 The deaf UN, human right[s]
 Why there is no eye to see the suffering of Yemeni kids?
 You just see the Saudi money
 And you keep silent and [keep] supporting [the] Saudi[s].

With the world turning a blind eye to the deaths and the humanitarian crisis in Yemen, the concerns of ordinary people, many of whom joined the popular mobilization in 2011, revolve around survival rather than democracy and human rights. Nonetheless, violence has not become the new normal in Yemen, and the youth, in particular, have continued to peacefully oppose both the Houthis' crimes and the airstrikes of the Saudi-led coalition. At the end of March 2015, a social media campaign was launched, using the hashtag 'Kefaya War' [enough war] to shed light on the war crimes committed in Yemen by all sides and to share stories of Yemenis' humanity and resilience.¹³ Throughout 2014 and 2015, protests were also organized on the ground, resisting the Houthi militias, calling for the country's unity and the rejection of violence (see, for example, Zunes and Al-Haidary 2015). Today, however, amidst the violence, destitution, and despair, these voices of peaceful resistance have become more and more scattered.

Notes

- 1 *Qat* leaves are popularly chewed in Yemen for their mildly stimulant effect. *Qat* is chewed in private settings, as well as at weddings, business and political meetings. Lisa Wedeen (2008) has argued that the sites of *qat* chewing are reminiscent of the Habermasian public sphere, as they provide spaces of dialogue and critical debate.
- 2 The close relationship between the Islah and the president stood in stark contrast to the position of Islamists in countries such as Tunisia and Egypt, where their political organizations had been banned.
- 3 Probably less so in the South, traditionally and for good reasons more critical of the president.
- 4 This argument is in fact very close to the one made by Ali Abdullah Saleh, who called the protests a conspiracy that aimed to destroy the country. See, for example, Carlstrom (2011).
- 5 The 1994 civil war is briefly discussed in the following section.

- 6 Amendments to the Constitution that passed in 2001 and extended Saleh's power and term in office made it obvious that the president was slowly preparing the succession of his son Ahmed.
- 7 Saleh's argument was not unique, but was a common rhetorical device of dictators threatened by the 'Arab Spring' uprisings; very similar statements were given by Qaddafi in Libya or Assad in Syria.
- 8 Of the 565 seats, only 40 were distributed to representatives of the independent youth (Alwazir 2016, 174–5).
- 9 According to Saudi Arabia, many Yemenis loyal to President Hadi, and the popular media, the Houthis are supported by Iran, which uses the insurgent group to increase its influence in Yemen and the region. Against these claims, scholars of Yemen point out that Iran's involvement in Yemen before the conflict had been minimal; the Houthis, although likely to receive financial and military assistance from Iran, are driven by their own politics and grievances rather than following external orders. See, for example, Von Bruck (2014) and Carapico and Yadav (2014).
- 10 Independence Day, celebrated on 30 November, is a national day in Yemen, commemorating South Yemen's independence from the British achieved in 1967.
- 11 Salman and Khalifa refer to Saudi Arabia's king and the UAE's president, respectively.
- 12 As mentioned earlier, some groups, like the southern movement, took the anti-Houthi/Saleh position without necessarily granting their support to Hadi and al-Islah.
- 13 See the Facebook profile: Kefaya War#Our Yemen, available at: www.facebook.com/pg/KefayaWar/about/?ref=page_internal

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