



**Gulf Research Centre Cambridge**  
Knowledge for All

Workshop 10

## **The Future of Yemen's Unity**

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### **Abstract**

Yemen is at a critical juncture. The National Dialogue Conference (NDC) called for constitution drafting, a constitutional referendum, and new elections. The timetable has slipped, and, for the moment, no end date has been set. The question of the state's structure is tied inevitably to the southern issue – shorthand for the political, economic and social demands emanating from the south, which had been an independent state prior to 1990. There, a loosely aligned mix of organizations and activists known as the Southern Movement (called *Hiraak*) is calling for separation or, at a minimum, a temporary form of a two-state federalism followed by a referendum on the South's future. Separatist sentiment is running high and appears to have strengthened over the course of the present transition process.

The *Hiraak* NDC delegation demands significant concessions, arguing that anything short of two-state federalism and/or a promise to organize a referendum on the South's future status is unacceptable. Then there are those from *Hiraak* who remained outside the NDC and did not recognize it and who insist on immediate independence. Most *Hiraak* members, however, bank on the negotiations' failure, either due to the inability to reach a

substantive compromise or lack of implementation on the ground. They vow to escalate protests and a civil disobedience campaign, regardless of the NDC decisions, until they achieve independence. A constitutional referendum would provide a focal point for their opposition, triggering a boycott and likely violence. The result would be to further undermine the transition's legitimacy.

While the GCC initiative was successful in facilitating the departure of former President Ali Abdullah Saleh and forming a new transitional government, it fell short on providing solutions to the massive and intractable challenges threatening unity and a sustainable peace in Yemen. In particular, the GCC initiative ignored the country's past, including the numerous human rights violations and the deep rift between various political factions. It also allowed the ruling party to continue as a major player in Yemeni politics without undertaking any serious and substantial political reform effort. As a result, the GCC initiative did not address major underlying causes and conditions of the conflict in Yemen. It was designed for regime renovation rather than regime change, and therein lay the seeds of the current instability.

Besides, there are more complicated questions of how to strike a balance between accommodating former ruling party members and completely removing them from public life. In addition, the southern separatist *Harak* movement and the Houthi rebellion (called *Ansarullah* – meaning God's Partisans) were not directly addressed in the GCC initiative.

## **Description and Rationale**

If Yemen hopes to forge a more stable future, it desperately needs to agree on the fundamental question of its state structure. Agreement on the issue is difficult in light of circumstances where basic trust, legitimacy, and consensus are lacking. Forcing an agreement at this stage would be more than a fragile state, fragmented country, and fractured political class could handle. Instead, it would likely further discredit the process, strengthen more militant southern views, and provoke dangerous brinkmanship and bloodshed.

The workshop, therefore, seeks to bring about a better understanding of the country's current situation and the latest developments, while identify the critical factors at play. The case of Yemen suggests that overthrowing a despotic regime is relatively easy, while the building of a new equitable political order to replace the old regime is much harder. In between the long durable authoritarianism and the stability of a newly emerging political system, there may be a grey area of instability, hybrid regimes, and possible chaos that could last longer than expected.

The current situation is characterized by numerous destabilizing factors. First is the ineffectiveness, even absence of state institutions. In Yemen, the central government has only limited control over its territory. Its authority remains confined mostly to the major urban areas. With three quarters of the population living outside the cities, however, service delivery to remote areas is not only extremely difficult but it also raises questions about the state's overall legitimacy.

Secondly, as a result of unification in 1990, the state is burdened by an oversized public sector. While some 1.2 million people work in the public sector, 60 percent actually hold military and security-related positions. The cost of sustaining such a large workforce is staggering. However, the government sees their continuation in these positions as critical to their continued loyalty to the regime.

Thirdly, Yemeni citizens have low confidence in the current government's ability to successfully handle the country's future economic challenges. In the people's perception, the government's legitimacy has weakened because of the patrimonial system that co-opted tribal figures and some security and military officials. As a result, this group not only controls significant parts of the state's policy-making process, but also important parts of the private economy. Ordinary Yemeni citizens see their exclusion from economic opportunities as the biggest threat to their security.

In light of these factors, the current transitional phase has brought about more instability and radicalization in the immediate term. In the post-revolution transition period since 2011, the situation in Yemen has actually gone from bad to worse. To date, the unity government has failed to gain the trust of many citizens and is yet to implement any meaningful reform to meet the people's demands. It has failed to deliver basic services such as securing and sustaining electricity and preventing gas pipelines from continuing attacks. The government has not taken steps to implement the 20 points agreed upon to address the southern issue and continues to violate public trust by appointing unqualified individuals for public office – such appointments are largely based on affiliations and loyalty rather than merit. These failures provide a reason for separatists to continue their call for secession. The *Ansarullah* have not handed in their militia's heavy weapons or engaged peacefully in the political process, but rather are creating more instability. Most importantly, Al-Qaeda in the Arabian Peninsula (AQAP) has been able to exploit the absence of the state.

*Ansarullah* have used violence and the threat of civil war to seize power in Sanaa, resulting in the defeat of their rivals General Ali Muhsin, the Ahmar family, and the Islah party. *Ansarullah* also forced President Hadi to dissolve the reconciliation government

and appoint a new technocratic one. *Ansarullah* and the southern *Harak*, both of which have long been excluded from Yemeni politics, now have broad powers to shape Yemen's future government. *Ansarullah*, whether intentionally or not, have, for religious reasons, even become a reliable partner for the US in the fight against AQAP. The sudden power shift associated with *Ansarullah's* rise has broad repercussions for Yemeni politics and for regional dynamics. The NDC, meanwhile, is pursuing the plan to divide Yemen into a six-region federation, leading *Ansarullah*, after seizing Sanaa, to force all players to sign a new accord 'The Peace and National Partnership Agreement' which, among other provisions, calls for a revisit of the six-region federation proposal.

A fair resolution of the southern question may preserve the security and stability of a united Yemen on a federal and inclusionary basis through a new structure and a new social contract for the state. This new federal state could then initiate a period that represents a complete break from the history of conflict, oppression, abuse of power, and monopoly of wealth.

### **Scholarly Contribution**

It is widely believed that the quest of the south for potential secession will be the major issue in Yemeni affairs in 2015 as it might result in the disintegration of the country. So far, no in-depth scholarly papers have analyzed the various potential scenarios for the immediate future of Yemen. While many writings focus on the GCC initiative and the transitional period, there is a dearth of resources examining and analyzing the southern movements and the possibility of them staying in or breaking away from a unified Yemen. This workshop seeks to shed light on this unaddressed issue by encouraging many scholars to participate.

### **Anticipated Participants**

For potential topics for papers that this workshop seeks to receive, the following list can be considered:

- Remaining united: What is needed?
- Creating a unified legitimate Southern political representative: Examining the southern political fragmentation
- The role of external players in determining the South's destiny
- Potential scenarios for the disintegration of the state
- Is separation possible?
- If separation happened, what would a southern state look like?

- Reflections on the Southern quest for the political & security situation in the GCC countries
- What is the possibility of having a monarchical state in an independent southern Yemen?

## Workshop Director Profiles

**Ahmed A. Saif** has a Ph.D. (2000) in politics from the University of Exeter, UK. He taught at Exeter, AUS, and Sanaá universities. Currently, he is the director of Sheba Centre for Strategic Studies. He has authored several publications and among the most recent of them are: “Yemen: Politics and Society,” “Misperception and Mistrust Relationships: Saudi Arabia, Kuwait and UAE *vis-a-vis* Iran”; “Citizenship Prospects in Post-Revolutionary Traditional & Multi-Fragmented Yemen”; “Void vs. Presence: The In-between-ness of State & Society in Yemen”; “Deconstructing before Building: Perspectives on Democracy in Qatar”; “Rethinking the Arab Spring: Potential Scenarios” and “Paradox of Regional and International Intervention in the Democratic Transformation Countries.”

**Isa Blumi** is Associate Professor of Global History and Middle East Studies at Georgia State University, USA. His work covers the late Ottoman period and successor regimes as part of a global process that interlinks the Balkans, the Middle East, and the larger Islamic world. He researches societies in the throes of social, economic, and political transformation, thus allowing him to expand his work to include the 20th and 21st centuries. In this respect, Blumi explores processes of change induced by, for instance, refugees/migrants throughout Muslim communities scattered throughout the world as a means to question how we understand forms of social organization and the origins of violent conflict in regions as diverse as East and South Arabia, the Western Balkans, and Southeast Asia. Examples of his approach are the books *Chaos in Yemen: Societal Collapse and the New Authoritarianism* (Routledge 2010) and *Ottoman Refugees: Migration in a Post-Imperial World* (Bloomsbury 2013). Dr. Blumi has taught in the American University of Sharjah, Leipzig University, and the Graduate Institute of International and Development Studies in Geneva while serving on advisory boards to organizations concerned with international affairs and development.

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