

Case study: Yemen

In March 2015, a large-scale military intervention led by Saudi Arabian forces began in Yemen, with airstrikes, ground warfare and a humanitarian crisis persisting through subsequent months. To some, this was a proxy war between Saudi Arabia and Iran; to others, this was the fall-out from a brutal Yemeni inter-sectarian war; to others, it was the attempt by a regional power to impose its dominance over an impoverished neighbour.

Whilst these perspectives all have elements of validity to them, and will be explored in this series, these lectures will instead be focused on understanding the Yemeni crisis as part of a long-standing process in the transformation of violence in Yemen, in which regional and global linkages have taken a central role. Yemen may seem to host a range of different conflicts, from Southern separatism to the insurgency of al-Qa'ida in the Arabian Peninsula (AQAP), to the popular demonstrations that overthrew the long-serving regime of Ali Abdullah Saleh in the Arab Uprisings of 2011, to the Zaydi-dominated rebellion that swept to power in late 2014. But the lectures will explore the interconnections between these seemingly diverse conflicts, and their common processes of transnationalisation. They connect up crucially not only to Middle Eastern issues, but also to US foreign and counterterrorism policy, the UN's misguided efforts at brokerage, and to conflicts in the Horn of Africa.

The reading for this option is an unusual mix of national political analysis, policy reports and news commentary. Much of the academic analysis is not directly connected to the current conflict, but is crucial in order to make sense of the process of transnationalisation. The policy and news reports are mostly historically lightweight and are conceptually unrefined, but as intense conflict is continuing, it is necessary to absorb the information they provide in order to develop plausible explanations for its recent escalation. Because the literature on Yemen, with a few honourable exceptions, displays limited theoretical applications and insights, the opportunity to make innovative arguments is high. It is only by combining information and modes of analysis from a range of sources, and with concepts and theories from the rest of this course, that a better understanding can be developed.

Lecture 1. National history: unification, authoritarianism, rebellion

The conventional account of the conflict in Yemen is organised around a narrative of Yemeni politics from the establishment of the republican government in North Yemen (1962) and the independence from the British of South Yemen (1967) through to unification (1990). The unification happened under a government commonly though perhaps loosely characterised as

authoritarian. The narrative proceeds through to the eventual breakdown of that authoritarian government in 2011-12 and the establishment of a successor regime, but interrupted in designing a new constitution by a second rebellion. The first lecture provides, and then problematises, this conventional narrative.

Lecture 2. Conflict and international relations

The Saudi-led air campaign of 2015 has been the most forcible external intervention into Yemen since the 1960s, but it is part of a long-standing pattern of interaction between foreign military institutions and Yemeni political life. This lecture explores the relationship between AQAP and US counterterrorism strategy, and sets that within an account of the militarisation of the Yemeni public sphere. It then relates these changes to the character of the Yemeni government from the early 2000s, and particularly in its responses to Southern separatism and the Zaydi political movement (Ansar Allah, 'Houthis') in the northwest. It finally explores why and how the apparent political disorder in Yemen draws in foreign state actors and international organisations.

Lecture 3. Province, state, region, world: the level of conflict in Yemen

Yemen is the place where the rigid politics and oil riches of the Arabian peninsula meet the conflicts of the Horn of Africa, particularly those in Somalia: historically, Yemen has absorbed influences from, been a transit and trading post between, and been ruled by agents from both sides of the 20-mile wide Strait of Mandab. The lecture will explore the usefulness of understanding Yemen's long-term conflicts in terms of transcontinental connections and rivalries. It will connect these rivalries back to the quite developed forms of civic and political agency that exist in Yemen, crosscutting regional, religious, tribal and class divides, in order to explore how there have been multiple level of conflict in modern Yemen, and to appreciate how these levels interact.

Supervision questions

- What explains the apparent failure of the plans by external powers to bring peace to Yemen?
- What would be missed if the conflict in Yemen in 2015 is explained solely as a proxy war between Saudi Arabia and Iran?

Reading list

The reading doesn't break down easily between the themes of the three lectures, so a single list is provided. Here are some further specific notes of advice on the reading.

There is an extensive literature on Yemen's history from antiquity to the North Yemen Civil War (1962-70) and the independence struggle in Aden/South Yemen. Many of the longer texts mentioned here will reference aspects of this history, but to save time it's best just to read Dresch, especially chapters 2-4, as that sets the two Yemens in their international context: it's crucial to recognise that the outside world did not come to Yemen for the first time in 2015. The three most useful texts on pre-2011 Yemeni politics are Carapico, Wedeen and Phillips (2008), with the former two focused on civic activism and understandings, and the latter on official political processes. For Carapico, chapters 2 and 6 act as a helpful introduction to Yemen's politics; Wedeen is more theoretically ambitious, and chapter 5 on international influences may be most useful for this course. Phillips (2008) is handy, but the focus of the 2011 book (below) is more attuned to the themes in these lectures. On the 2011-12 revolt and stalled transition, the short pieces by Durac, Alley, Transfeld and Knights are all informative on different themes and are worth reading, perhaps in that order. Seitz in the Lackner volume is on the same theme as Knights, but with a different argument, as is Hill/Nonneman in contrast to Transfeld.

On conflict, the core text is Day: this is the only must-read text on the course. But in approaching Yemen through a subnational perspective ('regionalism' here means Yemen's regions, not transnational regions), it becomes the focus of the critique of what follows in the course. Phillips (2011), on the same theme and more briefly, instead embeds Yemen more closely in international dynamics. Aryani and Hellmich both, in quite different ways, locate the conflict in explicitly international terms, while Orkaby looks at the repeated failure of attempts at international brokerage. On transnational relations within conflict, see the articles by Thiollet and de Regt in the Lackner volume on migration and refugee movements between Yemen and the Horn of Africa, Corbi on arms trafficking, and Healy/Hill on transnational security threats. The reports from the International Crisis Group (ICG) and the Chatham House Yemen Forum provide a lot of useful information, but do be careful about adopting their often quite simplistic modes of explanation. The Chatham House reports focus on questions of governance at the expense of politics, and the ICG leads on policy recommendations. The ICG material on the Saada conflict (the 'Houthis') in the 2014 and 2015 reports is especially important, and can be usefully read alongside Brandt's piece in the Lackner volume and Boucek's piece on 'War in Saada' in the Boucek/Ottaway volume.

For something quite different, Clark provides a part-history, part-travelogue; it's not an academic text, but it is knowledgeable and readable, and may reveal a way of understanding the country's dynamics that scholarly texts and new reports between them cannot provide.

POL 16: Conflict in Yemen. Last updated 14 August 2015. Glen Rangwala.

* Paul Dresch, *A History of Modern Yemen* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2000)

* Sheila Carapico, *Civil Society in Yemen: The Political Economy of Activism in Modern Arabia* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1998)

* Lisa Wedeen, *Peripheral Visions: Publics, Power and Performance in Yemen* (University of Chicago Press, 2008)

Sarah Phillips, *Yemen's Democracy Experiment in Regional Perspective: Patronage and Pluralized Authoritarianism* (New York, Palgrave, 2008)

Vincent Durac, 'Yemen's Arab Spring – democratic opening or regime maintenance?', *Mediterranean Politics* vol. 17/2 (2012), pp.161-178

* April Alley, 'Yemen changes everything ... and nothing', *Journal of Democracy*, vol. 24/4 (2003), pp.74-85.

Mareike Transfeld, 'Yemen: GCC Roadmap to Nowhere', *Stiftung Wissenschaft und Politik Comment* 20 (2014), via:

http://www.swp-berlin.org/fileadmin/contents/products/comments/2014C20_tfd.pdf

* Michael Knights, 'The military role in Yemen's protests: civil-military relations in the tribal republic', *Journal of Strategic Studies*, Vol. 36/2 (2013), pp.261-288

Helen Lackner, ed., *Why Yemen matters: a society in transition* (London: Saqi Books, 2014)

Ginny Hill and Gerd Nonneman, 'Yemen, Saudi Arabia and the Gulf States: elite politics, street protests and regional diplomacy', Chatham House briefing paper (May 2011), at:

http://www.chathamhouse.org/sites/files/chathamhouse/public/Research/Middle%20East/0511yemen_gulfbp.pdf

** Stephen W. Day, *Regionalism and Rebellion in Yemen: a Troubled National Union* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2012)

* Sarah Phillips, *Yemen and the Politics of Permanent Crisis* (Abingdon: Routledge/IISS, 2011)

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* Lara Aryani, 'Saudi Arabia and the War of Legitimacy in Yemen', *Jadaliyya*, 2 May 2015, at:

<http://www.jadaliyya.com/pages/index/21538/saudi-arabia-and-the-war-of-legitimacy-in-yemen>

Christina Hellmich, 'Fighting Al Qaeda in Yemen? Rethinking the nature of the Islamist threat and the effectiveness of U.S. counterterrorism strategy', *Studies in Conflict & Terrorism*, Vol. 35/9 (2012), pp. 618-633

Asher Orkaby, 'The UN's Yemen problem: the international community and an elusive peace', *Foreign Affairs* on-line article, 11 May 2015, at:

<https://www.foreignaffairs.com/articles/yemen/2015-05-11/un-s-yemen-problem>

Kathryn Corbi, 'Small Arms Trafficking in Yemen: A Threat to Regional Security and Stability', George Mason School of Public Policy paper (winter 2011/12), at:

<http://journals.gmu.edu/newvoices/article/view/65>

Sally Healy and Ginny Hill, 'Yemen and Somalia: terrorism, shadow networks and the limitations of state-building', Chatham House briefing paper (October 2010), at:

https://www.chathamhouse.org/sites/files/chathamhouse/public/Research/Africa/bp1010_yemensomalia.pdf

International Crisis Group, various reports via:

<http://www.crisisgroup.org/en/regions/middle-east-north-africa/iraq-iran-gulf/yemen.aspx>

- 'Yemen at war', 27 March 2015
- * 'The Huthis: from Saada to Sanaa', 10 June 2014
- 'Yemen: Enduring Conflicts, Threatened Transition', 3 July 2012

Christopher Boucek & Marina Ottaway, eds, *Yemen on the Brink* (Washington DC: Carnegie Endowment for International Perplexity, 2010)

Victoria Clark, *Yemen: Dancing on the Heads of Snakes* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2010)