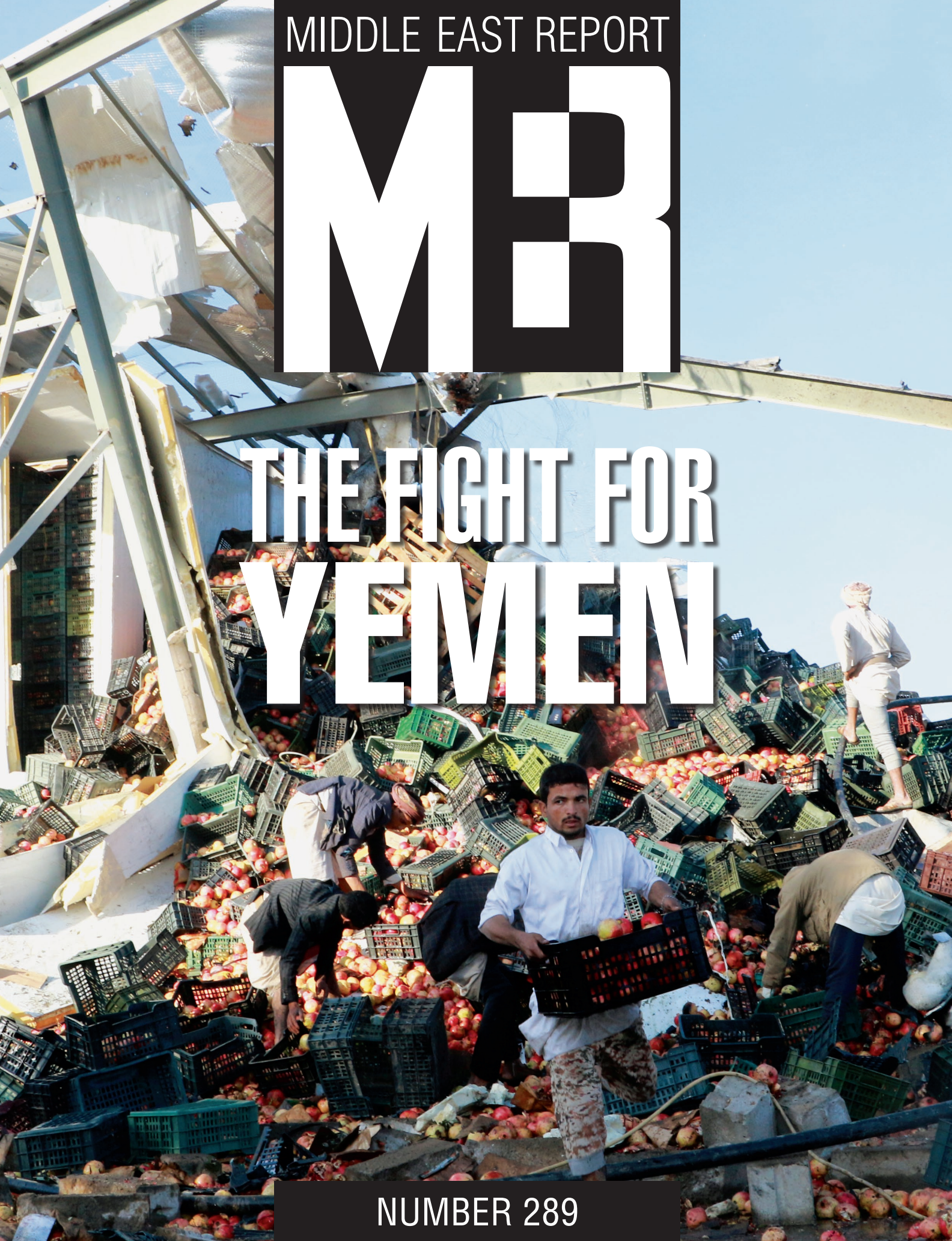


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COVER People salvage pomegranates after a Saudi-led air strike in Saada, Yemen, 2017. (Naif Rahma/Reuters)

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February's Congressional passage of a historic resolution to end US support for the Saudi-led coalition's war in Yemen was an important step toward ending that war and curtailing US military interventionism in the Middle East more generally.

That House resolution invokes the War Power Resolution of 1973, which limits the president's ability to undertake military interventions without Congressional approval. The Yemen resolution was propelled by a national surge of progressive grassroots activism to end US diplomatic and military participation in a war that has created one of the world's worst humanitarian disasters. The scope of destruction and human suffering is catastrophic: hundreds of thousands dead from bombing, war-related disease and malnutrition, and millions on the brink of famine without access to drinking water or medicine. The Senate, which passed a similar resolution in 2018, appears likely to pass the new House version. If both chambers approve the legislation, it would be the first time in history that both chambers passed a War Powers resolution.

But the Congressional resolutions, while welcome and overdue, are unlikely to bring an end to the war in Yemen unless deeper entanglements that have propelled decades of US interventionism in the Middle East are also addressed. At the core of the United States' continuous involvement in the Middle East over the past century has been the combination of US military power, international oil companies, weapons manufacturers and deeply reactionary regimes and social forces which the United States has relied upon to fuel its carbon-based society and maintain its global hegemony. The longstanding and intimate US-Saudi alliance, most of all, has continuously aligned Washington with the region's despots and against their people and their aspirations for freedom, justice and dignity.

The scope of the US-Saudi relationship goes far beyond President Trump's embrace of Saudi Arabia as an arms-sales cash machine or the bromance between the president's son in law and Saudi Arabia's young and reckless Crown Prince Mohammed bin Salman. It goes beyond the Saudi billions washing through American banks, real estate deals and Silicon Valley. Trump has simply doubled down on long-standing US policy: Every administration since Harry Truman has based its Middle East policy on ensuring the stability and security of the Saudi ruling family.

Ending the US role in Yemen's war will not suddenly end that conflict or US interventionism in the region. But it could mark a turning point. Ending Yemen's war could be a first step away from Washington's embrace of the region's most reactionary states and toward ending the US forever War on Terror by reversing the unconstrained militarization of US foreign policy. The challenge to dismantle the geopolitical and financial infrastructure of the US-Saudi alliance will be the next fight for the ascendant progressive movement that moved the dial on Yemen.

Meanwhile, Yemenis are struggling to dig themselves out of a man-made disaster, and the challenges they face are increasing in scope and severity. They are protesting Saudi and Emirati attempts to control their future, finding employment by joining militias, salvaging food from bombed farms and markets and organizing in numerous ways to try to affect what comes after the war. People of conscious must join the fight for Yemen on the basis of justice and accountability.

The color cover photo—which marks a new look for MERIP—captures the tenacity of Yemenis fighting for their own future. ■



Searching for survivors after Saudi-led coalition air strikes in the Old City of Sanaa, a UNESCO World Heritage site, 2015. HANI ALI/XINHUA NEWS AGENCY/EYEVINE/REDUX

Toward a Just Peace in Yemen

Stacey Philbrick Yadav and Jillian Schwedler

The United Nations (UN) has called Yemen's four-year-old war the worst humanitarian crisis in nearly a century, with 10 million on the brink of famine and nearly a quarter million at "catastrophic levels of food insecurity." Despite a brief glimmer of hope following negotiations in December 2018, "millions of Yemenis are hungrier, sicker and more vulnerable now than they were a year ago."¹ At every stage, the scale of suffering has been preventable, and yet pervasive misunderstandings—and some deliberate

mischaracterizations—mean that the war has reached a deadly stalemate.

The war is conventionally understood as beginning in 2015 when Saudi Arabia launched air strikes to restore the government of President Abd Rabbu Mansour Hadi, who fled the capital after it was seized by the longstanding northern insurgent group known as the Houthis and their allies. But the conflict soon escalated into a more substantial war as a coalition of states led by Saudi Arabia and the United Arab Emirates (UAE)—motivated to contain what they characterized as an Iranian-backed coup in Yemen—employed aerial bombardment, naval blockades and ground forces to push

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back the Houthi's advance. With UN quiescence and US and European weapons, the war's antagonists have had access to asymmetric military and diplomatic resources, yet it is clear that there is no military victory to be had in Yemen.

While the war indeed may be asymmetric, the conflict is not neatly two-sided, as the conventional framing suggests. Viewing the war through a sectarian lens (between Sunni and Shi'i forces) or a regional lens (proxy warfare between Saudi Arabia/the Gulf and Iran) belies the complex interplay of actors and alliances on the ground. Those lenses also fundamentally underemphasize Yemenis' pursuits of diverse outcomes. Neither the Saudi-Emirati coalition nor the opposition to Hadi are uniform blocs. The complexity of Yemen's multi-faceted war is important to understand analytically in its own right, but also because that multi-faceted dynamic has ethical and political implications.

The tendency to reduce Yemeni politics to a few recognizable actors is not new, nor has it ever been politically neutral. Indeed, the US and GCC-backed transitional process that unfolded at the end of Yemen's 2011 popular uprising made political choices about which groups to recognize and which to exclude. The real aim of that transitional framework was to build a government and a post-conflict process that empowered actors whose aims did not challenge regional Gulf interests or US counterterrorism objectives. In the process, excluded local groups and their grievances were ignored in ways that stymied the transition and paved the road to war by 2015.

In the context of this multisided and often simplified catastrophe, Americans and Europeans whose governments have supplied weapons and intelligence to the coalition and provided it with diplomatic cover in the UN are implicated in the war. Many of those citizens have begun to take actions to restrain their government's contributions to the war. Yet the necessary work of curtailing weapons sales or pressing for accountable investigations into war crimes committed by all sides will not by itself be sufficient to produce a sustainable peace or to address the destruction caused by the war in a way that is just. A just peace will also require a commitment to a post-conflict process that reckons with the interests of diverse Yemeni and non-Yemeni stakeholders. That process must not reproduce the drivers of conflict by elevating the voices and interests of only the most recognizable and foreign-allied factions. Those committed to a just peace will need to turn a critical eye toward the region's political economy as a whole, and its relationship to US economic and military policy more broadly.

Background to the War

The immediate roots of the war can be traced to the Arab uprisings of 2011, when millions took to the streets to demand the downfall of their autocratic and corrupt regimes. Yemenis participated in an 11-month uprising that forced longstanding President Ali Abdullah Salih to the negotiating table. Yemen's

wealthier and more politically stable (if also more repressive) neighbors, under the aegis of the Gulf Cooperation Council (GCC), brokered a negotiated exit for Salih that included three key provisions relevant to the current war.

The first provision granted Salih and his closest family and associates legal immunity, which sowed concerns among Yemenis because it meant that the ousted president could remain politically active in Yemen. More consequentially, the other provisions saw two significant groups excluded from the transitional power-sharing government: the Hirak, a collection of southern groups that had been seeking greater political and economic autonomy since 2007; and the Houthis in the North, a group known also as Ansar Allah that had been fighting the government for greater cultural autonomy and political accountability since 2004.

Excluded from any formal representation in the new transitional cabinet (following Hadi's February 2012 election by uncontested referendum), the Hirak and the Houthis were each able to derail elements of the transition process, particularly during Yemen's poorly designed and executed National Dialogue Conference (NDC).² Hadi then created ad hoc committees where real decision-making took place—without any participation from the Hirak, the Houthis or the voices of those independent women and youth who had been so crucial to the 2011 uprising's success.

Western investment in this failed transition process doubtless stemmed in part from a reassessment of its ineffectual policies in Libya and Syria and the desire to contain any fallout from Yemen's uprising. For the Gulf's undemocratic monarchs, a genuine popular movement on their southwestern border was worrisome, and the GCC prioritized the concerns of foreign actors over the substantive demands of the millions of Yemenis who mobilized for change. Hadi's transitional government also proved responsive to the interests of foreign actors.

The legacies of Salih's long-standing policy of insecurity rent-seeking also stymied the transition. Salih had attracted foreign aid by amplifying the risk posed by militant groups, especially Al Qaeda in the Arabian Peninsula (AQAP), which allowed him to direct resources to his own political survival throughout the 2000s.³ As he faced a steady string of internal challenges in the 2000s, Salih began to personalize the use of repressive force by putting most sectors of the armed forces and intelligence services under the control of family members.⁴ After the uprising, the transitional leadership lacked the capacity to dismantle Salih's personalization of the security sector. As a result, fragmented militias across the country absorbed much of that military equipment and personnel, enabling them to hold ground in the war to come.

After the unsatisfying conclusion of the NDC, the Houthis escalated their criticism of the central government and staged protests outside of their traditional areas of support. Capitalizing on this momentum, armed Houthi militants moved on Sanaa in September 2014. A substantial number of troops loyal to Salih stood down as Houthi

Control areas in Yemen

As of September 2018



the Hadramawt region, an eastern-central valley that had been effectively ungoverned since the uprising. AQAP's move drew the United States and the UAE into direct military conflict, but not the Saudis or Yemeni forces loyal to Hadi. This fragmentation and realignment of actors engaged in conflicts across Yemen shaped the dynamics of the next stage—the war itself.

Cascading Effects of War

On March 25, 2015 Saudi Arabia launched Operation Decisive Storm, which many consider the formal beginning of the war. The massive air campaign was accompanied by the imposition of a naval and land blockade designed to restrict the ability of the Salih-Houthi coalition to receive external support. The blockade did not stop the flow of arms, nor did it prevent the Houthi capture of existing weapons (and weapons production facilities) inside Yemen. Beginning in August 2015, the Saudi forces began bombing civilian infrastructure to cripple the North by destroying economic productivity. Since

forces entered the city, signaling the possible emergence of a Houthi-Salih alliance with the power to bring down Hadi's faltering transitional government.

For a short time, a negotiated agreement offered the Houthis and Hiraq a share of a new transitional cabinet and maintained a fragile peace, but the government was largely paralyzed. In January 2015, presidential appointees on the Constitutional Committee announced a draft constitution that included federal restructuring. The draft was unacceptable to both the Houthis and the Hiraq, as it carved the country into regions that would undermine the local authority of both.⁵ Houthis forced Hadi and many of his ministers to flee to Aden and began to push into the South. That move inflamed the southerners and pitted the Houthis against both the Hiraq and supporters of Hadi's government.

These developments in the South between the Houthis, the Hiraq and Hadi's government are crucial to understanding the war in Yemen, yet they fall outside conventional framing of the conflict. The Hiraq's opposition to the Houthi putsch did not equate to Hiraq support for Hadi or his Saudi backers. Instead, southerners sought to retain their autonomy and viewed the Houthis as outside invaders. When Hiraq groups later created a Southern Transitional Council (STC) to insure their autonomy, they sought aid from the Emiratis—not from the Saudis, who were pushing for Hadi's government to control all of Yemen, including the South. Meanwhile, AQAP capitalized on the chaos to experiment with territorial governance in

2017, the coalition has encircled the port of al-Hodeidah, the main conduit for food imports and humanitarian aid to much of the North.

Over four years of blockade, Yemen has developed a war economy through a system of black-market transit and taxation, providing a powerful source of revenue for border regions and the militias that operate their checkpoints. The economic collapse of the country was furthered by the deliberate weaponization of civil service salaries and the relocation of the central bank from Sanaa to Aden. Goods enter and circulate in Yemen, but profiteers grow rich as these goods move to (expensive) markets in urban areas. Given that Yemenis are predominantly rural, the urban concentration of expensive goods and the realities of a divided geography and war-torn infrastructure produced vast islands of suffering, from both violence and starvation.

The exact number of conflict-related fatalities is not known. A UN official offered a figure in August 2016 of more than 10,000, while the Armed Conflict Location and Event Data Project puts the death toll at more than 60,000 from January 2016 through December 2018. Some 37 percent of those killed in 2018 died in al-Hodeidah—an 820 percent increase in conflict-related fatalities from the previous year.⁶

Yemen's war may be less lethal than that of Syria, but its worsening humanitarian catastrophe has touched every part of Yemen—and fully 80 percent of the population. According to the UN's Office for the Coordination of Humanitarian



A nurse watches over patients recovering from cholera at the May 22nd Hospital, Sanaa, 2017.

CATALINA MARTIN-CHICO/PANOS PICTURES

Affairs (OCHA), 24 of Yemen's 29 million people are in immediate need of humanitarian assistance. Fewer than half of the already weak healthcare facilities are functioning in any capacity, and those that function lack adequate medicines, bandages and facilities for sterilization. Hundreds of thousands are ill as a direct result of poor sanitation and water-borne diseases.⁷ As a result of destroyed sewage facilities, Yemenis have suffered from the worst cholera outbreak in decades with 1.2 million suspected cases. UNICEF reports that a Yemeni child dies every ten minutes from preventable causes.⁸ More than 1 million pregnant women suffer from malnourishment.⁹ The effects of the humanitarian crisis in Yemen will be intergenerational.

Human security is made worse by the growing number of Yemenis who are forced to flee their homes for safety, food or because their homes have been destroyed. At least 3.3 million are internally displaced, with as many as 1 million displaced from al-Hodeidah governorate alone in the past six months.¹⁰ On January 26, 2019, eight were killed and at least 30 wounded as a result of the shelling of a center for displaced persons in Haradh district, Hajjah governorate.

The collapse of the economy caused by the war has made things worse. The Yemeni rial fluctuates between a half and a quarter of its former value. Some 35 percent of businesses

have entirely closed, while 51 percent of the surviving firms have seen their business shrink significantly. Prices of food commodities are 73–178 percent higher than before the war; fuel costs have risen at an even higher rate.¹¹ Combined with the divided banking system and the crisis of cash liquidity, Yemenis desperate to feed themselves have sold all manner of possessions and borrowed sums from friends, relatives and local merchants. Some families are even marrying their daughters in their early teens or even younger, to settle debts, raise money for food and give the household one less mouth to feed. Many more are finding employment in the one growth area of the economy: fighting for military groups. The recruitment of children into the military increased by 25 percent in 2018, and women are joining militias for employment on all sides of the conflict.

When considered in their totality, the cascading effects of Yemen's war extend well beyond battle deaths and are disproportionately borne by civilians and vulnerable populations most likely to be excluded from any political settlement.

The Politics of Multiple Wars

Foregrounding the needs and voices of Yemenis most affected by the war requires a reckoning with its political drivers

and the multiplicity of its antagonists. Ideology, sect, tribe, region and political claims all intersect in ways that defy easy categorization; they are also imbricated in local, regional and global politics.

The conflict in the North is the most discussed: the Saudi-led coalition seeks to defeat the Houthis and restore to power what international actors—but not all Yemenis—view as the legitimate government of Hadi and his cabinet. Most of the fighters in the North are Yemeni, while most of the air strikes are foreign. Iran's backing of the Houthis and the Saudis' backing of Hadi lend the conflict a sense of Shi'i-Sunni sectarianism. This dimension has become, in some ways, a self-fulfilling prophesy fueled by war.

Despite growing sectarian polarization, the conflict in the North is more complicated than this binary suggests. The Saudi-led coalition is not entirely unified, with the North a primary concern for Saudi Arabia but not for its coalition partner, the Emiratis. The Saudis work comfortably with members of Yemen's Islamist Islah, in which the Muslim Brotherhood plays a powerful role and is aligned with many coalition-backed militias. The UAE, by contrast, has targeted members of Islah in the South, where Islah members have been detained and tortured, Islahi leaders assassinated and the organization's assets seized or destroyed.

Northerners not involved in the fighting are divided in their allegiances: some support the Houthis, some hope for Saudi defeat of the Houthis and some disavow both—among other configurations. Nor are all northern or Zaydi tribes allied with the Houthis; as the war broke out, tribal leaders in the Khawlan region even sought to remain neutral. And Yemen's Vice President Ali Muhsin, who was the longstanding commander of the First Armored Division of Yemen's military before he abandoned Salih during the 2011 uprising, has close ties to many northern militias but cannot be counted as an uncomplicated Saudi ally.

In the South, meanwhile, the sometimes-fragmented Hirak groups oppose the Houthis but without supporting Hadi or his Saudi backers. The UAE has played a more direct military, political and economic role in the South than its Saudi counterparts have in the North. In part because of their distrust of Islah, the Emiratis are seen as reliant upon salafi militias hostile to both the Houthis and the Brotherhood. Southerners often greet Hadi's infrequent visits to Aden with large demonstrations marked by pre-unification Peoples Democratic Republic of Yemen (PDRY) flags that announce secessionist intentions.

Thus, despite their coalition partnership, the Saudis and Emiratis have focused their activities on different parts of Yemen. At times, rival Gulf militias have reportedly exchanged fire when they meet in front line areas like Taiz and al-Hodeidah. The wartime division of labor, however, has largely kept at bay conflicts that may emerge around incommensurate visions for post-war Yemen. Such intra-Gulf rivalries often fly below the radar, but they are not entirely new.¹² Internal

schisms between Qatar and its GCC allies, on the one hand, and Saudi Arabia and the UAE, on the other, came to a head in 2017 and resulted in Qatar's withdrawal from the coalition in Yemen. That crisis has also put tremendous pressure on Oman, the primary backchannel for Yemeni negotiators and their regional allies, to renounce its position of neutrality.¹³ Oman's unwillingness to choose sides may in part explain the expansion of both Emirati and Saudi forces in Yemen's eastern province of al-Mahra.¹⁴

Regional dynamics elsewhere in the Middle East have also shaped the conflict in Yemen. Iran's patronage of the Bashar al-Assad regime, which is reasserting control over almost all of Syria, puts Iran in a stronger position regionally than before that war. Similarly, post-ISIS government policies in Iraq have assumed a sectarian flavor that affords Gulf actors little ability to influence Iraqi politics. In this context, anchoring Yemen firmly within the Sunni Gulf regimes' sphere of influence has taken on a greater urgency—perhaps more than it did at the beginning of the war.¹⁵

Alongside these regional and peninsular rivalries is a global context that has abetted the war. One source of this is US policy. The administrations of presidents George W. Bush, Barack Obama and Donald J. Trump have all tended to view Yemeni politics as inscrutable and to largely limit US engagement to counterterrorism objectives. One primary consequence—and one that cannot be attributed to the Trump administration alone—has been the deferral of US policy to Saudi priorities. The statist nature of the UN further compounds this deference, giving more weight to the sovereign prerogatives of the war's state-based antagonists than their non-state adversaries—to say nothing of Yemeni civilians. Despite some limited progress, efforts to investigate war crimes committed by all sides have been repeatedly blocked with US assistance.

Developments in Europe have been guardedly more progressive, where activist efforts to suspend weapons sales to Saudi Arabia not only advanced earlier and with more government support but have been explicitly tied by government officials to progress in negotiations.¹⁶ Sweden hosted peace talks in December 2018 with significant support from Germany and other European allies. Great Britain and the United States, however, have largely maintained their policies in support of the coalition amid mounting pressure from activist groups and from Congress.

Mobilizing Against War

Activist efforts to bring about an end to Yemen's war have gained considerable momentum over the past 18 months, as several previously disconnected streams have coalesced. The first and most important stream originates in the work of Yemeni activists themselves. Globally dispersed in a diaspora of considerable precarity, Yemeni activists have struggled to address political, military and humanitarian dimensions of

the war. Most face at least some surveillance and scrutiny in the countries in which they work.¹⁷ Online campaigns have sought to connect communities of diasporic activists, but spatial fragmentation is only one of the barriers to coordinated action. Yemeni activists in the diaspora are no less divided on the underlying political questions that drive the conflict in Yemen than are their family members in Yemen. The most coordinated action, however, was likely the Yemeni bodega workers' strike, organized in opposition to the Trump administration's ban of Yemeni immigration.¹⁸ The categorical denial of entry to Yemenis living under escalating conditions of crisis was a unifying factor that contributed momentum and helped build new activist allies.

Among non-Yemeni allies, anti-war activists have the longest-standing relationship to the conflict. Many anti-war organizations in the United States and Europe first took notice of Yemen in the context of Obama's increasing reliance on drones as a part of his military approach to counterterrorism. Groups like CodePink and Amnesty International documented the escalating reliance on drones during Yemen's tumultuous transitional period, when Hadi extended Salih's authorization of the use of drones in Yemeni territory. As with his predecessor, this policy damaged Hadi's legitimacy at the local level. It also contributed to the deterioration of security that many Yemenis, particularly those in the South, experienced prior to the Houthi advance on Sanaa in 2014.

Anti-war activists focused on drone warfare did not always connect their cause to the growing insecurity that followed Salih's departure from power. They nonetheless provided important impetus for the broader approach that organizations like the Yemen Peace Project and Win Without War adopted as Yemen's failed transition shifted to open war. The concerted media and lobbying campaigns by groups such as these helped to generate steady and somewhat bipartisan Congressional interest in US policy toward Yemen long before the fallout of the journalist Jamal Khashoggi's assassination by Saudi Arabia in October 2018. The first effort in the Senate to restrict weapons sales to Saudi Arabia came in 2016 in the form of the resolution advanced by Sen. Rand Paul and Chris Murphy; it secured only 27 votes. By December 2018, however, a broader War Powers resolution passed the Senate; the newly elected Democratic majority passed the resolution in January 2019 in the House of Representatives. This momentum mirrors similar growth in activism in Europe, where several of the coalition's military backers faced legislative pressure to limit arms sales as a means of pressuring Yemeni antagonists and their regional backers to come to the negotiating table.

A New Framework, A New Peace?

As promising as this momentum may be, it reflects the modest horizons of an anti-war strategy pursued through legislative means. Restricting arms sales promises to slow the war and perhaps encourage negotiations. It does not, however, speak

directly to the wreckage of the war or the almost unfathomable challenge of reconstruction. The war economy, which generates profits from the clandestine trade in people as much as in goods, will be difficult to supplant; cross-border reconstruction promises to lock in regional clientelism. This process in Yemen parallels developments in Syria but also draws on longstanding Gulf dynamics.¹⁹ Should US and European supporters of the coalition manage to incentivize a negotiated settlement of some kind, that agreement would need to address these concerns. And such a peace would have to reckon with the multi-faceted dynamics of the war—dynamics that are ignored by the United States and in the UN Security Council resolutions that continue to treat the war as a two-sided conflict.

In the meantime, parts of Yemen are experiencing piecemeal reconstruction through the private sector, an approach that US and Gulf actors strongly favor but one that may well hinder the restoration of state institutions or capacity.²⁰ This approach does not challenge—and may even entrench—the material interests of external actors who have already shaped the war and its antecedent conflicts. Absent a significant shift in policy—in Yemen and in the region—toward one that promotes accountable governance and the rebuilding of a shared concept of the public, it seems unlikely that such an approach to reconstruction will support a just or sustainable peace. Just as the war has fragmented and isolated Yemen and Yemenis, reconstruction as it is currently unfolding amounts to little more than the privatization of peace. ■

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A bridge in Bani Hassan, Yemen, damaged by Saudi-led air strikes, 2018.

TYLER HICKS/THE NEW YORK TIMES/REDUX

The Saudi Coalition's Food War on Yemen

An Interview with Martha Mundy

Millions of Yemenis face starvation as a result of the war. The Saudi-led coalition has blockaded Yemeni ports and airfields and systematically targeted food and rural livelihoods. The siege and toll on civilian water, sanitation, health and energy infrastructure have led to the largest cholera outbreak ever recorded by the World Health Organization—over 1 million cases. Numerous strikes by coalition aircraft have killed innocent bystanders, many of whom were attending schools and shopping in markets. In August 2018, more than 51 civilians were killed, at least 40 of them young children, when a bomb hit a school bus. Yet as devastating as these strikes have been, more deadly to the Yemeni people overall are the coalition strikes targeting farms, fishing boats, food storage sites and transportation networks, which worsen the conditions that give rise to famine. While parts of Yemen faced chronic food shortages before the war, the numbers of malnourished and starving people have sharply increased, with UN agencies repeatedly warning of an imminent man-made famine.

Under international humanitarian law, the deliberate targeting of food as an object essential to civilian life is prohibited, as codified in Article 54 of the Geneva Conventions. The May 24, 2018 UN Security Council Resolution 2417 on the protection of civilians in wartime specifically reiterated this principle: "Using starvation of civilians as a method of warfare may constitute a war crime." The Security Council resolution noted that after several decades during which rates of global hunger had been declining, the past two years have seen the number of malnourished and starving people increasing. Neither the Security Council nor its member states have taken substantive action to constrain the use of aerial bombardment in this war. The United States is complicit in the Saudi aerial bombardments of Yemen. Saudi pilots trained by Americans fly American aircraft and drop American bombs, while American technicians service and keep the planes in the air. American contractors also upgrade the classified software on the planes, including the targeting software.¹ Saudi Arabia would be unable to launch air assaults on Yemen without American support and cooperation.

Martha Mundy, who taught anthropology at the London School of Economics, works on family, law and agrarian relations in the Arab world. She has extensive field experience in rural northern Yemen, where she lived from 1973–1977 and made a number of subsequent research trips. Since Spring 2016, Mundy has documented the targeting and destruction of rural Yemen and its agricultural sector in a series of articles and an October 2018 report by the World Peace Foundation at Tufts University.² She uses data from Yemeni sources³ covering 2015 to 2018 to analyze attacks on civilian targets, particularly the targeting of the

food system through attacks on farms, rural markets, agricultural land, water and transport infrastructure, agricultural extension offices and fishing boats and fishermen.⁴ These data allow Mundy to disaggregate attacks on rural livelihoods and agriculture by province and over time.

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What do you mean when you say in your World Peace Foundation report that “to target agriculture in Yemen requires a certain precision”?

About 65 percent of Yemenis live in rural areas, and over half of the population relies on animal husbandry and farming for their livelihoods, in whole or in part. Targeting the agricultural sector in areas held by the Sanaa government has thus caused major internal displacement and hunger. An International Labour Organization survey of labor markets seven months into the war found that two-thirds of those displaced came from rural areas, leading to a significant decline in the agricultural workforce.⁵

Less than 3 percent of Yemen's land surface was classified as arable by the UN Food and Agriculture Organization in 2015, yet the Ministry of Agriculture data shows that farms and cultivated land were targeted in some 180 separate incidents and animal and poultry farms in more than 75 other incidents during the first 18 months of the war. The Ministry of Fishing Wealth reports that by the end of 2017, every fish off-loading port had been targeted, 220 fishing boats had been destroyed and 146 named fishermen had been killed. These attacks require precision targeting and serve to undermine rural livelihoods, disrupt local food production and displace populations. The targeting of the Yemeni agriculture sector and rural livelihoods is thus not merely a form of collateral damage incurred as an accidental or incidental result of targeting military objects.

Indeed, one need not bomb agriculture to harm it gravely. The war creates cascading effects on food security, particularly in the region of the Tihama plain, long a “grain basket” of Yemen. A study from the Flood-Based Livelihoods Network and the Water and Environment Center in Sanaa looked at the impact on agriculture in two major wadis (Zabid and Siham) from March 2015 to June 2017. The report found that in both areas over that two-year period, crop-area cultivation declined an average of 39 percent and crop yields by 42 percent.⁶ Farmers in these areas reported that they could no longer produce at pre-war levels due to the extensive damage to water infrastructure, high prices for diesel fuel and other agricultural inputs, collapse in markets for renting land and the destruction of roads, markets and storage facilities.

As I wrote in the report, “if you consider the damage to the resources of food producers (farmers, herders, and fishers) alongside the targeting of food processing, storage

and transport in urban areas and the wider economic war, there is strong evidence that coalition strategy has aimed to destroy food production and distribution in the areas under the control of Sanaa.”

Your report also draws attention to policies of the Saudi-led coalition that cause even more starvation than the aerial bombing of rural infrastructure. What are some of the most important measures that have contributed to starvation in Houthi-held areas of Yemen?

Closure of the airport in Sanaa, seizure by forces linked to the coalition of the oil-producing regions, the repeated blockade and later assault on the main port of Hodeidah and Saudi-imposed delays on UN-verified ships have sharply curtailed economic activity and flows of humanitarian aid to Houthi-held areas. More importantly, however, was moving the central bank, which had continued to pay salaries to government employees across the lines, in late September 2016 from Sanaa to Aden. Thereafter, the bank ceased payment to all civil servants in Houthi-held areas, including teachers and medical personnel. As the state is the largest employer in Yemen, many people lost their income and hence the ability to buy food. It is impossible to relocate a central bank without support from the international banking system and the major powers, so we are brought back to the support that the United States, Great Britain and France have offered Saudi Arabia and the United Arab Emirates (UAE) in the economic war. Lastly, from late summer 2018, the bank brought in huge amounts of Yemeni rials—printed by a private Russian company and allegedly delivered to the office of the prime minister in Aden, not even to the bank—sending the value of the rial crashing further. Skyrocketing prices have put food out of reach of the poor.

How is it that the United States and UN Security Council have backed one side in the conflict? After all, large portions of the former national military and other allies of Ali Abdullah Salih, the former president of Yemen, as well as Salih himself, allied with the Houthi rebels to oppose the Saudi-backed government of Abd Rabbu Mansour Hadi.

It is helpful to recall how from 2011, with massive popular protest mobilization and splits between and within the blocks

of the ruling elite, the Gulf Cooperation Council (GCC) and the permanent members of the UN Security Council were deeply involved in attempting to manage internal Yemeni politics (see UNSC Resolution 2014 of October 2011). They supported the one-candidate presidential election of Salih's former vice-president, Hadi, in late February 2012. Hadi was to steer a transitional process of two years during which time a new constitution was to be written and general elections held to replace the parliament elected in 2003. But in February 2014, when the constitution had not been agreed upon and elections had not been held, the major political parties—without the agreement of the southern separatist movements or the Houthi Ansar Allah movement—agreed with international powers to extend Hadi's term for one additional year.

This attempt to manage the transition entailed tensions, given the marginal place accorded the Houthi and the southern separatist movements in the national dialogue and the privileging of the major political parties over the more progressive voices of the popular uprising of 2011. Hadi also unilaterally announced just before the end of his second year in power a division of the country into six regions, which would have severely damaged the interests of both the Houthis in the North and separatists in the South.⁷

At the same time, Hadi faced significant pressure to continue to implement Washington-consensus neoliberal reforms at a difficult political and economic time. He imposed fuel-price increases when fuel was already in short supply, which led the Houthis to enter Sanaa *manu militari* but with hardly a shot fired, as army units went over to the popular insurrection. The UN Special Envoy then drew up a document signed by all the political forces (including Hadi) called the National Peace and Partnership agreement, which was recognized by the Security Council in Resolution 2201 as the political road map as late as mid-February 2015. That resolution paid lip-service to the agreement, but when the GCC, Western powers and the World Bank began to close their operations in Sanaa, they signaled a disregard of the agreement in their clear preparations for hostilities. After the coalition began air strikes on Houthi targets on March 25, 2015, the UN Special Envoy to Yemen, Jamal Benomar, resigned under pressure, noting that resolution to the conflict could only come through agreement between Yemeni actors. Although Yemen was not given much attention by the Western corporate news agencies, Western and Gulf powers were nevertheless very much involved from the early stages.

The tragedy in Yemen has parallels with other besieged areas, such as Gaza. In both cases, the international community has either stood by or actively supported policies blocking trade and supplies. Aerial bombardments from states with US-supplied air forces destroy civilian infrastructure with impunity. The United States is a major player in both cases, supporting Saudi Arabia and the UAE's role in Yemen on the one hand, and Israel and Egypt's economic war on Gaza, on the other. What are some of the differences that you see?

One difference is the availability of information. In Gaza, the Office of Coordination of Humanitarian Affairs and Palestinian and Israeli human rights groups provide documentation of civilian impacts, as do reports by the water and sanitation utilities. Although it is hard to avoid the sense that Gaza represents a kind of laboratory for the economic and ecological war that we see deployed today against Yemen, the Gaza Strip remains by comparison a very small area. In Yemen, the specialized international consortia for damage assessment ceased work early in the war. Technologies such as satellite imagery have been underutilized to provide in-depth damage assessments outside of a few urban areas, while rural areas are largely invisible in the media landscape.

There has also been less public awareness of Yemen over the decades, whereas Palestine has been the world's most internationalized conflict since the 1947 UN Partition Plan. In 1947, Yemen's South was still under British rule and its North under an isolationist imamic state that had successfully resisted Western colonialism. In the 1960s, both North and South Yemen moved to republican regimes (exceptional for the Arabian Peninsula). Until the assassination of the North's President Ibrahim al-Hamdi in 1977, the North retained a certain margin to negotiate with Western powers and Saudi Arabia. Economically, North Yemen slowly became integrated with the Gulf oil economies and their models of elite consumption. From 1970 onwards, mass male Yemeni labor migration abandoned fields for construction jobs in Saudi Arabia and other Gulf states. From the late 1980s, as Yemen began to produce oil, the northern regime adopted Gulf models of elite enrichment and investment in financial paradises. And from the 1990s, President Salih—at first in alliance with the Islamist Islah party (which included the Muslim Brotherhood, tribal leaders including the Ahmar clan and Salafi militants)—built a security state and surrendered economic and development policy to the Washington-led institutions. When these foreign-controlled institutions closed down their support for Yemeni ministries in 2015, those ministries were ill-prepared for the task of documenting the subsequent war.

Your book *Domestic Government: Kinship, Community and Polity in North Yemen* (1995) is based on fieldwork in Yemen conducted between 1973 and 1977 in Wadi Dahr, in North Yemen. You focus on the workings of domestic government—the hierarchies and relations that extend from the amalgamations of households rather than categories such as tribal areas versus cities that have dominated accounts of Yemeni politics. Your work shows how little we know about local-level impacts on agriculture and food in this economic war. How does your work as an anthropologist of rural Yemen inform your work today, when it is so difficult for anyone to gain access to these areas? How does thinking about households help us understand the many impacts of the food war on Yemeni civilians?



A farmer walks around his cucumber farm in Sadah province after it was targeted by two Saudi-led coalition air strikes on July 8, 2017.

TAHA AL SURGBAI

The worsening conditions for field research and data collection have led me to work with agronomists to document changes in the Yemeni food-production system and to support Yemeni researchers as best I can to do basic documentation in these terrible times. Over the years, I have been keenly aware of the weaknesses and difficulties in university-based knowledge production in Yemen. Such a dearth of knowledge production cannot be replaced by yet another international agency or NGO short-term research survey. My earlier work also has taught me a great respect for earlier traditions of farming and land husbandry, whose destruction appears one of the aims of this war.

Do you think any of the parties responsible for creating starvation in Yemen will ever be held responsible?

Alex DeWaal, who writes extensively on humanitarian issues, has called for Yemen to be a test case for prosecuting (a new) crime of starvation—always a transitive verb.⁸ A number of lawyers are trying to explore routes to bring their national governments to account for their support of the coalition in the war. But the limits of international justice are painfully obvious when a senior judge on the International Criminal Court resigns in the face of US threats.⁹

Yemen is a strong case for such an attempt since the role of the coalition and its supporters is legally far clearer and compelling than that of internal state or sub-state actors inflicting local sieges, notably in Syria or Sudan. It is in the interest of Western activists to end the impunity for such massive crime.

Yet let us not forget the longer history of responsibility in Yemen's tragedy. The capacity of Yemen to feed itself has been destroyed not only in this war but over the last 50

years. The integration of the country (first North Yemen and then all of Yemen after the 1990 unification) into the wider regional oil economy transformed its elites into conduits for finance capital and its workers from skilled cultivators to substitutable labor. On the model of pro-natalist neighboring oil states, family planning, women's rights and employment were marginalized. For those 50 years, it has been the iron law of Western development policy that while Western governments may subsidize basic food production and agriculture at home, no government in the Global South may do so. This practice led to the destruction of traditions of social cooperation, farming knowledge, seeds, terraces, animal species and ecological balances of highland and lowland agriculture. The resulting erasure of family farming is incomplete, one reason for Yemen's resistance to the ferocious destruction wrought by this war. But beyond a legal response to the present holocaust, nothing less than a revolution in the valuation of Yemen's land and ecology is required to restore the country to its people. ■

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Women shout anti-government slogans during a protest march in Sanaa on November 14, 2011.

LINDSAY MACKENZIE/LUZPHOTO/REDUX

Yemen's Women Confront War's Marginalization

Afrah Nasser

Yemeni women are typically depicted either as heroic icons—such as the Arab region's first woman Nobel Peace laureate, the journalist and peace activist Tawakkol Karman—or as suffering mothers living amid crushing poverty and violence. This limited frame excludes the everyday activism of Yemeni women who have been working for decades to expand women's political power and shape their society, under often rapidly changing and difficult circumstances. In the context of the war that broke out in 2015 and the immense suffering it has produced, women have been war-makers and peace-makers alike. They also resist efforts to instrumentalize them for narrow political

gains or to exclude them from the political processes that impact their lives.

Despite advances gained from women's strong participation in the 2011 uprisings against the dictatorship of Yemen's former President Ali Abdullah Salih, and despite the fact that they continue to play an essential role in the day-to-day survival of their communities, three years of war and militarization have resulted in a significant setback for Yemeni women and increased their marginalization from formal political and conflict-resolution channels. Yemeni women join others—including youth and the southern movement—who are absent from the negotiation table. Yet women are also doubly-excluded, given the gendered impact of the war and resultant humanitarian crisis. Indeed, women and girls have often borne the brunt of the collapsing social order, with its poverty, famine, disease and dislocation.

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Gains and Losses

Prior to the war, Yemen consistently ranked among the least developed countries in the world. For its female population, this translated into widespread legal discrimination, illiteracy, child marriage and a high maternal mortality rate. Advances in women's rights in modern Yemeni history, nevertheless, have far outpaced the political and economic rights of women in other parts of the Gulf, such as Saudi Arabia or the United Arab Emirates, despite the Gulf's far greater wealth.

The experiences of Yemeni women, however, have been shaped and limited by the top-down manner in which rights were extended: first in South Yemen in 1967 and then under North Yemen's 1970 republican constitution. When the two states unified in 1990, universal suffrage rights and civil rights in the associational sector were extended to all, although discriminatory provisions in the constitution remained and were eventually expanded via amendment. Despite (or perhaps because of) these discriminatory provisions, women have consistently used the political and civil rights they do enjoy to contribute to Yemen's vibrant civil society and media sectors. They also have been on the frontlines campaigning against discrimination and political marginalization.

Women's activism has taken many forms, from the political and academic activism of feminists like Raufa Hassan and Amal al-Basha to the Islamist activism of women like Karman. As the Yemeni state eroded during the 2000s under severe economic and social pressures brought about by Yemen's adoption of neoliberal economic policies, women became increasingly active in addressing the needs of their communities. Accounts of women's activism during this period indicate that while women felt excluded or constrained by partisan political activism, their substantive demands for political inclusion and political and economic accountability mirrored those of many opposition parties.¹²

Women's capacity for leadership in this landscape of opposition politics crystallized with the outbreak of Yemen's 2011 uprising, when Karman earned widespread recognition. A campaigner for press freedom, especially through her organization, Women Journalists Without Chains, Karman was awarded the Nobel Peace Prize in 2011 for her leadership in the uprising.³

The most significant achievement for women in the transitional period following Salih's departure from office came in 2013, when women fought for and obtained 30 percent of the seats in the country's National Dialogue Conference (NDC). Women's participation shaped the content of a number of the NDC's declarations, while they worked to secure their representation moving forward by establishing a 30 percent quota in any new government body or institution established in the country. The National Board for Monitoring the NDC's outcomes, for example, was established with 30 percent representation for women. Women also took part in the Constitution Drafting Committee, a first for Yemeni women despite both North and

South Yemen having drafted and adopted several constitutions over the past decades. Although the new draft constitution did not address all forms of gender discrimination, it represented a step toward gender equality: The draft took up issues on which women had campaigned for years, such as a ban on child marriage and measures to ensure equal access for men and women to the justice system.

Yet these advances occurred at the same moment that the political system as a whole was descending into chaos and war. From the Houthi takeover of Sanaa in September 2014 to the Saudi-led military intervention in 2015, the formal political process ground to a halt. Militarization constituted a significant loss for women's political voice and role in decision-making. Under conditions of war, the push for women's representation has shifted from political institutions to diplomacy, reconstruction and transitional justice.

Gendered Impacts of War and Crisis

More than two thirds of Yemen's 29 million people are currently facing what the UN calls the world's worst humanitarian crisis.⁴ Cholera and other infectious diseases continue to threaten millions of people amidst a collapsing health care system.⁵ More than 10,000 people have been killed or wounded (according to a UN report in 2016, which surely underestimates this number), and numerous human rights organizations and UN investigators have documented various war crimes committed in the country by all warring parties.⁶ By 2018, the UN Panel of Experts concluded that Yemen's state "all but ceased to exist."⁷

Women and children are typically the first casualties of such dire crises. The ongoing state of violence and bombing, and the blockade and siege that the Saudi-led coalition has imposed on Yemen, have had a devastating impact on maternal and children's health. According to UNICEF, a child dies every ten minutes in Yemen because of preventable causes.⁸ Millions are facing famine, yet the most alarming toll has been on women and girls of childbearing age.⁹ Some estimates indicate that up to 3 million Yemeni women and girls are in acute need of humanitarian protection, with more than 1 million pregnant women suffering malnourishment.¹⁰ Oxfam also reports an alarming rise in child marriage in Yemen, whereby "families marry off their daughters earlier to get money to pay for basic food items and at the same time reduce the daily cost of feeding the family."¹¹ Child marriage compounds the risk of violence: The UN estimated that Yemeni women and girls saw an increase in gender-based violence of 63 percent in the first two years of the war.¹²

While Yemen's tribal customs strongly condemn abducting women, the deteriorating security situation has begun to change this norm. Dozens of women have been victims of forced disappearance and unlawful detention, facing torture and mistreatment in Houthi rebel prisons.¹³ As women's lives have deteriorated, Yemen remains the lowest-ranking country

in the World Economic Forum's Global Gender Index, with a gender gap estimated today to be 90 percent or more.¹⁴

The impact of the war's violence and social collapse on women may also be underreported, in part because of the opacity of the war itself. Death-toll numbers in Yemen are contradictory even across UN agencies, where some estimate that 10,000 people have been killed or wounded while others state that a child dies every ten minutes. The *Washington Post* has documented the obstacles facing the UN accounting and reporting of death tolls, strongly suggesting that UN estimates are undercounting the dead. As Kareem Fahim argues about death tolls, "It is rarely covered in the media because of restrictions and difficulties traveling there, but also because of a reticence about explaining the confounding array of actors and grievances attending a conflict in the poorest country in the Arab world."¹⁵

Lise Grande, the UN's humanitarian coordinator for Yemen, claims that female children in Yemen tend to be the most vulnerable and face the worst malnutrition.¹⁶ While not counted as killed or wounded by combat, girls' and women's disproportionate exposure to humanitarian costs and gender-based violence must be considered a major component of the war in Yemen. It is in this context that Yemeni women are again carving out agency under unimaginable constraints, albeit not always in ways that expand (other) women's agency.

Women in War and Peace

The war in Yemen is not something that is simply happening to Yemeni women, but rather a process in which women themselves are playing diverse roles across different regions of Yemen. In the Houthi-held capital Sanaa, for example, women have been recruited into the military. The Houthis have opened training camps for women, creating a women's military unit known as Zeinabeyyat.¹⁷ These female forces have been deployed to crack down against women in peaceful public protests over the past three years.¹⁸ In the context of existing norms of gender segregation, especially in the North, these women soldiers are necessary for the detention and policing of other women and have thus been essential to Houthi rebel governance.

The southern regions of Yemen, by comparison, have not witnessed women taking up arms in the battle between the southern resistance forces and Houthi forces during or since the Houthi advance on Aden from March to July 2015. The strong presence of conservative salafi fighters in southern militias has meant that women are neither recruited nor welcome as fighters. In the frontline city of Taiz—a city in southwestern Yemen that has been under siege by Houthi forces since the war began in 2015 and is consequently perhaps the most lawless and dangerous place in Yemen¹⁹—women have joined a range of different resistance groups, including periodically fighting the Houthis. Reliable estimates of the number of female soldiers are hard to obtain, but military work is an attractive choice for Taizi women because few reliable sources of income exist since the Yemeni economy's

collapse. All warring parties prioritize salaries for their militants over the provision of public goods or services. Given the fact that more than a million civil servants in the Taiz region have not received their salaries for more than two years, women and men alike have joined military factions as a source of income, perpetuating the continuation of conflict.

It is a perverse irony that women have been recruited as military actors by many groups, but largely deprived of a political voice in how the conflict will end. Far from contributing to women's political empowerment, the military recruitment of women is primarily aimed at the more efficient oppression of (other) women.

Meanwhile, women have been told during successive stages of the conflict to step aside whenever they attempted to participate politically. Women were excluded from the first peace talks in 2015, for example, leading a group of Yemeni politicians and activists to form the Women's Pact for Peace and Security, a body endorsed by the United Nations Entity for Gender Equality and the Empowerment of Women (also known as UN Women).²⁰ The Women's Pact has not achieved significant progress for women's political participation, as they face reluctance from the Yemeni government officials to include women members in any political or peace process.

At the grassroots level, the Mothers of Abductees Association was formed by female relatives of thousands of forcibly disappeared men in different parts of Yemen, following the model of the Argentinian Mothers of the Plaza de Mayo. The Association works as a pressure group, raising awareness about the missing men and advocating for their release. Given the severe restrictions on journalists, these women have faced considerable difficulty in reaching an audience even in different parts of Yemen, let alone internationally.

Confronting Women's Marginalization

The future of Yemen, not just the future of Yemeni women, will depend on how women—as individuals and in groups—fight for inclusion in any peace process designed to end the war. Smear campaigns against women in the media, the removal of women activists from peace talks and the undermining of the work of the Women's Pact all suggest that Yemeni women are finding few allies, whether among Yemeni (male) political factions, foreign governments or international agencies across the (male) political spectrum. The only UN agency to offer consistent support for the Women's Pact is UN Women, which itself plays no direct role in brokering peace.

As news spread in November 2018 that Sweden would host a new round of peace talks, the Swedish ambassador to the UN Security Council, Carl Skau, affirmed that Sweden was keen to see women participate and that Sweden would continue to support the Women's Pact.²¹ Yet when the talks took place in Stockholm in December 2018, the assistant secretary of the Yemeni Popular Nasserist Party, Rana Ghanem, was the only female member of any delegation. Research on

women's involvement with political parties in Yemen suggests that women's exclusion is not a function of party ideology, as secular and Leftist parties rarely commit resources to the gender equality they espouse.

Indeed, during the past three rounds of peace talks, only three women have sat at the negotiation table.²² "One of the reasons why I was able to be in the negotiations was my leading position in the Nasserist Party," explains Ghanem, who has been involved with the Nasserist Party since 1991. "Yemeni political parties' leadership has always been occupied by men and that has reflected itself in the lack of female representation in all these peace talks... This should not be an excuse, though, and the Yemeni government has to fulfil its promise of the 30 percent quota for women." Ghanem argues that this commitment should be on coequal standing with the implementation of the NDC outcomes and UN Security Council Resolution 2216 as conditions for any agreement.²³

Some sources of support for Yemeni women's political activism do exist. The UN Special Envoy for Yemen Martin Griffiths (along with his predecessors, Jamal Ben Omar and Ismail Ould Cheikh Ahmed) has ensured women's political participation in peacebuilding processes through creative ways, in order to apply UN Security Council Resolution 1325.²⁴ Women have worked closely with Griffiths' team in a variety of advisory groups during the four rounds of Yemen peace talks in Kuwait, Geneva and Stockholm.

In the recent Stockholm peace talks, women members participated in three groups. Two groups were supported by the UN envoy's office: the Women's Technical Advisory Group comprising eight Yemeni women,²⁵ the Political Advisory Group consisting of three men and two women and the Women's Pact for Peace and Security supported by UN Women. "All these groups have compensated for the lack of women's political participation, as the warring parties refuse to include sufficient female representation at the negotiation table," says one female member speaking on condition of anonymity. "Some in both parties make the excuse that the UNSC resolution 2216 didn't mention women representation in the negotiation process, some think it's still not the right time to include women at this stage of the conflict resolution process and some simply think that women are less competent in leadership."

The setting of the 2018 Stockholm peace talks enabled these women's groups to access and engage with the warring parties' delegations. Jamila Raja, a Yemeni diplomat and a member of the Political Advisory Group, believes that the opportunity made her more knowledgeable than ever of the two sides' needs and fears, and it gave her a sense of where to direct her influence. "Our work in the group focused on thinking of ways to find common ground between the parties, which was a challenging task. We weren't at the negotiation table, but we managed to work on agreement proposals."

Najat Joma'an, a professor of Management and Finance at Sanaa University and a member of the Women's Pact, argues

that much more needs to be done. "These groups are a good step, but we need an effective women's political participation [process] and both parties have to be pressured to include women in their delegations." Ghanem suggests that one way to do so is to compel inclusion of women members in these peace talks. "I think the UN Special Envoy could play a different role in his gender representation approach than how things look like right now," explains Ghanem. "While each party is asked to bring 12 members, I think Griffiths could increase the number of members and ask the parties to bring, say, 16 or 17 members, and dedicate these new seats for women only, and if a party fails to bring the women, the seats shall remain empty."

A stronger political will from the warring parties and the international community to address the political marginalization of women is necessary for increasing women's political representation in Yemen's conflict resolution process. Meanwhile, Yemeni women from all sides of the political spectrum keep playing a central role, within the available space. One lesson from the long history of women's engagement and activism is that women will not sit by and passively wait to be invited in. ■

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Demonstrators outside the prime minister's office in London protest a visit by Saudi Crown Prince Mohammad bin Salman, 2018.

GUY SMALLMAN/EYEVINE/REDUX

Yemen and the Imperial Investments in War

Priya Satia

News of widespread famine in Yemen and the grisly killing of the US-based journalist Jamal Khashoggi in the Saudi consulate in Turkey provoked intense and unprecedented public questioning about American ties to the Saudi regime in late 2018, particularly the role of American arms and military support in the Saudi-led war in Yemen. Many called for cancellation of the Saudi military deals, but President Donald Trump refused and instead expressed admiration for the autocratic Crown Prince Mohammed bin Salman. While Trump's stand sparked scrutiny of his family's intimate relations with the Saudi regime, his professed grounds for persisting in the arms deals were that they are crucial for American workers and industry. This claim is bogus.

To be sure, the United States is the world's largest arms exporter, with a third of international arms exports originating there. The next largest exporter, Russia, has one-fifth of the

market. Saudi Arabia is the United States' largest arms customer. In the last fiscal year, the United States sold \$55.6 billion of weapons worldwide, an increase of 33 percent over the previous year.¹ Last May, Trump's first foreign trip as president was a visit to the Saudi kingdom, where he signed an arms deal with an advertised value of \$110 billion. Although this figure has been shown to be inflated, it remains true that Saudi arms sales make up an enormous share of American arms exports.

During the crown prince's visit to the White House in March 2018, Trump eagerly waved a poster-board chart claiming that arms deals with Saudi Arabia would support tens of thousands of American jobs, notably in the swing states of Pennsylvania, Ohio, Michigan and Florida. He spoke in terms of half a million jobs to explain his refusal to stop "an investment of \$110 billion into the United States."

Experts have shown that Trump's job figures are grossly exaggerated; in fact, the arms sales would likely help sustain about 10,000 American jobs and create a few hundred new

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jobs at most. Even allowing for a generous multiplier effect in the larger economy, Reuters estimates a total number of sustained and new jobs of 84,000 to 168,000—a fraction of what Trump claims.² Moreover, the robust American defense budget and a record backlog of orders also suggest little risk of layoffs for American workers if the deals did fall through. The deals will, however, create tens of thousands of new jobs in Saudi Arabia, which seeks the arrangement partly to help develop domestic industry and local expertise.

But the American weapons partnership with Saudi Arabia is about more than jobs and investments. The military-industrial economy is too old and wide for any one arms deal to matter significantly. In defending his commitment to the arms deal, Trump explained that if he canceled, the Saudis would simply work toward its goal of greater militarily independence and Russia and China would profit from America's moral qualms.

With this logic, Trump articulated the actual purpose behind many arms sales since the twinned emergence of modern imperialism and modern industrial capitalism. While particular arms deals and arms-makers become scandals now and then, in the larger scheme, arms-making has been at the heart of industrialism and the spread of Western imperial power since the eighteenth century.

The real stakes of these arms sales are geopolitical—securing American influence in a region long understood as pivotal to Western imperial power. And there are vast industrial interests at stake in furthering that mission, apart from arms-makers. The US military is the country's single largest consumer of fossil fuels. Oil companies and financial institutions also depend on Saudi money. So does the tech industry. Since 2016, the Saudis have invested \$11 billion in private tech firms. The Saudi royal family owns 10 percent of Uber and a share in Lyft. Saudi money is the largest single funding source for US startups. Reflecting on how such industries have figured in the making of Western imperial power in the Arabian peninsula forces a reckoning with the US government's relationship with these companies as much as with Saudi Arabia.

Empire, Arms and Modern Capitalism

The centrality of arms-making to modern empire and industrial capitalism was acutely apparent at that hinge-moment of history, the end of World War I—supposedly the war to end all wars. Many who survived it hoped to make a new world free of arms—and empire. After the United States joined the war in 1917, President Woodrow Wilson insisted it be fought in the cause of self-determination. But the war did not end empire, and many of the ongoing struggles in the Middle East are rooted in that failure, including Americans' own imperial investments in war there.

During the war, the British Empire expanded into the Middle East, the former terrain of the defeated Ottoman Empire. Although the war was officially over in November 1918, Great Britain engaged in violent suppression of rebellion

in these newly occupied territories, as well as in India, Ireland and Egypt. The British government drew on new military technologies, especially airpower, in these counterinsurgencies, partly to convince the weary British public that war really had ended. This strategy was the beginning of a covert form of colonial intervention that allowed empire to survive in an increasingly anti-imperial age. But many Britons recognized that military technology had made a new scale of mass death possible. They launched a movement against the arms industry for having driven humanity to an apocalyptic juncture.

The high wartime profits of arms companies like Vickers, then supplying bombers for aerial counterinsurgency in Iraq, were a scandal, as was members of parliament owning shares in such companies. Critics discerned a secret international: a complex of arms firms, banks and governments fomenting war out of greed. The Labor MP Hugh Dalton noted that the Ottomans had used Vickers's guns against the British; he condemned directors of arms firms as “the highest and completest embodiment of capitalist morality.”

He was right, insofar as arms manufacturers had been crucial to the creation of modern capitalism since the industrial revolution in the eighteenth century. Military contracting for the wars of conquest that established Great Britain's global empire helped drive the emergence of modern capitalism, although that transformation is often celebrated as a triumph of Enlightenment values. The British also spread arms around the world, equating their spread with the spread of civilization itself. They were convinced that having scruples about who they sold to would mean forfeiting profit, prestige and influence to their rivals, the French and the Dutch—prefiguring Trump's anxieties about Russia and China.

Government-spawned innovation in firearms manufacturing soon drove industrial revolution in the United States, too. After decades of patient investment, the federal government enabled the production of firearms with interchangeable parts. The resulting American System of Manufacture was adopted in machine-tool, sewing-machine and other industries. British gun makers followed suit, adding bicycles, cars and other essential modern goods to their offerings. At the end of the nineteenth century, global arms sales were thriving. European and American arms companies obtained banking partners that gave loans to client states. Cartels formed as business alliances emerged to divide up world markets.

By this time, Great Britain was no longer an empire on the make, and the armed “native” began to seem a more threatening figure. The British began to police arms sales in the Middle East and South Asia especially and passed race-based laws on gun ownership in its colonies. World War I redoubled their concern: The Middle East expert Mark Sykes worried that enough arms had spread to “arm every black man who wants a rifle.”

In the 1920s and 1930s, global arms conventions tried to prohibit arms exports to Africa and the Middle East, but loopholes and vested interests—including the American arms industry—continued to confound control. The British



President Trump highlights arms sales to Saudi Arabia during a meeting with Crown Prince Mohammed bin Salman in the Oval Office.

EVAN VUCCI/AP PHOTO

themselves, captive to the old fear of forfeiting profit and prestige to rivals, subsidized the military strength of the two rival powers in the Arabian peninsula: Sharif Hussein of the Hejaz (Great Britain's wartime ally against the Ottomans) and the Wahhabi-backed House of Saud in Najd, which vanquished the Sharifians in 1925. Some British MPs worried that the Saudis would turn their British arms against Great Britain next as the dominant power in the region.

A 1935 British government inquiry into the private manufacture of arms alighted on the truth that war was central to Great Britain's economy, concluding that the line between military and civilian manufacturing was so blurry that it was impossible to say who was making or profiting from arms. Arms and their parts were central to industry in general—as they had been since the industrial revolution. The commission noted that “large numbers of people, of all classes...by reason of their employment, their business interests or by the holding of shares, may have a financial interest in war or the preparation for war.” Nationalizing arms production would require nationalizing all of industry, it concluded. Moreover, they argued—like their eighteenth-century predecessors—that it was better for Great Britain to supply arms to its own enemies than for rival powers to profit politically and economically from its principled abstention from such sales.

Shortly after the commission submitted its report, the Germans occupied the Rhineland, and Great Britain began

rearming with the approval of Labor politicians like Dalton. World War I had taught the importance of not being adequately prepared as much as it had fomented distrust of arms-makers. As the commissioners had anticipated, intensification of arms-making had an enormous impact on the economy: Rearmament pulled Great Britain out of the Great Depression.

The United States Seizes the Baton

We live among this geopolitical and moral detritus of the end of World War I. Seizing the baton of global imperial power, including heavy reliance on airpower, the United States has long sealed its partnerships with authoritarian rulers around the world with arms sales. And once again, the Middle East is a key focus of those concerned with the spread of arms.

The confused British diplomacy in the Arabian peninsula enabled the rise of American power there. While serving in the wartime occupation administration in Iraq, one of Great Britain's most influential Arabists, Jack Philby, developed a partiality for the Saudi cause. After resigning from government service in 1924, he moved to the peninsula and became chief advisor to Ibn Saud—and a bugbear to his government. (His son Kim Philby would become one of the notorious Cambridge Five in the Cold War—the ring of British double-agents working for the Soviet Union.) Standard Oil of California sought Philby out to broker the negotiations for

an oil concession in the kingdom, and Philby obliged. Thus it was that oil was discovered in Saudi Arabia in 1933 under American auspices. For Americans as much as peoples of the peninsula, observes the writer Amitav Ghosh, the history of the "Oil Encounter," whose consequences touch upon "every aspect of our existence," is "a matter of embarrassment verging on the unspeakable, the pornographic."³ Avoided in imaginative life, that history is relegated to the abstract realm of security.

Through long institutional cooperation with the British during World War II and the Cold War, the American military and intelligence establishment learned the covert approach to intervention in the Middle East, most infamously in Operation Ajax, the joint Central Intelligence Agency (CIA) and British MI6 coup in Iran. In 1960, just two years after the Iraqi revolution finally forced the British to depart the country, the CIA attempted to assassinate the Iraqi head of state.

Arms sales were part of the American effort to secure influence in the region from the middle of the twentieth century. In the twenty-first century, American arms are on all sides of conflicts in the region. Islamic State fighters have them. The Taliban have them. American arms are on multiple sides of the Syrian conflict. Notoriously, the bomb that Saudi Arabia dropped on a school bus in Yemen last year was American. Forty children and 11 adults died in that strike, and many more were wounded. The United States has also supported the Saudi effort in Yemen with refueling and intelligence.

Arms manufacturing drives the US economy, but it also creates chaos around the world. Still, the Trump administration continues to ease the sale of arms abroad, eliminating regulations in the name of economic growth. The Arms Transfer Initiative aims explicitly to "expand opportunities for American industry [and] create American jobs," according to Pentagon official Tina Kaidanow.

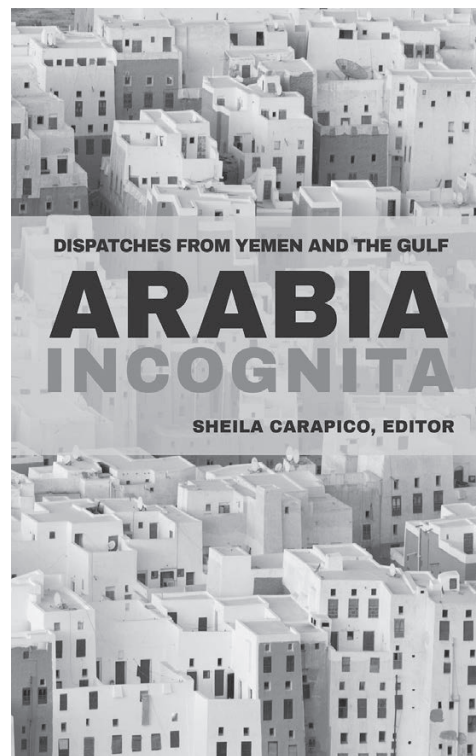
Top American contractors benefiting from this work include Lockheed Martin and Boeing. But these Silicon Valley and Seattle-based behemoths are far from the only technology firms to profit from defense contracts. Amazon, Microsoft and other tech giants also benefit from multiyear, multibillion-dollar Pentagon contracts. The fact that Silicon Valley is swimming in Saudi money is news now, but its growth has always depended on a robust supply of defense contracts. As the historian Margaret O'Mara puts it, "The American tech economy rests on the foundations of the military-industrial complex...[T]oday's tech giants all contain some defense-industry DNA."⁴

Tech moguls recognize the importance of defense contracts. Amazon spent millions this year lobbying for contracts for its facial-recognition technology, cloud-computing services and other products. "If big tech companies are going to turn their backs on the Department of Defense, we are in big trouble," said Amazon's Jeff Bezos. Lockheed Martin says it will defer to government decisions about Saudi arms deals; its sales in Saudi Arabia for 2019 and 2020 are in the range of \$900 million. Government departments likewise consider industry outreach and relationships with potential contractors to be standard practices.

ARABIA INCOGNITA

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But some segments of American labor are increasingly uneasy about military contracts. Within Amazon, workers are deeply concerned that the company's facial recognition technology may be used by the US Immigration and Customs Enforcement agency to track illegal immigrants. Hundreds have written to Bezos expressing their refusal to build a platform for government surveillance that violates human rights. Similar dynamics are unfolding at Microsoft and Google. Google employees have successfully stymied renewal of the company's controversial Pentagon contract to provide artificial intelligence for analyzing drone footage.

The gun control debate also fuels such moral reckoning within major companies. Blackstone and JP Morgan pulled out of Saudi Arabia's Future Investment Initiative—nicknamed “Davos in the Desert”—after the Khashoggi affair; both companies also tried to distance themselves from firearms manufacturers after the 2018 school shooting in Parkland, Florida. These moves have enhanced their brand appeal among many, although it is doubtful they have affected the gun industry as a whole—or the inequities systematically perpetuated by such wealth-consolidating firms. Still, they signify a search for a new capitalist morality, echoed by Silicon Valley investors belatedly cringing at the flow of Saudi money that provided tech companies with crucial liquidity for years.

In the aftermath of the Khashoggi affair, Venky Ganesan, a partner at the technology investor Menlo Ventures, told the *Washington Post* that acceptance of such money would be a “real moral challenge” going forward.⁵ Ro Khanna, Silicon Valley's representative in Congress, is calling on the valley to acknowledge that Saudi activities are a “slap in the face” of the “Enlightenment ideals” at the heart of its work. (Here, again, the notion that pacific Enlightenment values drive innovation obscures the historic role of defense contracts, even in the growth of Silicon Valley.)

Rethinking Arms and Capitalism?

Apart from snubbing investment and canceling arms deals, the Khashoggi scandal and the famine in Yemen provoked calls for fresh Western intervention against Saudi Arabia. But in the Middle East, the struggle since World War I has been to shake off Western power. Intervention would be a break with the longstanding US-Saudi partnership but would nevertheless perpetuate the sense of imperial prerogative that has long governed Western relations with the region. Rethinking the place of arms-making in our economy will entail a remaking of that foreign policy and envisioning a different kind of postcolonial world.

The Enlightenment thinker Adam Smith gave us the mythic ideal of pacific economic transformation. He also offered advice on managing the moral qualms inevitably unleashed by capitalism: He prescribed restraint in sympathy, blocking out of “miseries we never saw,” limiting our sympathies to the immediate, visible effects of capitalism, lest our guilt become paralyzing. Perhaps because he was a man from the Bezos-owned world of the *Washington Post*, Khashoggi broke the Smithian dam against

American empathy with more distant victims of Saudi horrors in Yemen. Many are struggling to reconstruct that dam: “We shouldn't trash [the relationship with Saudi Arabia] all over one thing,” urged one executive at Davos in the Desert.⁶ But others, however haltingly, are trying to stake out a different path and hold the US government and industries to account.

By pointing out that nationalizing arms-making would mean nationalizing all of industry, the 1935 Royal Commission exposed the illusion of wider innocence implied by critics' focus on the villainy of arms-makers. More than a hundred years after the end of the World War I, greater awareness of collective complicity in violence suggests an opportunity to more effectively revisit the lost causes embraced by those grieving survivors: the end of war and empire and the end of the arms-manufacturing that gives life to both.

Arms-makers do epitomize capitalist morality in that they have been at the heart of economic transformation since the industrial revolution, despite the determined efforts to alter that reality after World War I. The gun control movement and the criticism of America's enabling of Saudi horrors are asking Americans to navigate toward a different economic morality. If government contracts remain essential to industry, governments might contract for something other than surveillance and military technologies.

In the eighteenth century, British fiscal institutions existed entirely to provide resources for war; building canals was outside their purview. But governments now have the option of promoting growth more effectively through other kinds of government contracts—welfare rather than warfare, including education, health care and infrastructure projects.

Moreover, major arms contractors of the past—Remington, Le Creuzot, Vickers—also at times manufactured typewriters, farm implements, electric shavers, bicycles, sewing machines, speedboats and rail material. After World War I, defeat forced the German arms-maker Krupp to turn “swords into ploughshares” by making typewriters, surgical instruments, household pipes and cinematograph machines. As the world faces environmental devastation, welfare rather than warfare contracts might offer a way forward; ploughshares are actually more crucial to security than arms. The US military's current investments in renewable energy initiatives, biofuels, electric vehicles and other green technologies are disastrously undermined not only by its intense surveillance of climate activists but by its unending geopolitical ambition in the Middle East. ■

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An Emirati soldier escorts Yemen's Prime Minister Ahmed Obaid bin Daghar during a visit to the Red Sea port of Mukha, Yemen, August 6, 2017. FAWAZ SALMAN/REUTERS

Ambitions of a Global Gulf

The Arab Uprisings, Yemen and the Saudi-Emirati Alliance

Adam Hanieh

From the wars in Syria and Libya to the catastrophic bombing campaign in Yemen, the Gulf states led by Saudi Arabia and the United Arab Emirates have been the main Arab forces involved in the region's current conflicts. The Gulf also increasingly shapes the political and economic policies of other Arab states, promoting economic liberalization along with hardening authoritarianism and repressing social protest. Their destructive prosecution of the war in Yemen is an attempt to position themselves as the principal mediators of the maritime routes and territorial hinterlands located in and around the Arabian Peninsula—a strategic prize that will be decisive to shaping the Middle East's future geopolitical landscape.

Eight years since a wave of uprisings swept across the Middle East, the specter of violence, social destruction and mass displacement has largely replaced the hopes of 2011. In the first phase of these region-wide revolts, protesters sought an end to authoritarian rule and articulated widely felt aspirations for a new political and economic order. The remarkable manner in which these uprisings initially leapt across borders signaled the commonalities of lived experience throughout the Middle East—forcefully shaking a regional framework in place since the 1970s.

Precisely because of their regional reverberations, the Arab uprisings represented a particularly serious challenge to long-established US imperial strategy—and that of other Western states—in the Middle East.

Through the late twentieth century, this US strategy had come to rest on three main pillars of regional support—Israel, the Gulf states and a range of Arab authoritarian rulers—each with their own distinctive relationships to the core global powers. The West's economic, political and military support would help underpin governments that had little interest in upsetting the regional order—epitomized most visibly in the decades-long rule of individuals such as Egypt's Hosni Mubarak and Tunisia's Zein El Abidine Ben Ali. Within this structure, the Gulf states, principally Saudi Arabia, but also Qatar and the United Arab Emirates (UAE), came to play a critical role in terms of both their unique multi-decade strategic connection to the United States as well as their own significant influence in other Arab states.

The popular movements that broke out across the region from 2011 threw the stability of these political arrangements into disarray. In response, the second phase of the uprisings saw a determined effort by Arab political and economic elites, Western countries and other powers vying for regional influence to remake the Middle East in a way amenable to their continued interests. The crises that have emerged since that time are a direct consequence of this effort, which can be summed up in two interconnected objectives: first, to crush the popular aspirations of the uprisings and protect (and extend) the socio-economic structures that preceded them, and second, the connected bid by major global and regional powers—including but not limited to the United States, European Union, Russia, the Gulf states, Iran and Turkey—to project their own authority over this newly fashioned regional order.

The Gulf states have emerged as key protagonists within these dual processes. From the wars in Syria and Libya—where different Gulf powers have supported an ever-shifting range of factions—to the catastrophic bombing of Yemen, the Gulf has been the main Arab force involved in the region's current conflicts. Outside these areas of open war, the Gulf also increasingly shapes the political and economic policies of other Arab states. In partnership with international financial institutions

such as the World Bank, the International Monetary Fund and the European Bank for Reconstruction and Development, billion-dollar funding packages from the Gulf states have insisted on the standard tropes of market-led development, prioritizing privatization, opening up to foreign investment and cutting subsidies and social spending.¹ Politically, this economic liberalization has been closely entwined with hardening authoritarianism and repression of social protest through the years that followed 2011.

Positioned at the center of east-west trade routes traversing the Arabian Peninsula, East Africa, the Red Sea and Indian Ocean, Yemen is a key battleground for the towns, ports, military bases and shipping lanes that will underpin global power in the coming decades.

The consequences of the Gulf's deepening involvement in the region are reflected in the growing linkages between the political economy of various Arab countries and the dynamics of Gulf capitalism. This interweaving of the regional political economy is driven by different forms of cross-border capital flows originating from the Gulf, including mergers and acquisitions, minority portfolio investments in other Arab stock markets, the establishment of cross-border subsidiaries and control over licensing and agency rights. At the same time, the Gulf itself has become a highly significant zone for other Arab capitalists—most notably in sectors such as construction, logistics and retail. Through these and other intra-regional relationships, the tempo of capital accumulation in the Gulf increasingly acts to shape productive, commercial and financial activities in neighboring Arab states.

Tensions in the Gulf

Across the wider region, this projection of the Gulf's political and economic power has reproduced and generalized numerous frictions emanating from the Gulf itself. The starkest example of this dynamic is the escalating tensions between Saudi Arabia and the UAE, on the one hand, and Iran, on the other, which became particularly evident following the ascendance of King Salman to the Saudi throne in 2015 and his appointment of Mohammed bin Salman as defense minister and crown prince in 2017.

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Both father and son have consciously heightened the Gulf's conflict with Iran and have found a reliable and enthusiastically in the Crown Prince of Abu Dhabi, Mohammed bin Zayed bin Sultan Al-Nahyan. Acting through this united front, Saudi Arabia and the UAE have sought to use the rivalry with Iran as a means to step up their own direct intervention in the region, thereby implanting themselves at the center of any eventual political transitions or settlements.

The repercussions of this inter-regional conflict have been felt across all countries in the Middle East, but they are most intensely seen in Yemen, Syria, Iraq and Lebanon—four countries that to varying degrees remain outside of the Gulf's full orbit of control. This conflict has also generated a whole series of crises, schisms and political realignments at the global level. These crises include the divisions within and between President Donald Trump's administration and the US political class, the growing regional influence of other powers such as Russia, China and Turkey and the increasingly open alliance between Israel and the leading Gulf states.

Another important illustration of how the tensions within the Gulf are reproduced at the regional level has been the Saudi-Emirati-led blockade of Qatar. Despite the commonalities of different Gulf states—their dependence on hydrocarbon exports, a reliance on a largely rightless, non-citizen labor force and close relationship to the United States and other Western states—the Gulf Cooperation Council (GCC) integration project did not extinguish the competitive rivalries within the Gulf. Instead, a sharp hierarchy of political and economic power has marked the GCC since its inception in 1981, with the main pivot revolving around a Saudi-Emirati axis. These two countries have formed the principal zones of capital accumulation in the Gulf and, at least until the recent blockade of Qatar, have acted as the main interlocutor between other Gulf states and the wider world market.

Dominated by this Saudi-Emirati axis, the other Gulf states have felt marginalized within the GCC's wider



Abu Dhabi's Crown Prince Sheikh Mohammed bin Zayed al-Nahyan walks with Saudi Crown Prince Mohammed bin Salman during the Saudi-UAE Summit in Jeddah, Saudi Arabia, June 6, 2018.

BANDAR ALGALOUT/COURTESY OF SAUDI ROYAL COURT/HANDOUT VIA REUTERS

political and economic structures. Qatar, in particular, with its tiny citizen population (only 313,000 citizens out of a total population of 2.6 million) and its enormous wealth arising from its role as the world's largest exporter of liquefied natural gas, has particularly chafed at this hierarchical structure. One consequence has been Qatar's attempt to carve out an autonomous regional policy for itself and achieve a relative independence from Saudi Arabia and the UAE. Much like the Saudi and Emirati roles in the wider region, Doha's attempted projection of power has occurred through both financial and political means—including its support for different Islamist movements and Arab governments, its attempt to dominate the Arab world's media landscape and hosting a variety of exiled individuals and political parties.

This intra-GCC schism continues to echo throughout the region. In late January 2019, Qatar announced that it would buy \$500 million in Lebanese bonds, a step toward deeper involvement in a country where Saudi Arabia has traditionally been the main Gulf player. Doha is also attempting to reassert its weight in the Gaza Strip, pledging in November 2018 to cover six months of civil servants' salaries in the besieged territory. At an international level, alongside the closer association with Turkey and Iran that followed in the immediate wake of the Saudi-Emirati blockade, Qatar has sought to establish a rapprochement with countries usually seen as much more aligned to its larger Gulf neighbors. In this respect, official visits by the leaders of Pakistan and Sudan to Qatar in January 2019 marked an important diplomatic victory for the isolated Gulf state.

The War in Yemen

These regional dynamics provide the backdrop to the bombing campaign launched by Saudi Arabia and the UAE against Yemen in March 2015, a war that pits the Middle East's wealthiest economies—fully backed by the world's most powerful states—against the poorest country in the region. Much commentary has rightly focused on the immediate humanitarian calamity resulting from the war, but it is equally important to place Yemen's crisis in its wider regional and historic context.

Positioned at the center of east-west trade routes traversing the Arabian Peninsula, East Africa, the Red Sea and Indian Ocean, Yemen is a key battleground for the towns, ports, military bases and shipping lanes that will underpin global power in the coming decades. Control over these logistical nodes holds significant implications for the success of China's One Belt One Road initiative, Indian ambitions in South Asia and the Indian Ocean and the efforts of core Western states to maintain their military dominance within the region. In this environment, all Gulf states are attempting to position themselves as the principal mediators of the maritime routes and territorial hinterlands located in and around the Arabian Peninsula—a strategic prize that will be decisive to shaping the Middle East's future geopolitical landscape.

Up until the first Gulf War of 1990–1991, Yemeni workers formed an important component of Saudi Arabia's overall migrant labor force. Now, driven by its broader regional aspirations, Saudi strategy has shifted to a more direct alliance with Yemeni President Abd Rabbu Mansour Hadi and various local tribal and military leaders largely concentrated in the northern parts of the country. The status of these leaders depends upon patronage networks funded by Saudi Arabia, plentiful opportunities for war profiteering and Saudi disbursement of weapons, cars and passports.²

Replicating recent GCC practice in Egypt, Jordan, Tunisia, Iraq and Lebanon, the kingdom has placed up to \$3 billion in Yemen's Central Bank. Until early 2018, revenues from Yemen's oil exports were actually held in an account at the Saudi-owned Al Ahli Bank in Riyadh. This tremendous influence over Yemen's political economy has been further buttressed by direct Saudi control over Yemeni territory, including the port of Midi, located adjacent to the kingdom's Jizan province on the Red Sea, and the port of al-Ghaydhah, in the eastern al-Mahra governorate.

Such territorial conquests are an integral part of Saudi ambitions to dominate maritime routes through the Gulf of Aqaba. They also complement other Saudi initiatives such as the recently announced Red Sea Alliance, which aims to establish a common security and political framework between the kingdom and six other countries bordering the Red Sea and Gulf of Aden: Egypt, Djibouti, Somalia, Sudan, Yemen and Jordan. To this end, Egypt's 2017 agreement to cede

its Red Sea islands of Sanafir and Tiran to Saudi Arabia is striking confirmation of the kingdom's growing pan-regional muscle. The two islands are projected to form part of the \$500 billion NEOM megacity project, which will see new cities, economic zones and agricultural areas established under Saudi hegemony across both sides of the Red Sea.³

In contrast to Saudi Arabia's focus on Yemen's northern regions, the UAE's main theater of military operations has been in the South. Here, the UAE has seized a number of Yemeni ports—Mukalla, Aden and Mokha—as well as the country's sole gas-liquefaction plant and an oil export terminal located in the eastern coastal city of al-Shihir.⁴ The island of Socotra has also emerged as a key pivot of Emirati strategy, with one British newspaper noting, “the UAE has all but annexed this sovereign piece of Yemen, building a military base, setting up communications networks, conducting its own census and inviting Socotra residents to Abu Dhabi by the plane-load for free healthcare and special work permits.”⁵

These interests in Yemen are linked to an expanding arc of Emirati influence across East Africa, including the establishment of ports and military bases in Eritrea, Djibouti and Somaliland, the training of African security forces and the placement of over \$1 billion of Emirati reserves in the central banks of both Ethiopia and Sudan.⁶ In a manner that foreshadows possible post-conflict trajectories in Yemen, Emirati development aid has been an important instrument in facilitating this growing Emirati political and military footprint across Africa. In 2016, for example, investment pledges by the state-owned Abu Dhabi Fund for Development were given in return for an exclusive 25-year Emirati lease on a military base in Somaliland.⁷

The intensifying Saudi and Emirati presence across these maritime routes helps explain the focus of the Gulf-led intervention on al-Hodeidah, a northern Yemeni port through which 90 percent of the country's food and humanitarian imports entered prior to the beginning of the war. Al-Hodeidah is a critical target for the Gulf's wider regional ambitions. Located alongside one of the busiest choke points in global shipping—the 30-kilometer-wide Bab Al Mandeb at the intersection of the Red Sea and the Gulf of Aden—control over al-Hodeidah is viewed as essential to securing maritime trade between Asia and Europe. Nonetheless, despite fierce battles and a prolonged blockade by Saudi Arabia and the UAE through 2018, which led UN agencies to warn of imminent famine and the risk of cholera outbreaks throughout the country, the port remains under Houthi control.

This projection of Saudi-Emirati power throughout the Indian Ocean, Red Sea and East Africa occurs amidst the growing geographical reach of other regional and international actors, including Qatar, Turkey, Iran and China.⁸ Seen through the lens of these regional rivalries, it is misplaced to view the Saudi-Emirati attack on Yemen as simply a result of overzealous adventurism driven by the ambitions of the young and inexperienced crown princes of Riyadh and Abu Dhabi. Likewise, US support

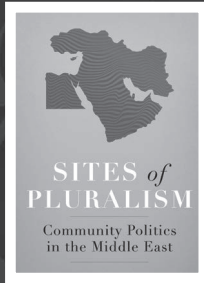


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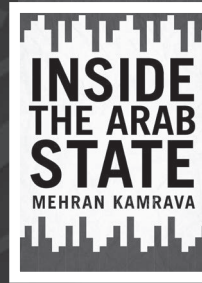
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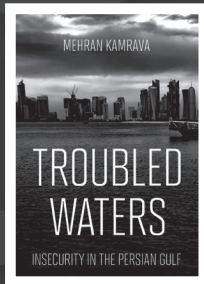
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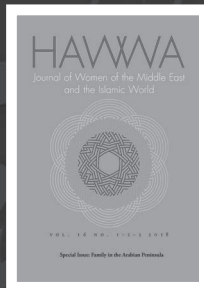
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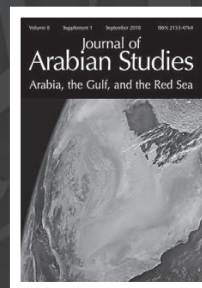
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for the war cannot be reduced to Trump's personal affinities with authoritarian rulers such as Mohammed Bin Salman or the desire to market American arms to a GCC war machine with seemingly insatiable appetite for weapons and military hardware. While the US political class sharply debates the efficacy of Saudi-Emirati strategy and the eventual outcomes of the intervention remain unclear, there is a compelling geopolitical logic behind the struggle to dominate Yemen's future.

Post-Conflict Reconstruction

The deep embroilment of Saudi Arabia and the UAE in Yemen's war positions these two Gulf states as major players in defining the direction of the country's post-conflict reconstruction. As with other conflicts in the Middle East, notably that of Syria, the precise contours of Yemen's reconstruction and rebuilding are yet to be determined. But it is essential to view post-conflict scenarios in continuity with the dynamics of the war itself—a new phase in the competition over territory, markets and maritime routes in which all key protagonists will attempt to consolidate and formalize any gains made over the past four years.

A possible indication of where this phase in Yemen might head is foreshadowed by the Gulf's role in post-uprising transitions elsewhere in the region. In addition to political and diplomatic alliances, a key element to this has been the extension of Gulf aid and financial support to other Arab governments. This support has occurred in a multiplicity of forms, including development aid, bilateral investment flows, central bank deposits and the provision of subsidized oil and gas. Large GCC-based institutions such as the Saudi Fund for Development, the Abu Dhabi Fund for Development, the Kuwait Fund for Arab Economic Development and the Islamic Development Bank are already active across the region and will certainly play a major part in determining where post-conflict funding in Yemen goes and on what it is spent. Aid from these institutions typically focuses on large infrastructure projects, agribusiness and financial reform. If experiences in other Arab states are a reliable guide, support to these sectors as part of reconstruction efforts will continue to bolster the Gulf's political alliances and strategic interests in Yemen.

Another factor to consider alongside such financial flows is the significant regional reach already held by large Gulf firms (both state and privately owned) over key economic sectors in the Middle East. In the context of Yemen's post-conflict reconstruction needs—particularly for sectors such as power, water, infrastructure, food, housing, energy and logistics—Gulf-based conglomerates are well placed to further deepen their economic interests in the country. Indeed, Saudi Arabia's cement firms have seen a huge spike in their share-prices over the last three months in expectation of the coming boom in Yemen's reconstruction.⁹ The macabre reality is that such firms stand poised to reap enormous profits as a direct result of their own government's

deliberate destruction of Yemeni infrastructure, estimated to be worth around half of the country's 2013 GDP.¹⁰

There has also been a notable tightening between the delivery of humanitarian relief in the region and the position of the Gulf states as logistical nodes for the transport and provision of aid, encapsulated in the decisive role of Dubai's International Humanitarian City as the main nexus for humanitarian work across the entire Middle East.¹¹ Saudi Arabia has also begun its own foray into humanitarian relief in Yemen, with the launch of the Saudi Development and Reconstruction Program for Yemen in August 2018. This fund has focused in particular on the reconstruction of airports, maritime facilities and energy infrastructure in those areas now under Saudi control.

How successful the Gulf's ambitions may be in moving forward remains unclear. The eventual outcome will be shaped by intra-Gulf competition as well as the particular configuration of political power that marks the end of the war. Other actors are also intensely involved—vying political factions in Yemen, international financial institutions, foreign governments and new economic actors thrown up in the course of the conflict itself. The interests of these groups do not always align, and they will face considerable challenges in pushing forward their visions. Nonetheless, despite all these contingencies, the mere cessation of hostilities and the expected reconstruction boom—now predicted daily in the region's business press—will do little to challenge the realities of power in the Arabian Peninsula. There is a need to “follow the money [in order to] uncover the power dynamics” as Mandy Turner has aptly put it.¹² Within this unfolding process, the strategic goals that drove the initial Saudi-Emirati attack on Yemen need to be seen in continuity with what may come next. ■

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Residents of al-Mahrah protest peacefully in the city of al-Ghaydha against any Saudi military presence. June 25, 2018.

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The Saudis Bring War to Yemen's East

Susanne Dahlgren

A new phase of the war appears to be unfolding in al-Mahra, the far eastern governorate of southern Yemen on the Indian Ocean next to Oman. In 2017 Saudi Arabian troops suddenly rolled through the streets of al-Ghaydha, the governorate capital, taking over the regional airport and announcing that the area had been placed under their security control. They were soon joined by hundreds of conservative Yemeni salafists who had been driven out of the northern part of the country. While Mahari citizens have pushed back against the extremists and continue to demonstrate against the “Saudi invasion,” the real reason for the Saudi presence has become visible: to build a long sought oil pipeline from Saudi Arabia to the Indian Ocean through Mahari lands.

A May 2018 headline in a southern Yemeni newspaper posed a question that many southern Yemenis have been asking themselves: “What is Saudi Arabia doing in

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al-Mahra?”¹ The author, Salih al-Mahuri, a young journalist writing for the youth news site *Raseef22*, lists a number of Saudi initiatives in al-Mahra, the eastern Yemeni governorate bordering Oman, and asks: What is behind this surge in Saudi activity?

Although overt fighting continues in the central and northern parts of Yemen, insecurity remains a daily experience in the southern parts of the country. That insecurity is due to the culture of governing disloyal regions with sporadic violence, which former President Ali Abdullah Salih inaugurated in southern territories after Yemeni unity started to fail. The exception has been al-Mahra in the far east, untouched by the fighting that accompanied the Houthi military offensive into the South in 2015 and spared jihadist violence from al-Qaida operatives. Al-Mahra and its capital al-Ghaydha have been havens in Yemen's climate of near persistent violence since the late 1990s.

Al-Mahra's exceptionalism changed in 2017, however, when United Arab Emirates (UAE) forces extended their military reach into the area. Saudi forces soon arrived with heavy military equipment moving through the narrow streets of al-Ghaydha. Saudi forces have since expanded their footprint militarily, politically and economically. They took control of the major regional airport for military purposes and imposed taxes on the local population. Saudi Arabia is also developing plans for major construction projects, including around the port of Nishtun, located on Indian Ocean sea routes. Al-Mahra is the only area in Yemen that shares a border with both Saudi Arabia and Oman. The airport at al-Ghaydha provides a lifeline to the governorate, which is separated by hundreds of kilometres of desert roads from other parts of the country.

Saudi Arabia claims that its expanding operations in the governorate are merely meant "to stop arms smuggling to Houthi militia."² Saudi officials contend that Iran smuggles arms through the land border with Oman and through Nishtun and the local airport in al-Ghaydha. Mahari authorities strongly deny these claims. While it is true that al-Mahra has for decades been a conduit for smuggling routes not only between Oman and Yemen, but also between Saudi Arabia and Yemen—consumer goods in exchange for alcohol and the leafy stimulant qat—there is little evidence that Houthis are obtaining arms through these routes. Indeed, with Houthis in control of much of the Yemeni army and its weapons stocks, their need for externally sourced armaments is questionable.

For many in al-Mahra, Saudi claims about the region being an arms delivery site to the Houthi militia is perceived as an excuse for a Saudi invasion of their governorate. Saudi troops are in al-Mahra, many locals argue, because it is pursuing a long-held plan to gain land access to the Indian Ocean for its oil exports, including a pipeline originating in Saudi Arabia to al-Mahra, where an expanded port could develop oil tanker capacities. Such a pipeline would allow Saudi Arabia to bypass the risky Strait of Hormuz passageway from the Gulf, through which most Saudi oil exports must pass in order to reach global markets.

Since the war in Yemen began in 2015, media throughout the southern part of Yemen—the area that until May 1990 formed the independent state known as the People's

Democratic Republic of Yemen—have reported in separate sections news about Yemen and the South, as if these were two separate countries. The war has only strengthened the resolve of many in the South to end Yemeni unity and become independent. How that should happen, and what kind of new state should emerge, is one of the central questions that divide its inhabitants.

But with the growing Saudi presence in the region's east—its armed forces, construction companies and political influence—another dividing line concerns the desirability of the continued involvement in southern politics of the two main anti-Houthi coalition countries—Saudi Arabia and the UAE. In this context, the United Nations (UN) mediation process to end the war in Yemen is largely focused on ending the overt violence and fighting in the central and northern parts of the country. But a new and consequential phase of the war, fought not with bombs but through construction projects and aid—and expansionist ambitions—appears to be unfolding in the far eastern realms of southern Yemen. This war is being waged between the leading coalition parties, the Saudis and the Emiratis, over influence in the Yemeni South, the strategically important part of Yemen along the Bab al-Mandeb Strait that connects the Indian Ocean to the Red Sea.

Al-Mahra's Isolated History

Foreign interest in Yemen's east is relatively new. The area that formed the Sultanate of Qishn and Soqatra until the British Empire withdrew in 1967 from South Yemen was remote and not very prosperous. Prior to southern independence from Great Britain, the Sultanate of Qishn (today's al-Mahra) and Soqatra—and its ruling Al Afrar family—had its throne on Hadibu, the main town of the island of Soqatra some 300 kilometres off the coast of al-Mahra. The socialists who took over in South Yemen after driving out the British established the present governorate center of al-Ghaydha, opening schools and a central hospital in the region. While neither telephone lines nor asphalt roads connected the area to the capital of Aden, Maharis slowly developed the area, led by people who believed that everybody should have access to health and education.

Al-Mahra played a crucial role in the rebellion in Dhufar, across the border in Oman.³ The People's Front for the Liberation of Oman pushed for a social revolution and women's emancipation similar to what took place in South Yemen. But these two regions have a much longer history of shared culture, including pre-Arab languages, linking them more closely to each other than to their regional capitals. Following that rebellion, South Yemen and Oman built warm relations and the border remained open for local people to cross, as I witnessed in the late 1980s.

When I lived in al-Ghaydha in 1992, the local authorities took me to visit the town's power station, a small hut located

on a hill overlooking the town. The hut's small generator was the first such power supply in the town. From the hill I could see how one part of al-Ghaydha was entirely dark while another had a scattering of lights. The chief in charge of power supply then turned a switch on the generator, and the illuminated and non-illuminated parts of the town reversed. The power supply was clearly insufficient for the entire town, whose needs at that time were increasing due to the arrival of air conditioners.

Even with Yemeni unification in 1990, al-Mahra remained a forgotten corner of the country desperately trying to strengthen a central state structure. In the capital Sanaa, I even met government officials who were unaware that al-Mahra belonged to Yemen. The situation changed only when Maharis who worked abroad began to invest in the area, generating the kind of wealth needed to develop. The near-open borders between Oman and Yemen further benefited al-Mahra, although the Omani Sultanate never engaged in large-scale projects in this neighboring region.

Al-Mahra remained outside of conflict and upheaval during and after the 2011 uprisings against Salih's rule. The region even managed to avoid involvement in the war that followed the takeover of Sanaa by the Houthis—with the backing of Salih and troops loyal to him—in September 2014 and their military offensive into the South in early 2015. Many southerners joined the anti-Houthi coalition led by acting President Abd Rabbu Mansour Hadi, which was soon taken over by Saudi Arabia and its foreign partners—the UAE in particular. Most southerners did not want war but were quick to militarize once the Houthis launched an offensive on southern territories. The war over Aden lasted approximately three months, with government-aligned forces and southern supporters together pushing out the Houthis. In many southern narratives, the war is between the North and the South, the second such war since Yemeni unity in 1990. Residents of al-Mahra, however, remained largely uninvolved.

The Saudis Come to al-Mahra

The war began to directly impact al-Mahra only in 2017, when Emirati troops arrived to expand its Security Belt initiative over the entirety of southern Yemen. That initiative consists of local men trained and recruited under Emirati command. Local authorities, among them the self-nominated Sultan of al-Mahra, Abdullah bin Isa Al Afrar, rejected the deployment,



Nishtun seaport, al-Mahrah governorate, 2018.

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saying that the governorate had its own means of security.⁴ Even though Al Afrar is one of the founders of the Southern Transitional Council (STC), the primary coordinating body seeking to reclaim southern independence, the sultan has kept open the idea of the re-establishment of the sultanate that ruled al-Mahra and Soqatra until 1967. The STC works in close collaboration with the Emiratis, who thus were forced to drop the idea of extending their presence into al-Mahra. While collaborating with the Emiratis, STC leaders have repeated their objection to foreign troops being stationed in the southern territories once it is independent.

The close alliance between the Emiratis and the STC—the leading southern political force—has made Saudis consider their future role in post-war Yemen. The Saudis are aware that Hadi, whom they unreservedly support, has a diminishing power base in the country, even in the South. At the same time, their Emirati coalition partners are working to secure good relations with the STC, elements of which will most likely rule the South in some form once the war is over.

It was in this context of increased Emirati engagement with southern leaders that Saudi troops arrived in 2017, again without any consultation with the local authorities. Unlike the Emiratis, however, the Saudis apparently had obtained Hadi's sponsorship to enter the governorate. When Hadi visited al-Mahra in August 2018, he was received not by local authorities but by the Saudi ambassador to Yemen, Mohammed al-Jaber.⁵ The first action of the Saudi military was to take over al-Ghaydha civil airport and reserve it for military purposes. According to former deputy governor of al-Mahra and a senior army officer, Shaykh Ali Salim Al-Harizi, following the arrival of troops Hadi's vice president, Col. Ali Muhsin, had assured the local authorities that the purpose of the Saudi military presence was only to provide the coalition logistical support and to combat smuggling in the region.⁶ As al-Harizi explained in an interview, local

residents were suspicious of the vice president's assurance and directly asked troops whether they belonged to the anti-Houthi coalition. The answer was no; these were troops for Saudi Arabia only. For many locals, this Saudi presence thus meant Saudi military occupation.

Ali Muhsin, Salih's former right hand who turned against the then-president during the 2011 uprising, is known across Yemen for his involvement whenever there is unrest in the country. Throughout the war, he has been active on the eastern front, including in the oil-rich Marib and Hadhramaut governorates. Muhsin's arrival in al-Mahra underlines Saudi Arabia's interest in this eastern corner of the country not only during the war, but more importantly for the power struggle sure to come when the war finally ends. Muhsin is likely to emerge a key player in the reconfiguration of power in Yemen.

The long-standing governor of al-Mahra, Muhammad Abdullah Kuddah, sought to impose limits on Saudi involvement in the governorate, including limiting the airport to civilian flights. He also demanded that all decisions about military deployments be made together with the local authorities. In response, Hadi replaced Kuddah with a more Saudi-friendly politician, Rajah Sa'id Bakrit, also a long-time politician in al-Mahra.

Like many prominent Mahari tribesmen and dignitaries, Kuddah holds Omani citizenship, a move Oman took following the Saudi policy dating to pre-unity times of gaining loyalty in Yemen by allocating citizenship to key political players. Oman's own aim in al-Mahra has been to support close and neighborly relations with Maharis, a connection with long historical roots. Oman has maintained a neutral position in the Yemeni war, even though it has not publicly expressed opposition to the Saudi and Emirati manoeuvres in al-Mahra. Instead, Oman has sought to keep the area under its influence.⁷ The former deputy governor, al-Harizi, described the presence of Saudi forces in the governorate as an occupation.⁸ He warned the Saudis that if they do not retreat, a military response might ensue. In 2018, the Saudis similarly accused the Emiratis of occupying Soqatra.⁹

Maharis Push Back

Mahari residents have since 2018 organized a number of protests against the Saudi presence. The protesters demanded that the airport in al-Ghaydha be returned to civil use, that the seaport in Nishtun be returned to local control and that Mahari fishermen can resume full activities in the sea. Saudi Arabia imposed an import tax of 100 percent on trade between Yemen and Oman in late August 2018, sending the price of food and consumer goods skyrocketing. Protesters demanded that all foreign military forces immediately withdraw from their governorate and that the government focus on improving the harsh circumstances of their neglected corner of the country. Saudi

Arabia responded by adopting the tactic of its partner in war, the UAE, of promising reconstruction and aid projects alongside its military forces. It also reduced income taxes and allowed fishermen to resume their activities. When Hadi visited al-Mahra in August 2018, Saudi Arabia announced plans to initiate eight development projects to improve the living conditions of Mahari people.¹⁰

Those projects included a 264-KW power generator, 15 water tanks, extensions to al-Ghaydha's central hospital and a new hospital with a university as part of the King Salman Education and Medical City. Given that the governorate's human resources are very limited, the university will likely be run directly by Saudi authorities. More than 192,000 school books were also printed for primary school pupils throughout the governorate.¹¹ In a ceremony chaired by Saudi-friendly local authorities, the first batch of books was distributed to smiling school children.¹² While the education system across the entire country collapsed as a result of the war and the humanitarian crisis, the reality was that Yemeni education was already in steep decline following unification in 1990. A new southern teachers' trade union actively promotes reform, including writing a qualitatively better curriculum. But for the southern teacher-activists who have protested poor quality text books from Sanaa for years, the news of Saudi penetration into the education field was more bad news.

Together these projects illustrate that Saudi Arabia has made progress in its long-aspired plan to gain land access to the Indian Ocean for oil exports by building an oil pipeline from Kharkhir on the Saudi side of the border through al-Mahra to the sea. The Saudi-based marine construction company, Huta Marines, has been asked to provide a project plan to expand and develop oil tanker facilities at Nishtun, the small seaport built by the Danish government in the 1980s.¹³ While the Saudi projects that have been promised to al-Mahra appear lavish, the total expenditure will be dwarfed by the economic benefits that will befall the kingdom if its tankers gain an open over-land avenue to the Indian Ocean.

Even more alarming for many Maharis is that Saudi troops did not come alone. Residents in the coastal town of Qishn were surprised in January 2018 when their small town was suddenly filled with men with long beards. The newcomers offered large amounts of money to buy local properties. The men belonged to the Dar al-Hadith Institute, a prominent salafi institute formerly located in Dammaj in Saada, in the north of Yemen. That institute was forced to close following a Houthi siege and assault in the area in 2014.¹⁴ Lebanese and Yemeni media reported that Yahya bin al-Hajuri, the salafi shaykh who had managed the Dar al-Hadith institute in Saada, arrived in Qishn to oversee the establishment of the new center.¹⁵ The move concerned neighboring Oman, which has resisted the expansion of Islamist extremism into its territory.

The sudden influx of hundreds of salafists led local women in Qishn to organize protests against the establishment of the institute and appeal to local shaykhs, tribes and land-owners to not sell land to the newcomers. According to the statement issued by the women, “thousands of northern extremists have arrived to our small town and started to purchase land for the purpose of establishing an extremist community.”¹⁶ The women appealed to the governor of al-Mahra to stop what they considered to be an invasion. Pressured by the protests, the governor quickly issued an order banning the establishment of religious institutes without the approval of the local authority. The order also indicated that displaced persons could not settle in the area without the permission of local authorities.¹⁷

What initially was the purpose of bringing potential extremism to an area that historically has been free of religious puritanism? The Lebanese newspaper *al-Akhbar* suggested that the goal was to establish “a salafi emirate” in the neighborhood of Oman and perhaps the Saudis intended to provoke the sultanate to take a stand. For the Hadi regime, the fact that the students of Dar al-Hadith Institute had become militarized and joined the war has been a problem to be solved; many of those students had relocated to relatively tolerant places, such as Taiz and Hodeida, where many currently fight. Al-Mahra might have provided a solution—an isolated location where they could resume their studies, which also might prevent them from making the full transition to militant jihadism.

The New Front of the Yemen War

To be sure, the Saudi adoption of Emirati tactics that proved successful elsewhere in the South—troops arriving with aid and development assistance—has had some success in al-Mahra. The protests in al-Mahra stopped after the Saudis entered into negotiations with local representatives and promised to respect their key demands, including the lifting of import taxes at the Oman border. In September 2018, however, the protests resumed as locals felt that the Saudis were not living up to their promises; in November, the Saudis fired on demonstrators, killing one.¹⁸ Security sources in al-Ghaydha attest that the order came from Governor Bakrit, who accused the demonstrators of being smugglers.¹⁹ Since then, protests seem to have waned, and a number of tribes have stopped opposing the Saudi plans. Saudis have likely cut deals directly with local tribal leaders; almost simultaneously, a media campaign celebrated the promised Saudi development and assistance projects.

Many locals are taking a more critical look at the expanding Saudi footprint in al-Mahra. As Abd al-Jabar al-Jariri, one of the young Mahari activists, wrote in a blog post, “The sons of al-Mahra are not naïve; like other Yemenis, they know that the main objective of the Saudi forces in al-Mahra is securing the oil pipeline, which the

kingdom intends to extend through the territory of the Mahari people.” Maharis who hold Saudi passports were not, he notes, issued the identity cards that would allow them full rights in the kingdom. Indeed, thousands of Yemenis, Maharis among them, have been forced to leave Saudi Arabia since the start of the war.

Despite mounting international pressure on Saudi Arabia to end the catastrophic war, especially after the brutal murder of the Saudi journalist Jamal Khashoggi, the Saudis appear to have little interest in seeing the conflict in Yemen end. Saudi Arabia has stated openly that its first priority in the war is to ensure that what it considers to be the legitimate government of Hadi remains in power. The kingdom’s second stated priority is to ensure that the Houthi military attacks across the southern Saudi border permanently cease. But an unstated and perhaps more important priority may well be to permanently secure access to the Indian Ocean. The UN peace mediation process is slowly working toward implementing the two first objectives, and Yemeni troops on the ground are determined to reclaim more areas from Houthi control. All that remains of Saudi plans is to secure its dominance in al-Mahra province, the chosen place for Saudi expansionist policies. As a result, the true front of the war is now in the east. ■

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A US checkpoint near the national bank in Baghdad, soon after the 2003 American invasion of Iraq.

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American Interventionism and the Geopolitical Roots of Yemen's Catastrophe

Waleed Hazbun

The extreme nature of both the war and the ongoing humanitarian catastrophe in Yemen cannot be explained without reference to the shifting dynamics of broader geopolitical change in the Middle East. The region's current pattern of violence is rooted in the repeated US efforts to re-make the region to its advantage through the use of coercive force since 2001. Washington's interventions and proliferating counterterrorism operations around the region—along with the new Arab wars that followed the Arab uprisings—have led regional middle powers to attempt to reshape that system to serve their own interests. The Saudi–Emirati war in Yemen is just the most tragic example of an Arab state suffering from the geopolitical transformation of the geopolitical and regional order.

The Sana'a Center for Strategic Studies begins its 2018 year-end review: "Yemen is no longer 'on the brink' of catastrophe. Rather, it has already been pushed into the abyss and therein continues to fall."¹ Yemen's free fall into a humanitarian abyss has roots in its longstanding internal political divisions and power struggles, some dating back decades, which came into open conflict following Yemen's popular uprising in 2011. Less understood, however, is that the extreme nature of both the brutal war and the ongoing humanitarian catastrophe cannot be explained without reference to the shifting dynamics of broader geopolitical change in the Middle East since 2001.

Yemen has long been exploited as a strategic location for transcontinental empires or proxy battles, such as between Egypt and Saudi Arabia in the 1960s. The war in Yemen today, however, is not a proxy war between rival regional powers, such as Saudi Arabia and Iran. Yemen's catastrophe reflects how, since the Arab uprisings of 2011, the Middle East regional order has transformed from a system organized around and against a US-dominated and managed system into a multipolar system lacking the shared norms, diplomatic channels or balancing mechanisms that previously constrained inter-regional conflict and the use of force. The Middle Eastern geopolitical order is experiencing its own kind of free fall into an abyss of violence and disorder; the war in Yemen is symptomatic of this transformation, not its cause.

The region's geopolitical disorder was not caused by a power vacuum, Iran's alleged quest for regional domination, sectarian differences between Shi'a and Sunni or even reckless leadership in Saudi Arabia or the United States. Rather, the region's current pattern of violence is rooted in the repeated US efforts to re-make the region to its advantage through the use of coercive force. The post-September 11, 2001 US military interventions throughout the region failed to establish a stable regional security architecture; on the contrary, they generated intense insecurity for both rival and allied states—as well as within societies—while facilitating the proliferation of armed non-state actors and weapons flows. As the regional system has become more complex and multipolar, continued US reliance on coercion rather than accommodation and compromise has intensified the forces of regional instability that the United States seems both unwilling and unable to control.

Regional insecurities generated by US interventionism since 2001, followed by the post-2011 downscaling of US efforts to shape regional order due to its diminished political leverage, have accelerated these trends toward regional power rivalry and conflict. Previously, the United States and other external powers sought to contain regional conflicts. But Washington's interventions and proliferating counterterrorism operations around the region—along with the new Arab wars that

followed the Arab uprisings—have led regional middle powers to project power at the regional level in an attempt to reshape that system to serve their own interests.

Iran, Qatar, Turkey, the United Arab Emirates (UAE) and Saudi Arabia have all sought to project power beyond their proximate neighbors in the wake of the decline of US dominance. While Israel had long been the only regional power with the capacity to project military power at the regional level, a number of middle powers now seek to pursue their interests in a similar, generally destabilizing, manner. While the United States has refused to constrain the behavior of its Saudi and Emirati allies, it also has been unable to contain Iran's expanding influence. The efforts of these states to project coercive power have led to new levels of destructive civil wars, weapons proliferation, state fragmentation and humanitarian crises in the region.

The Saudi-Emirati war in Yemen is just the most tragic example of an Arab state suffering from the transformation of the geopolitical and regional order. Congress has joined humanitarian organizations and peace activists in seeking to limit US involvement in that destructive war, but US responsibility goes far beyond its ongoing weapons sales and support for the military campaign.

US Interventionism and Regional Destabilization

The post-World War II Middle East state system, presided over by British and then American dominion, was fraught with tendencies toward inter-state conflict and rivalry. But external and local states during the era of the Cold War, with a few exceptions, sought to balance threats, limit escalation and restrain revisionist actors, including their own allies. Over the past two decades, however, the mechanisms that mitigated conflict in the past have eroded. At the center of this process are US policies that destabilize a region they claim to protect.²

With the 2003 invasion of Iraq, the United States became an agent of instability as it engaged in interventions including regime change and the arming of proxies to fight its expanding War on Terror. The collapse of the Iraqi state and the rise of a domestic insurgency that mobilized transnational jihadists—along with a massive US military presence and its disregard for international law and norms—generated heightened insecurity among US rivals, including Iran and Syria. Normative restraints on the aggressive behavior of regional states also was diminished. Iran and other US rivals sought to challenge American power by supporting armed militias and insurgent networks and by acquiring new military capabilities through local manufacturing and imports. By 2010, the US vision for an American dominated post-Cold War regional security architecture—based on the containment of Iran, support for US-allied regimes and managed progress toward Arab-Israeli peace—was in disarray. Amidst this turmoil, the American era in the region came to an end. Middle East states no longer

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looked to the United States to provide security or order. After 2011, these dynamics and support from regional and external powers enabled the rapid militarization of several uprisings and the outbreak of multiple civil wars leading to the fragmentation of territorial control in Syria, Iraq, Libya and Yemen.

Rival middle powers seeking to reshape the regional system to meet their own interests have deployed military force

The post–September 11, 2001 US military interventions throughout the region failed to establish a stable regional security architecture; on the contrary, they generated intense insecurity for both rival and allied states—as well as within societies—while facilitating the proliferation of armed non-state actors and weapons flows.

and armed non-state militias, leading to the fragmentation of centralized states and territorial control. The immediate security interests of US allies began to take priority over US policy preferences. Meanwhile, the emergence of multipolarity at the global level—with Russia and to a lesser degree China seeking to gain leverage in the Middle East³—together with the rise of multiple regional powers with rival goals, means that the Middle East is no longer either a unipolar system organized around US domination or a bipolar system defined by Saudi-Iranian rivalry.

Toward the end of President Barack Obama's first term (2009–2012), the United States downscaled its quest for regional dominance due to its declining political leverage and the rise of new sources of instability. The United States could no longer manage regional order through balancing and deterrence, and longstanding ideas about what constituted American interests were contested. While the security of Israel and Saudi Arabia had long been central to US regional strategy, these states were at times obstacles to US policy initiatives to contain Iran, promote an end to the Israeli-Palestinian conflict and limit regional arms proliferation. Meanwhile, both US allies and rivals in the region came to feel more insecure. Increased rivalry and conflict led to widescale intervention and deployment of military force—the new Arab wars.⁴

Even with growing regional turmoil during his second term, Obama suggested that the United States did not face pressing strategic security threats from the Middle East. Terrorism and Iran's regional role were strategic challenges, but these concerns

failed to offer a guide for broader regional strategy.⁵ The United States might have sought to establish a regional balance of rival states through a diplomatic vision broader than the 2015 Iran nuclear deal. Instead, Washington only encouraged regional conflict by tolerating repressive regimes, offering arms and military support to allies, deploying coercive sanctions against rivals and failing to establish mechanisms to address conflict. Most striking was the contradiction between the ongoing deployment of military force against ISIS in Iraq and then Syria and the failure to mitigate other ongoing conflicts involving Yemen, Israel/Palestine, Syria, Iraq and Libya.

Meanwhile, like other states in the region, the United States sought new tools and techniques to either influence or contain emerging networks of non-state actors. US special operations forces developed networked forms of warfare and counter-terrorism, while intelligence services backed both non-state militias and specially trained local counter-terrorism units, fostering the flows of arms and intelligence needed to sustain them.⁶ These trends deepened with the inauguration of the Trump administration and its more unilateral and transactional form.

Unleashing the Saudi-led Counter-revolution

With the exception of the state collapse that followed the US invasion of Iraq and the nightmarish descent of Syria into civil war, the Saudi-led effort to direct a regional counter-revolution against the Arab uprisings and impose its vision for new regional order has had the most destabilizing effect. The development of an aggressive, expansionist Saudi approach to regional politics was a reaction to the US invasion of Iraq, which produced a Shi'a-dominated government and the expansion of Iranian influence in Iraq and beyond. Riyadh remained distant from the new Iraqi regime, while private Saudi funds supported jihadists and the insurgency in Iraq. Saudi Arabia sought to redefine its regional rivalry with Iran along sectarian lines as a means to shore up political allies within Sunni populations in the Arab world. In doing so, it placed its own interests over those of the United States.

Saudi distrust of Washington's role in the region spiked when in 2011 the United States acquiesced to the fall of Egypt's long-ruling dictator Hosni Mubarak. Saudi leaders were especially threatened by Obama's declaration—which was not without major contradictions—that US interests were aligned with those of the democracy-seeking protestors in Tunis, Cairo and elsewhere. Saudi and US approaches to regional politics, if not also their core interests, began to diverge. While the United States struggled to redefine its regional role, Saudi Arabia launched what can be viewed as a regional counter-revolution. Not only did Riyadh seek to derail the democracy-oriented narrative of the Arab uprisings and reverse any democratic gains—for example by crushing the uprising in Bahrain, managing an elite transition in Yemen and supporting the 2013 coup in Egypt. It also struggled to



People search under the rubble of a house destroyed by a Saudi-led air strike in Sanaa, August 25, 2017.

KHALED ABDULLAH/REUTERS

maintain its regional influence in the face of expanding Iranian power and the rising influence of Turkey and Qatar, which often backed Saudi rivals.

On the one hand, these actions follow the trend of other rising regional powers pursuing assertive policies to advance state interests in the wake of the declining US role.⁷ On the other hand, while Turkey, Qatar and even Iran seek a new regional order that serves their own interests, Saudi policy under the aggressive leadership of Crown Prince Mohammed bin Salman—with support from the UAE—resembles the George W. Bush administration in its effort to remake the regional system in the wake of September 11, 2001. In both cases, unilateral force that violated regional and international norms was used to coerce states and societies to conform to an imposed regional plan.

Obama's policies encouraged Saudi policy as Washington pursued a nuclear deal with Iran in the face of Saudi and Israeli opposition, and it did so without working to establish new norms for the regional system via diplomatic solutions or

any kind of grand bargain. Saudi Arabia and the UAE, with little deference to the United States, asserted their interests by backing President Abdel Fattah El-Sisi's authoritarian regime in Egypt, supporting extremist armed opposition groups in Syria and launching the destructive and ineffective military campaign in Yemen.

The UAE, in fact, provided an early model for this aggressive new approach. Since the late 1990s, it developed its own military capabilities and became a more active player in regional geopolitics, emerging "as one of the region's most interventionist foreign policy players."⁸ Sheikh Mohammed bin Zayed, the crown prince of Abu Dhabi and a strong supporter of Mohammed bin Salman, has encouraged hardline policies toward Iraq and Qatar as well as military intervention in Yemen. The UAE has gone further in Yemen by deploying its own ground troops as well as "recruiting, funding and training a variety of local proxy forces in southern Yemen."⁹

While Saudi Arabia and the UAE portray their regional strategy as a reaction to Iran's expanding regional influence,

they have failed to leverage this threat into effective regional balancing against Iran. The rival interests of the Arab states, their failure to cooperate and the eroding norms for regional politics explain this under-balancing.¹⁰ As a result, Qatar's short-lived attempt in 2011 to revive the GCC as a forum for collective security was debilitated. Saudi Arabia and the UAE have opposed any accommodation with Iran and prevented regional discussions that might stabilize the regional order. Having long been sheltered under the US security umbrella—which they helped finance—the UAE and Saudi Arabia now commit their resources toward “the creation of military-centered national strategies.”¹¹

The Tragedy of American Policy in Yemen

In 1962, when Egypt under Gamal Abdel Nasser intervened in North Yemen to support the nationalist forces against Saudi-backed royals, President John F. Kennedy encouraged restraint but later mobilized US aircraft over Saudi skies to deter Egypt and reassure Saudi Arabia.¹² In contrast, the Obama administration played a critical role in backing the Saudi-led campaign in Yemen, even as many US officials believed the United States had no interest in the conflict other than showing support for Saudi Arabia in the wake of differences over the Iran nuclear deal. Even as Obama attempted to articulate a shift in US regional policy to contain rather than confront Iran, the combination of continuing targeted drone assassinations in Yemen and backing the Saudi-led coalition amounts to direct US responsibility in the tragedy of Yemen.

The scale of this tragedy is enhanced by the fact that US policy makers were skeptical about the war in Yemen even as the United States offered massive arms packages to Saudi Arabia.¹³ Meanwhile, much of the Washington think-tank community and policy-oriented media outlets, together with the arms industry, continued to advocate for Saudi and Emirati interests. American facilitation of the Saudi-Emirati war in Yemen is akin to when the United States gave a green light to the Israeli invasion of Lebanon in 1982. In both cases, a US ally dragged the United States into a situation that failed to serve US regional interests while resulting in clearly foreseeable humanitarian disasters.

Trump's election only accelerated Saudi Arabia's attempts to expand its regional influence and develop closer strategic cooperation with Israel. But these moves have been counterproductive for Riyadh: Forcing the 2018 resignation of the Lebanese Prime Minister Saad Hariri (later rescinded) and prosecuting the war in Yemen have given Iran increased regional leverage in the face of Saudi policy failures. Rather than embracing Qatar's post-2013 efforts to rebuild GCC consensus policymaking, Saudi Arabia and the UAE instead sought to coerce Qatar into accepting a subservient role. The result was the fragmentation of the GCC as a regional organization and a further split in what was once a powerful Saudi-led Arab coalition.

Together, Saudi Arabia, the UAE and Israel seem to offer the Trump administration an (illusory) vision for regional order that includes the fruitless notion of resolving the Israeli-Palestinian conflict by coercing the weakened Palestinian Authority into accepting the Israeli-dominated territorial status quo. But even agreement amongst these parties—which is uncertain—would not make such plans viable. Regional and societal opposition to such plans exemplify the failure of Saudi Arabia to develop the popular and social basis to forge a new regional order.

At the same time, the growing regional influence of Iran and the military assertiveness of Hizballah have led to more aggressive Israeli actions, including attacks on Hizballah assets in Syria and drone activity over Lebanon. These actions risk the escalation of conflict. Meanwhile, rather than seeking negotiations with rival regional powers to address both pressing security threats and long-term strategic challenges, the United States has instead pulled out of the Iran deal. Secretary of State Mike Pompeo is leading an effort to coerce Iran through economic sanctions and the dangerous escalation of regime-change rhetoric. In this way, US-backing of the Saudi-led counter-revolution has only intensified Saudi-Iranian rivalry. It has also facilitated the intensification of regional conflicts, increasing regional instability while risking the further escalation of conflict.

No Way Out?

Within the current geopolitical landscape, the Middle East is in dire need of efforts to promote conflict management and de-escalation based on a realistic appraisal of the needs and interests of different states and the broader political, economic and social needs of a region suffering from decades of war and social collapse. Having once proclaimed support for the reformist, proto-democratic forces of the Arab uprisings, the United States has aligned itself with the reactionary forces of the Gulf-led counter-revolution. In its effort to take on ISIS, it has also returned to the War on Terror paradigm that dominated the post-September 11 period.

Despite the Iran nuclear deal, Obama failed to offer the leadership needed to open discussions on regional security issues, and this failure allowed Trump to reverse the Iran deal. More generally, the United States has refused to meaningfully support the resolution of violent conflicts in Palestine, Yemen, Libya, Syria and elsewhere. Worse, the United States and other external powers have used domestic and regional divisions to assert some influence and leverage in the region, with tools including economic sanctions (against Iran), direct military intervention (in Libya, Syria and Iraq), military support for regional interventions (in Yemen and Bahrain) and massive weapon sales throughout the region.

The continuing production of insecurity and regional rivalry shows few signs of exhaustion while the possibilities for escalation remain abundant. A different order, however, might be possible if social forces in the region are able to mobilize

and again challenge political elites who seek to suppress the popular will and discount the humanitarian concerns of the region's populations. Unfortunately, the reactionary repression of 2013 counter-revolution, the concentration of power by regime elites and the shifting priorities of external powers have decimated and demoralized many social movements. Moreover, diverse political forces and militias struggling for survival often accept support from any willing party—support extended with ulterior agendas.

Until societies across the region, in the United States and elsewhere are able to mobilize opposition to reckless government policies, humanitarian organizations, peace activists and willing political officials—regardless of their motivation—will need to press for limits to US weapons sales and tactical support for the destructive Saudi-Emirati war in Yemen. In the United States, the anti-war left may find common cause with the libertarian right and centrist critics of so-called liberal hegemony, in advocating for a regional US strategy of restraint. Meanwhile, the United Nations and other actors should work toward rebuilding norms of constraint, promoting

conflict resolution and fostering inclusive regional negotiations. The priority must be immediate humanitarian needs while crafting the foundation for building—in the absence of US hegemony—a pluralist regional order. ■

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- Sheila Carapico, ed., *Arabia Incognita: Dispatches from Yemen and the Gulf* (Just World Books, 2016).
- Sarah Phillips, *Yemen and the Politics of Permanent Crisis* (Routledge, 2011).
- Isa Blumi, *Destroying Yemen: What Chaos in Arabia Tells Us About the World* (California, 2018).
- Ginny Hill, *Yemen Endures: Civil War, Saudi Adventurism, and the Future of Arabia* (Oxford, 2017).

RECENT ISSUE-SPECIFIC

- Marieke Brandt, *Tribes and Politics in Yemen: A History of the Houthis Conflict* (Hurst, 2018).
- Shelagh Weir, *A Tribal Order: Politics and Law in the Mountains of Yemen* (Texas, 2007).
- Noel Brehony, *Yemen Divided: The Story of a Failed State in South Arabia* (I.B. Tauris, 2011).
- Laurent Bonnefoy, *Salafism in Yemen: Transnationalism and Religious Identity* (Hurst, 2011).
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Three Women Activists Advancing Peace in Yemen

Stacey Philbrick Yadav

The growing public awareness of the war in Yemen—and the historic Congressional invocation of the War Powers Act this winter—could not have occurred without the dedicated activism of Yemeni Americans and their allies. A contributing editor to this issue, **Stacey Philbrick Yadav**, spoke to three activists working from different corners of the United States—Seattle, Atlanta and East Lansing—to advance peace in Yemen. The following conversation, edited and condensed, tracks the work of these three women—scholar-activist **Shireen al-Adeimi**, the Yemen Foundation’s **Aisha Jumaan** and the Yemen Peace Project’s **Aliya Naim**—across organizations and platforms, each guided by diverse concerns.

Please explain the kind of work you do and how you first became active on the issue of peace and justice in Yemen.

Aliya Naim: I’m a founding board member for the Yemen Peace Project, a US-based organization founded in 2010 by a group of students and activists who were unhappy with the lack of accurate representation about Yemen in the media and uneasy with US policies that affected Yemen. We started the organization to advocate for better policies and to promote personal relationships between Americans and Yemenis. As the political and humanitarian situation in Yemen worsened, the Yemen Peace Project has worked directly with lawmakers on Capitol Hill advocating for positive change, particularly with regard to US support of Saudi policies in Yemen. The organization also advocates for the extension of Temporary Protected Status for Yemenis in the United States and runs an empowerment fund program to help Yemenis make positive changes in their communities

Shireen al-Adeimi: My advocacy for Yemen began in 2015 when I uploaded an online template of a letter I wrote to my senator at the time, Elizabeth Warren, urging her to introduce legislation that would end US support for the war on Yemen. I then created and began circulating a Change.org petition on my Twitter account. This effort led to various interviews with media outlets, such as *Democracy Now!*, PRI’s *The World* and NBC’s *Why Is This Happening*, as well as speaking engagements around the country and writing that has appeared in *In These Times*, NBC and elsewhere. I have

also organized fundraising events, including online fundraising campaigns in support of Doctors Without Borders in Yemen.

Aisha Jumaan: I started out informally with presentations and speaking in venues like churches, schools, clubs, etc. I continue to do this work and I always ask people to contact their representatives and senators to ask that the US stop supporting the Saudi coalition’s war on Yemen. As interest in the war has grown, I have organized events in Seattle and have done interviews for regional media.

In 2015 I organized a meeting with Rep. Adam Smith to present the Yemeni perspective on the war in Yemen. Smith had met with Saudi officials and lobbyists and was well aware of their point of view. I continued the discussions with his staff by phone and emails, providing them with material from UN reports that were not easily available to them. I also connected him with other community leaders. We similarly met with Senators Chris Murray and Maria Cantwell and some of their donors who shared their concern about the need to end US support for the Saudi war in Yemen.

I also realized that people’s livelihoods would be affected. When the war started in 2015, I contacted colleagues in Aden and Lahj to donate to those needing immediate assistance and then expanded to other governorates. As the economic situation deteriorated in 2016, I started approaching friends for contributions. All the funds were sent to Yemen to purchase food baskets, school supplies, book bags and Eid clothing for poor children. I received sufficiently large sums that I formally registered the Yemen Relief and Reconstruction Foundation in August 2017. In 2018, we provided over 5,000

families with food rations that sustain a family of six for one month, reaching some of the most inaccessible villages in Yemen. We also provide over 800 families with meat during Eid al-Adha and distributed 700 water filters in Aden and Sanaa, as well as critical medical assistance.

What are you proudest of accomplishing through your work so far? And what has been the greatest barrier to progress, whether personal or organizational?

Shireen: When Congress took an unprecedented step by passing a bill invoking the War Powers Act, it marked a significant victory for everyone who has long opposed the American intervention in Yemen. The war on Yemen, however, still rages on with full support from the United States, making it difficult for me to truly feel a sense of accomplishment or to be proud of efforts that I consider obligatory upon anyone who is aware of the immense suffering in Yemen and/or is in a position to speak out against those taking part in this carnage.

Aisha: I'm most proud of my work with Rep. Adam Smith, now the Chair of the House Armed Services Committee, informing him about the situation in Yemen and challenging the Saudi narrative. I'm also proud of the Yemen Foundation's relief efforts with food baskets, school supplies, etc., reaching some of the most devastated people. These efforts have been limited by my inability to travel to Yemen easily or move safely when I am there. I was last able to go to Yemen in July 2018, and I spent a whole day traveling from Aden to Sanaa passing many checkpoints, some of which were hostile to a woman alone with a driver. On my way back to Aden, we had to reroute our way through the desert to avoid such checkpoints, which increased travel time by more than hour; then I had to spend a night in Aden before I left.

Aliya, to what extent is your work on the war in Yemen part of a broader set of activist commitments? How does the issue of US policy in Yemen intersect with others?

Aliya: I think a large part of my activism and career choices can be attributed to the fallout of the so-called War on Terror. The intellectual and social consciousness of many young Muslims in the United States was due to US policy conflating Muslims with the Middle East and with terrorism and the resulting policing and demonizing of our communities. This caused even moderately aware young Muslims in the United States to develop a sense of transnational empathy with groups who were also affected by the surveillance, suspicion and military interventions born out of that era. It spurred me to focus my graduate studies and career on migration studies and immigrant justice, and led me to my current "real" work and volunteer work as a direct service provider to immigrant communities. I remember following the story of the Wisconsin teachers' strike and how activists described themselves as being partially inspired by the protests in Tunisia, Egypt and across the Arab world, including in Yemen. This was the first time I could recall

seeing Americans on television saying they were inspired positively by something that had happened in the Arab world.

My activism on behalf of Yemen was born out of the sense that Yemenis and Yemen have either been misrepresented or ignored—not just in the media, but in the anti-war movement as well as in academic circles, where Yemeni issues have never received as much attention other than as an afterthought, or Yemen's portrayal as a pawn in greater regional power struggles. As Americans have seen time and again, where there is a lack of good information, analysis and perspective, disastrous foreign policy follows. Considering the humanitarian disaster in Yemen, I feel the need to push in my own circles for more awareness about Yemen itself, instead of as tangential to the relationship between Saudi Arabia and Iran, or the United States and Saudi Arabia. Americans have a unique responsibility considering the enabling role that the United States has been playing in this crisis, to push not just for humanitarian relief but for better policies.

Who have you found to be your most unexpected allies? Is this durable?

Aisha: I have found so many unexpected allies in churches, especially Presbyterian churches. I have been invited to speak at many churches over the past three years and even to present a webinar to the PC-USA leadership. They have also been active in contacting their representatives about ending US support for the war in Yemen as part of a broader activist approach to foreign policy and human rights. These activities are consistent with their value system, so I expect it to be a durable alliance.

Shireen: I have seen the issue of Yemen taken up by anti-war advocates who joined the movement during the Vietnam era and have continued to oppose foreign interventions since then. While this advocacy is not surprising, I am inspired by folks who, despite decades of foreign intervention, continue to oppose war and advocate for the sovereignty of other nations. I have also connected to action-oriented university students and other young activists across the country who have organized teach-ins, rallies, protests and other forms of resistance to the US support for the war on Yemen. I believe this work is durable so long as these groups view the intervention in Yemen as part of a broader US foreign policy of imposing American will (through military means) upon developing countries, without concern for the immense cost to human life.

Aliya: I think this is a really good point—and I think that sometimes when explaining this conflict to people, those of us who have had an interest in Yemen for a long time spend a lot of effort explaining issues that are only of passing interest to the average American activist, like Saudi-Iranian relations, Yemeni politics and so on. Connecting the Yemen issue to Americans more directly is crucial. Many potential allies here in the United States want to be able to consider themselves (and their country) as moral actors, and therefore framing the issue as one of an immoral and self-interested foreign policy can be very effective.

This is also a good place to note that I am not Yemeni American or of Yemeni descent myself. I think people are often surprised to find that the Yemen Peace Project was not founded by any Yemenis or Yemeni Americans. I studied Arabic in Yemen for a short time in 2009, which is where my interest first took root. As (I hope) an ally, I think that what draws me to activism on this cause in particular, aside from falling in love with the country when I was there, is that Yemen and its people have been so disproportionately affected by misplaced counterterrorism initiatives, targeted killings, surveillance and of course the more recent drone strikes and bombings that are either direct goals or a byproduct of US foreign policy since September 11, 2001.

Have there been sources of solidarity that have been lacking? What do you see getting in the way?

Aliya: As someone who is active in Muslim-American circles, I would look forward to seeing Muslim-focused social justice organizations and nonprofits who work on related issues in the context of the Muslim community take more initiative to show solidarity in ending the US role in the Yemen crisis. There are so many ways in which justice for Muslim Americans has intersected with our relationship to Yemen—whether drone strikes, targeted killings, surveillance, immigration or justice for Guantanamo prisoners—and there have been and probably will continue to be many opportunities for these connections to be capitalized on by Muslim activists as opportunities for solidarity and further engagement.

Shireen: I have been disappointed by many prominent Muslim leaders and organizations around the country who have largely been silent or seemingly indifferent to the suffering of Yemenis.

Aisha: My biggest disappointment is the apathy or lack of support from the Muslim-Arab community. The injustices and devastation inflicted on the people of Yemen seem to either not move them or they were paralyzed by fear from saying anything about Yemen that would be interpreted as criticism of Saudi Arabia.

Aliya: It's really interesting to me that all three of us have focused on the Muslim community's response as the biggest disappointment in terms of lack of support and activism, particularly since this is not necessarily the case regarding other underreported human rights abuses, such as the Rohingya in Myanmar or Uighurs in China. Aisha, your point about Saudi Arabia is spot-on—I certainly get the sense that many of our leaders and activists who were educated in Saudi Arabia, or who travel there for pilgrimage or other reasons, are very hesitant to say things that may jeopardize their access to Saudi Arabia. Although I do not think the Saudi government is viewed as a moral authority by most American Muslims, I have heard hesitancy to criticize them too vocally until they have completed hajj themselves. It definitely opens up a lot of questions about hierarchies within the Muslim community

and the quality of the connections that we draw between our own civil rights and foreign policy.

The assassination of Jamal Khashoggi seems to have dramatically escalated Congressional pressure on the Trump administration to reconsider elements of its support for Saudi policy in Yemen. Aliya, what have been the advantages and disadvantages of this popular uptick in interest?

Aliya: I am definitely of two minds about what we've seen come out of the Khashoggi murder. On one hand, it is true that this has increased congressional pressure on the executive branch. If this leads to positive change vis-à-vis the US role in the devastation in Yemen, I would be very happy. It is disheartening, however, to know that it took the assassination of a Saudi journalist to bring attention to Yemen and that the murder of one person—although, of course, tragic—counts for more than the murder or slow death by starvation or disease of thousands of others, just because the former was a journalist and working for a prominent US publication.

The advantage is clear—there has been a big increase in the number of people willing to donate humanitarian aid, sign petitions and pressure their representatives on behalf of Yemen. I have noticed many more substantive pieces about Yemen in the media, in large publications such as the *New York Times*. A December 2018 article called, "From Arizona to Yemen—Journey of an American Bomb," by Jeffrey Stern, was particularly striking in its complexity and analysis. Nevertheless, I have little confidence in the media's ability to resist the urge to shoehorn Yemen into molds that the public and lawmakers already understand, such as a Sunni-Shi'i divide, or a Saudi Arabia-Iran issue, or counterterrorism. But I do think that there is plenty of space for activists, academics and community leaders to shape the narrative that Americans hear.

Shireen, as a Yemeni scholar with an active presence on Twitter, you are in a position to translate the conflict outside of any specific organizational channels in ways that Aliya describes. What has been the greatest challenge in navigating this space and your multiple audiences and interlocutors?

Shireen: I see my work on Yemen as two-fold: to educate the American public on the war and to advocate on behalf of Yemenis for an end to US involvement in the war. Working against commonly held beliefs about the nature of the war on Yemen can distract from highlighting the US role in the war. Getting Americans to view this as America's war on Yemen (as Congress has acknowledged through War Powers bills passed in the Senate and in the House) is a challenge when the war continues to be under-reported and mischaracterized as either a civil conflict or a proxy war among Iranians and Saudis.

A second obstacle is working to inspire political action among those who are misinformed, apathetic or cynical regarding the



Aisha Jumaan (fourth from left) and other activists meet with Rep. Adam Smith (front, next to Jumaan) on Yemen.

impact they may have in ending the war. This obstacle also applies to how some Yemenis view my work: They may be uninformed about the political system in the United States and/or cynical of the power of the American public to end the US war on their country. Communicating to both sides that this work is worthwhile and that all efforts—no matter how simple or seemingly small—are necessary to end the war, can be challenging.

I believe that any discussion on Yemen with an American audience should include a plan of action such as supporting House Joint Resolution 37 passed on February 13, 2019, marking the first time a War Powers bill was passed in the House. The next step is to pass the Senate version of that bill—Senate Joint Resolution 7—which will require American voters to call upon their lawmakers in the Senate to end US involvement in the war.

All three of you are women who are doing essential work within your communities and through your networks. As Afrah Nasser makes clear in her contribution to this issue, women in Yemen are leading in their communities every day, responding to critical needs and bearing the costs of the war disproportionately. Yemeni women have struggled to get representation where peace-building and post-war planning are happening. A Yemen Polling Center poll of 300 Yemeni decision-makers released in February 2019 showed that only 9 percent see the inclusion of women as important for peace-building or planning for a post-war Yemen.¹ What can the activist community do to ensure women are involved in deliberations and decision-making?

Aisha: The international community should insist that women are included in their delegations. As activists, we can raise awareness that decisions about war and peace in Yemen are excluding women who bear the brunt of the consequences of decisions made mainly by men. The other issue is bringing in new women's voices from outside the political parties, women who don't feel obligated to

present the party line. Finally, it's important to bring in the voices of Yemen's silent women heroes, especially those who are working in the education and health sectors under unbearable circumstances.

Shireen: As Yemen rebuilds and recovers from this devastating war, it's important for all Yemenis—men and women—to have equal participation and input over decisions that will impact them all. Both peace-building and post-war planning seem like a distant dream, however, while the war on Yemen continues and decisions are often made by non-Yemeni actors. The urgency now is to end the war and alleviate the suffering, and Yemeni women have certainly had an active role in achieving these goals in and outside Yemen without seeking permission to enter those domains.

Aliya: This is a tough question, because ultimately the way to ensure that women's voices are heard is to listen to women. So many women are doing medical work, critical activist work and playing other roles in their communities. In terms of the activist community in the United States, amplifying the work and contributions of women both in Yemen and abroad must always be on the agenda both within activist circles and outside of them.

I think that there is often a great deal of attention given to the ways women in particular suffer in wartime. Drawing attention to these issues is important, but it is important to give equal attention to the ways in which women step up to the plate during difficult times, doing essential work in the community, in politics, in relief work and in activist circles. It's important to avoid portraying Yemeni women (or any women) as simply victims of violence and chaos, without highlighting how they are constantly using their agency to create positive change. ■

Endnote

¹ Marieke Transfeld, "Youth Activism in the Yemeni Civil War," *Yemen Polling Center Policy Report*, February 2019.



Protesters call for an end to US involvement in the war in Yemen, November 2018 in Chicago. The blue backpacks stand for the 40 children killed in an air strike on a school bus that used an American-made bomb.

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Progressive Surge Propels Turning Point in US Policy on Yemen

Danny Postel

The US House of Representatives passed a potentially historic resolution on February 13, 2019, calling for an end to US military support for the Saudi-led coalition's intervention in Yemen that began in 2015. Although the US

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government has never formally declared its involvement in the war, it assists the coalition with intelligence and munitions and supports the aerial campaign with refueling and targeting. The United States is therefore complicit in the myriad atrocities the coalition has committed against Yemeni civilians, which Human Rights Watch and Amnesty International have characterized as war crimes.¹

What is already historic about the resolution (introduced by Democratic Representatives Ro Khanna of California and Mark Pocan of Wisconsin) and its Senate counterpart (introduced by Independent Bernie Sanders of Vermont, Republican Mike Lee of Utah and Democrat Chris Murphy of Connecticut) is their invocation of the War Powers Resolution of 1973, which restrains a president's capacity to commit forces abroad. Aimed to prevent "future Vietnams," the act gives Congress the authority to compel the removal of US military forces engaged in hostilities absent a formal declaration of war.

The House resolution was the first time Congress flexed its War Powers muscle in the 45 years since that resolution's passage. The Senate passed a parallel resolution in December, but the measure died when the Republican leadership refused to bring it to a vote. These congressional moves not only register opposition to US involvement in this war but also strike a major blow against unlimited executive power when it comes to launching war.

This long overdue Congressional action to constrain executive war-making, however, would not have been possible without a tremendous grassroots mobilization against US involvement in this disastrous war and the surging progressive tide that is raising deeper questions about US foreign policy.

Anti-war activists in the United States have been organizing against US support for the Saudi intervention in Yemen since 2015. While these efforts made an impact on the public debate about Yemen, they failed to move the policy needle—until an unexpected chain of events in late 2018 gave the campaign new traction and occasioned a momentous grassroots mobilization. The national organizing campaign is led by a combination of Yemen-oriented groups (the Yemen Peace Project, the Yemeni Alliance Committee and others) along with more established anti-war organizations like Just Foreign Policy, Win Without War, Code Pink and Peace Action. The addition of the ascendant Democratic Socialists of America contributed to the momentum. Yet it was the confluence of events outside the control of these groups—but to which these groups were well-positioned to rapidly respond—that propelled the campaign into broad Congressional support for War Powers resolutions in early 2019.

This campaign is poised to change not only US policy on Yemen, but possibly the longstanding US-Saudi relationship. To be sure, major obstacles stand in the way of such a shift—notably, the Israel lobby and the swampy Donald Trump-Jared Kushner ties with Gulf monarchs. But the tide is now turning, and the 2020 presidential election could change the equation even more dramatically.

Game-Changers

The Barack Obama administration gave the green light for the Saudi bombing campaign in 2015, dubbed Operation

Decisive Storm, as a way to placate Saudi Arabia's furious opposition to the Iran nuclear deal, which they viewed as betrayal and a sign that Washington was pivoting to Tehran.² Some commentators retrospectively regard the Iran deal as wrongheaded given the catastrophe that has unfolded in Yemen.³ But this imagines that Obama's decision to sign off on the kingdom's military campaign was automatic or inevitable. It was neither. The problem was not the Iran deal itself, but rather the decision to appease the Saudis in Yemen.

The Saudis viewed Trump's election as a godsend. Here was someone who embraced their assertion that Iran was the source of most of the region's problems and shared their determination to isolate and confront Tehran.⁴ Trump's first foreign visit as president was to Riyadh, where he told the ensemble of autocrats, monarchs and thugs what they wanted to hear: They have US support. Immediately after the May 2017 gathering, the Saudis stepped up their aerial assault on Yemen, and Trump announced a massive new weapons deal with the kingdom.

As the war intensified and the humanitarian crisis deepened, a broad coalition of US anti-war activists emerged and shifted their attention to Yemen, initiating a variety of educational events, protests and meetings to pressure congressional leaders. Despite their efforts, it took two events in the summer of 2018—one a horrific act of violence in Yemen that illuminated all that was wrong with US involvement, and the other a horrific act of violence in Istanbul not directly related to the war itself—to spark a major opening in public consciousness and on Capitol Hill.

On August 9, 2018, a Saudi-led coalition warplane bombed a school bus in Saada, northern Yemen, killing several dozen children between the ages of six and 11. Mainstream media coverage of this event was unusually extensive and graphic, with CNN airing chilling video footage of the final moments inside the bus before the bomb struck. The video found itself in heavy rotation and went viral on social media. The visceral imagery of children on a school bus struck a deep nerve among many Americans who otherwise had not been following events in Yemen.

Reports that the warplane in question was sold to Riyadh by Washington, and that the bomb was manufactured in the United States, began to materialize. The Yemen-based human rights organization Mwatana played an important role by providing CNN access to a cache of documents showing fragments of American-made bombs at the scene of multiple attacks in which civilians were killed and injured, going back to 2015.⁵ Mwatana's engagement with the US media also drew upon the knowledge and connections of US-based organizations that had long been working to draw attention to the direct role of the United States in the little-understood war. The horror of the school bus bombing, followed by this investigative surge, had a palpable effect on public opinion as Washington's direct role in the suffering of Yemeni civilians came into public focus.⁶

The second event, the October 2, 2018 assassination of the Saudi journalist Jamal Khashoggi, was the game-changer. When it was revealed that the *Washington Post* contributor was dismembered with a bone saw in the Saudi consulate in Istanbul and that Khashoggi's murder was directed by the highest levels of the Saudi regime, virtually the entire Washington foreign policy world condemned Saudi Crown Prince Mohammed bin Salman for his brazen brutality. "The Khashoggi killing shocked official Washington, which was forced to overcompensate for having endorsed Crown Prince Mohammed bin Salman as an enlightened reformer," Yasmine Farouk observes. "The humanitarian consequences of the war in Yemen added to that, so that the kingdom in its entirety has become entangled in the current polarization of US politics."⁷

Many Yemenis are ambivalent about what might be called the Khashoggi effect—the ways in which the Saudi journalist's brutal murder has drawn attention to the injustices of the war in Yemen. Abdurashed Alfaqih, Executive Director of Mwatana, conveys this ambivalence in his observation that "Yemen is one big Saudi consulate." "All Yemenis are like Khashoggi," he notes, "but without the *Washington Post*."

But Khashoggi's murder proved pivotal on the legislative front, when a handful of Republican senators joined Democrats in their support for Senate Joint Resolution 54, the War Powers measure to end US support for the coalition's military operations in Yemen. Just a few months earlier, in March 2018, this resolution had been rejected by the Senate. But following the school bus bombing, revelations of Washington's complicity in such atrocities and the Khashoggi affair, the Senate passed the Sanders-Lee-Murphy resolution in December 2018. While outgoing Speaker Paul Ryan blocked the House resolution on his way out of office, a new version, House Joint Resolution 37, passed the Democratic-controlled House in February 2019. Euphoria was widespread in progressive circles: Anti-war activists celebrated not just the passage of the resolution, but the critical role they played in bringing it about.

Mobilizing a Coalition

Since the beginning of 2018, a coalition of organizations have worked around the clock mobilizing grassroots support for congressional action. Groups like Win Without War, Just Foreign Policy, the Yemen Peace Project, Code Pink, Peace Action, the Yemeni Alliance Committee, the Friends Committee on National Legislation, Action Corps and the Fellowship of Reconciliation have worked closely with congressional allies, providing policy expertise and helping draft resolutions (both Senate and House versions). These organizations have mobilized their members and supporters around the country to pressure their congressional representatives to co-sponsor and vote for the resolutions. They organized rallies at US Senate offices in Nevada, Arizona,

Illinois, New York, New Jersey, Rhode Island and Maine (as well as on Capitol Hill), resulting in grassroots and media pressure on every Democrat who voted against the Yemen resolution in March 2018, which had a direct impact on the historic Senate vote in December.

While many efforts were coordinated, the mobilization was broad and diffuse enough to pressure congressional representatives across the country. In November, the Yemeni Alliance Committee, Just Foreign Policy and Action Corps organized rallies at the San Francisco and Los Angeles offices of two key House Democrats, Nancy Pelosi (then House Minority Leader, now Speaker) and Adam Schiff. Until then, Pelosi's position on Yemen was unclear.⁸ Yemeni and Yemeni-American activists figured prominently in both actions. Within 24 hours of the rallies, both Pelosi and Schiff agreed to co-sponsor the original House resolution.

Employing creative means, Chicago activists in November 2018 led by Voices for Creative Nonviolence, Just Foreign Policy and the Chicago chapter of Peace Action held a powerful demonstration at Chicago's Federal Building, placing 40 blue backpacks on the ground with the names of the children killed by the Saudi missile fired at their school bus. A teach-in on US involvement in the Yemen war held the next day at a packed auditorium at Loyola University featured the Yemeni-Canadian activist and Michigan State professor Shireen Al-Adeimi, who has emerged as one of the key voices on Yemen. Students at Loyola, DePaul and the University of Chicago have made Yemen a central focus of their activism.

Democratic Socialists of America, which now has more than 55,000 members nationally, has also played an important role. In November 2018 the organization issued a forceful statement on Yemen. In January 2019, it held a national video conference to educate and spark its members to participate in the National Day of Action for Yemen on February 4, 2019, which mobilized support for the current House and Senate resolutions to end US support for the Saudi military intervention.

A Left-Right Alliance on Yemen?

Yemen has become an important subplot in a larger story: the development of a new progressive foreign policy vision in Congress. A central figure in this story is Rep. Ro Khanna, who was first elected to Congress in 2016 and has emerged as a leading member of the Congressional Progressive Caucus. With his frequent appearances on such shows as *All In with Chris Hayes*, *Democracy Now!* and the *Intercepted* podcasts, Khanna has become a prominent voice in progressive and anti-war circles. Khanna goes beyond advocating simply for the end of US support for the Saudi-led coalition in Yemen: He wants to stop all US military assistance to Saudi Arabia.

At the same time, Khanna is part of a disconcerting trend in certain quarters of the anti-war left, sometimes expressing

affinity with right-wing reactionaries whose opposition to neoconservatism overlaps with their own. In February 2019, Khanna tweeted about an article by Fox News' Tucker Carlson in *The American Conservative* magazine: "Tucker Carlson offers a devastating critique of interventionism and shows how much of the foreign policy establishment has failed the American people. There is an emerging, left-right coalition of common sense for a foreign policy of restraint."⁹

Carlson may be a critic of neoconservatism, but he is also a defender of white nationalism and a purveyor of demonizing rhetoric about immigrants and Muslims. Praising someone like Carlson—especially without offering this caveat—risks rendering Khanna's anti-war position hostile to Yemeni-Americans and many other allies in the progressive push to end the war in Yemen.

Talk of a left-right coalition has been gaining traction in some anti-war circles, particularly since Trump's election. To be sure, the War Powers resolution could not have made progress without making common cause with some conservatives. Republican Sen. Mike Lee of Utah, for example, has been an instrumental ally on Yemen. But to speak of a broad left-right coalition, as Khanna and others do, risks alienating many progressives who fiercely oppose "America First" nationalism (read: white nationalism).

Rep. Tulsi Gabbard of Hawaii is also frequently quoted and retweeted in anti-war circles despite her well-documented Islamophobia, her enthusiastic support for the chauvinistic Hindu nationalism of Indian Prime Minister Narendra Modi, her praise for brutal dictators like Egypt's Abdel Fattah al-Sisi and her cooperation with the right-wing organization that arranged her trip to Syria to meet with the war criminal Bashar al-Assad.¹⁰

The troubling politics of this left-right coalition did not originate in Congress. Many progressives and anti-war activists, for example, contributed to the virality of this tweet from Sen. Rand Paul: "Sunnis have been killing Shia since the massacre at Karbala in 680 AD. If we wait until they stop killing each other, we will stay for a thousand years or more. I agree with @realDonaldTrump. Bring the troops home."¹¹ Many progressives, however, oppose building a left-right coalition that overlooks Orientalist and racist distortions about the Middle East and Muslims on the basis of shared support for a smaller US military footprint.¹² Such a coalition would be hostile, if not unrecognizable, to many of the people in whose name progressive activists often claim to speak.

Bernie, the Democratic Party and US-Saudi Relations

Unlike in 2016, when Bernie Sanders seemed to shy away from foreign policy issues, foreign policy has become a major focus as he enters the presidential race for 2020.¹³ In recent months he has issued an internationalist manifesto

and delivered a major foreign policy address at Johns Hopkins University's School of Advanced International Studies.¹⁴ With Sanders' timely leadership on ending US involvement in the war in Yemen, his increasingly critical views on US-Saudi relations and his broader anti-authoritarian internationalist vision, the contours of a Sanders-administration foreign policy are taking shape and could become a reality: Every poll shows Sanders beating Trump in a general election. As with domestic issues, Sanders' influence over the terms of the Democrats' foreign policy debate will be significant.

Moreover, every Democratic senator running for president is on board as a co-sponsor of the Sanders-Lee-Murphy resolution on Yemen. This development is remarkable and may portend a major shift in US foreign policy—at least toward Saudi Arabia. Resetting US relations with the Saudi kingdom, which Gilbert Achcar has felicitously called "the most reactionary state on earth," would go well beyond the Obama-Clinton-Kerry legacy—indeed, well beyond any previous Democratic administration—and have far-reaching repercussions in the Middle East.¹⁵

If US policy moves in this progressive direction, the grassroots mobilization to end US involvement in the war in Yemen—particularly the surge of 2018 and 2019—will be a key reason. ■

Endnotes

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Helen Lackner, *Yemen in Crisis: The Road to War* (Verso, 2019), 336 pp.

Few people from the West know Yemen better than Helen Lackner, who brings decades of on-the-ground experience to her writings on that country. Her latest book comes at a time when Yemen faces what can be termed, without any exaggeration, existential threats: to the country and, more consequentially, to the estimated 29 million people who live there. Her experience and insights make this book essential for understanding the multiple dimensions of Yemen's crisis.

Lackner starts by detailing how Yemen's popular uprising in early 2011 set off a chain of conflicts that led to the devastating military intervention led by Saudi Arabia and the United Arab Emirates, starting in March 2015. Her book went to press in mid-2017, so Lackner could not take account of critical developments since then, most significantly the rupture of the opportunistic alliance of the Houthi movement and forces loyal to former president Ali Abdullah Salih, resulting in Salih's killing. The resulting political realignment, however, has done nothing to bring the war closer to a conclusion.

Lackner's book is not a comprehensive account of the war. Instead she gives us lucid analyses of the political, economic and social dynamics of the country. She references the 1960s and 1970s but concentrates on the decade leading up to and those following the 1990 unification of the former Yemen Arab Republic (YAR, the North) and People's Democratic Republic of Yemen (PDRY, the South). Interestingly, in her chapter pairing pre-unification discussion of the YAR and PDRY, she devotes more pages to the former socialist regime—reflecting the years she spent as development consultant there—whereas the more usual focus in Western writing about Yemen is on the North.

A chapter on Yemen's Islamists draws appropriate distinctions between the different salafi and other Islamist groups, including the role of the Saudi Arabian-supported Dar al-Hadith Institute in sparking the Houthi wars between 2004 and 2010; the Muslim Brotherhood dimension of Islah, the main Sunni Islamist party; and the persistent presence of Al Qaeda in the Arabian Peninsula (AQAP). A separate chapter examines the emergence of the Houthis, named after the leading family in Ansar Allah, a revivalist movement that emerged in the early 1990s in the Zaydi northern highlands. Those wars pitted the Houthis against units of Salih's armed forces and affiliated militias. By the time of the popular uprising of early 2011, the Houthis had already extended their control beyond their home governorate of Saada; their cohesion and battlefield experience put them in a good position to exploit the political vacuum of the transition period following Salih's resignation in 2012, culminating in their takeover of the capital, Sanaa, in late 2014.

Lackner briskly reviews the dynamics that prompted the hastily-arranged unification of the two states in 1989–1990. True, citizens of both the North and the South long regarded themselves as Yemeni to the core. Why this sentiment led to unity at that moment was clear for the PDRY, which had been wracked by intra-regime fighting for years, most acutely in 1986. A few years later, the regime further suffered the loss of its Communist-bloc patrons, the Soviet Union and the (east) German Democratic Republic.

As for the North, Lackner attributes the YAR's motivation "respond to popular demands for democracy" (117). But she does not explain why this situation had grown particularly acute, leaving one to conclude that unity was, for Salih, a moment of opportunity rather than need. Unified Yemen swiftly encountered a crisis of enormous economic and social consequence when Salih declined to join the US-led international coalition assembled to force Iraq to end its August 1990 occupation of Kuwait; in November 1990, Yemen cast the sole vote of opposition in the UN Security Council to the resolution authorizing military action against Iraq. That vote resulted in the suspension of aid from the United States and other funders, aid that only resumed, in the US case, after Salih more adroitly aligned Yemen with the US War on Terror following September 11, 2001. Perhaps of more consequence in the early 1990s, Yemen's apparent support for Iraq led the Gulf states to expel more than 800,000 Yemeni workers, ending remittances that had boosted the Yemeni economy at the local level over the previous decade.

The quite different characteristics of the current war in the former PDRY warrant a separate chapter on the southern separatist phenomenon. While Lackner appreciates the PDRY's egalitarian social and economic programs, she holds the socialist regime responsible for the South's political instability and economic straits. Unity with the North led to the imposition of northern laws across the country, including the repossession of land and other property that had been nationalized. This imposition of northern laws—combined with the depredations by northern militias following the brief southern separatist war of 1994 and the forced retirement of southern military and other officials—led to street protests in Aden and other southern cities and towns that the government frequently responded to with deadly force. Today, straightforward southern demands for democratic reforms and economic justice dismayingly have not been accompanied by new leadership from younger generations. As a result, the political field in the South remains in the hands of older, even colonial-era, leaders. Lackner laments the "vast and variable" separatist organizations, which she asserts number almost one hundred, that make for a "movement [that] finds it hard to agree on anything beyond a desire for secession" (181).

Lackner provides a succinct analysis of the changes in Yemeni society over the last half-century. In the North, the oil price increases of the 1970s prompted mass labor

migration that “undermined” (100) the overwhelmingly agricultural economy of the central and northern highlands. Labor remittances also helped commercialize the economy and transform social structures of rural and town societies alike. In the South, as a result of the PDRY’s “ambiguous” attitude, “migration was almost as important in the life of most rural households” (103), notwithstanding socialist-type cooperatives and state farms. Throughout, tribal and other traditional solidarities gave way to relationships of job and welfare patronage based on wealth and proximity to the central government.

Lackner’s chapters on resource scarcity and the economy highlight Yemen’s water crisis, which in part is a consequence of afore-mentioned socio-economic changes. Household incomes from remittances and subsidized fuel and equipment have led to the unregulated pumping of ground water and expanded cultivation of qat and other high-value crops. The medium-term consequence will likely be a thorough depletion of the country’s ground-water resources. But immediate consequences include the lack of clean drinking water and

its prohibitive costs financially as well as in terms of labor, chiefly that of women and children. Lackner sees a “fairly straightforward” remedy: prioritize human needs for hygiene and drinking water and address the fact that 90 percent of the country’s water resources go to agriculture. The obstacle, in her view, is that rural large landowners formerly tied to the Salih regime control water management.

Lackner asserts that the “international neo-liberal agenda” of foreign donors (225) has wrongly emphasized the development of high-value export crops. Some specific examples of this agenda, however, would have made that point more convincing. Lackner extends her indictment of the “neo-liberal agenda” in a chapter devoted to the economic crisis that worsened in the period since 2011, mainly based on analyses of various “strategy documents.” But it remains unclear the extent to which factors like endemic corruption were more germane to the crisis—a crisis that the current war has turned into a catastrophe.

—Joe Stork.

IN MEMORIAM

Roger Owen

Arbella Bet-Shlimon

Roger Owen, a former contributing editor of *Middle East Report* who taught at Oxford University and Harvard University for over half a century, died on December 22, 2018 at his home in Cambridge, Massachusetts. He was 83.

A specialist in the economic, political and social history of the modern Middle East, Owen authored or edited 16 books, many of them standard features of undergraduate and graduate reading lists, including *State, Power and Politics in the Making of the Modern Middle East* (1992) and *The Middle East in the World Economy, 1800–1914* (1981). His first book, *Cotton and the Egyptian Economy, 1820–1914* (1969), examined the turn toward cotton monoculture in nineteenth-century Egypt as a political-economic phenomenon. His last, *The Rise and Fall of Arab Presidents for Life* (2012), analyzed the authoritarian systems that were then being challenged by region-wide protests and uprisings. His articles and reports

Arbella Bet-Shlimon teaches history at the University of Washington.

covered an even wider range of topics, among them British and French military intelligence, comparisons between regimes of imperial control, and the histories of commodities such as silk, sugar and oil. Owen also wrote regular columns for the newspapers *Al-Hayat* and *Al-Ahram Weekly*.

In the 1960s and 1970s, the field of Middle East studies witnessed mounting critiques of traditional scholarship on the region that culminated in Edward Said’s publication of *Orientalism* in 1978. As a junior scholar, Owen was among a number of historians, social scientists and literary critics influenced by Marxist and postcolonial theory, including Said, Anouar Abdel-Malek and Talal Asad, who questioned the prevailing assumption that the society, culture and politics of the Middle East should be understood mainly through the prism of Islam. Owen and Asad were members of the Hull Group, named for the British university where it first met. The group produced several landmark publications, including

the *Review of Middle East Studies* and the *Gazelle Review of Literature on the Middle East* that, along with MERIP in the United States, served as sites for new writing on the region. In *Orientalism*, Said reserved rare words of praise for Owen. Scholars like him, Said wrote, “are aware too that the study of man and society—whether Oriental or not—is best conducted in the broad field of all the human sciences.”

Owen’s introduction to the Middle East was accidental. He served in the British military, where he was stationed in Cyprus from 1955 to 1956. He spent his leaves visiting Tel Aviv, Beirut and Cairo, witnessing firsthand the excitement and turmoil of a region grappling with imperialism and decolonization after the establishment of Israel and Gamal Abdel Nasser’s rise to power in Egypt.

Owen subsequently enrolled at the University of Oxford. He earned a BA from Magdalen College in 1959 and completed a doctoral program in social sciences, specializing in economic history, at St. Antony’s College in 1965. Owen then taught Middle Eastern history at Oxford until 1993.

At the time that Owen completed his doctoral degree, it was conventional at Oxford to study the Middle East as a *sui generis* field—that is, Oriental Studies—and uncommon to study it in a disciplinary program like modern history that would normally focus on Europe. He was deeply skeptical of the notion that the history of Islam was the best way to conceptualize the history of people in the predominantly Muslim regions of Asia and Africa. In a searing 12-page review of the 1970 *Cambridge History of Islam*, Owen concluded that this framing was “acting to encourage the writing of bad history and to prevent the emergence of something more worthwhile.”¹

Owen developed his own research methods. He was influenced by his Oxford mentor Albert Hourani’s observation that economic histories of the Middle East sounded like they had been written by scholars who had never “seen a turnip.” “Determined to avoid the same accusation,” Owen later wrote, “I made sure that I got into the countryside.” Owen’s work was distinct in its time for its careful attention to ethnographic detail, physical geography and materiality: the infrastructure of roads and vehicles that made the trade of certain commodities possible, the exact design of water distribution systems, the division of labor in agriculture across ages and genders.

Owen’s work took him all over Southwest Asia and North Africa during his career. In Egypt, he visited Mohamed Hassanein Heikal’s melon farm and took the opportunity to ask the journalist questions about Nasser’s habit of receiving foreign guests at the Nile Hilton. Alongside a coalition of

international leftist activists, he attended a Palestine solidarity conference in Amman in September 1970, where he witnessed the tense weeks leading up to Black September. “As I was later to conclude,” he wrote while reflecting on those bloody events, “we would actually have been much more useful if we were a delegation of doctors.”

In 1993, Owen took up the A. J. Meyer Professorship in Middle East History at Harvard University, which brought him into the orbit of debates about American foreign policy in the Middle East. He did not relish political sparring but did recognize the need to engage in these conversations as a professional obligation. In 2002 and 2003, for example, Owen used his regular column in *Al-Ahram Weekly* to critically examine the George W. Bush administration’s case for war in Iraq. He described the war as having an “exemplary quality”—that is, fought with the intention of demonstrating American military might as part of a doctrine of fighting an ever-expanding War on Terror. “The Bush administration has to prove the rightness of its case to the world...it needs not only to be seen defeating old enemies,” he wrote, but “it will also need to keep finding new ones to make the same point.” His concern with the Iraq War led him to invite scholars of Iraq to Harvard and to design a graduate seminar on Iraqi history that he taught regularly in the last years of his career.

Owen’s capacious approach to knowledge production on the modern Middle East is reflected in the range of the work that he fostered, promoted and critiqued. He trained dozens of graduate students who wrote on nearly every region in Southwest Asia and North Africa. He sought to nurture the work of junior scholars on diverse topics including the history of gender, Indian Ocean trade and disease in the early modern world.

Owen’s instinct was to view his experiences through a historian’s lens. In his memoir, he recalled an occasion in the 1970s when he visited Jerusalem to testify on behalf of a British-Arab friendship organization that Israeli authorities had accused of anti-Semitism. As he dined with the organization’s Israeli defense lawyer, “a very nice man,” in a Jaffa restaurant housed in the former home of a displaced Palestinian family, he was shocked by the lawyer’s insouciance to where they were spending their evening. “For me, the place was clearly full of ghosts from the past,” Owen wrote. “Some might only see the present; others like me saw a place of absences and abandonment and the often difficult-to-discern traces of plowed-over villages.” ■

Endnote

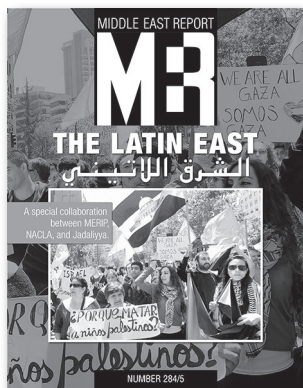
1 Roger Owen, *A Life in Middle East Studies* (Tadween, 2016).

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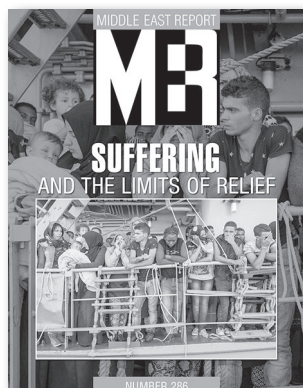
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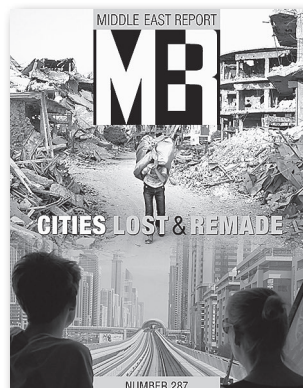
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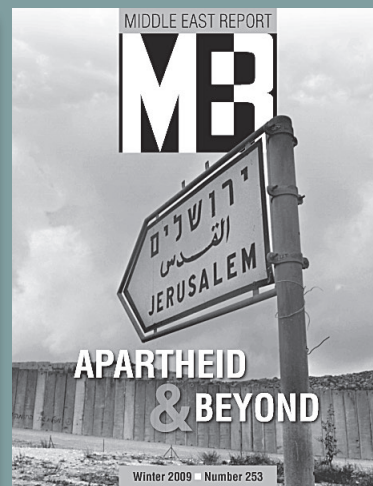
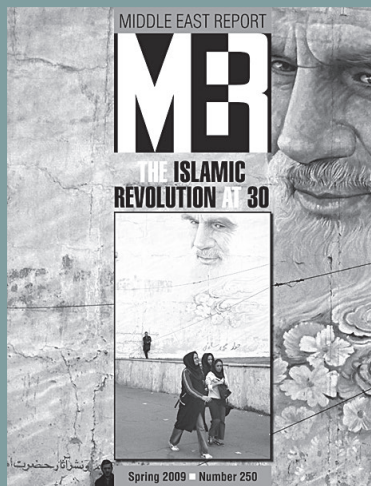
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