

Sociocultural Fault Lines Series

Yemen



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House in Sana'a

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Introduction

This report addresses sociocultural fault lines and their exploitation in Yemen's ongoing conflict. A **sociocultural fault line**^a is defined as an exploitable source of instability within a community, country, or region of the Operational Environment (OE). It consists of connected systems of exploitable conditions that affect the centrally important issues of public governance, economic well-being, social cohesion, and communal resilience. Fault lines develop over time and—like the exploitable conditions that create them—are often leveraged by domestic and foreign actors to advance their interests. Fault lines analysis can increase the situational understanding of an OE and serve to provide insight for military decisionmaking.

This report proceeds in four sections followed by a description of the methodology. The first section provides a brief background on the Yemeni OE in order to set the stage for the author's analysis. Section two discusses Yemen's sociocultural fault lines, including key judgments based on the intersection of several exploitable conditions that created them. The section also explores each of these fault lines in detail, ascertaining why they exist. Section three explains how each of the fault lines may be exploited, by whom, and the significance of this for the OE. Section four articulates the implications of exploitation for the U.S. Army. The report closes with a short description of the analytical methodology that led to the report's findings.

EXPLOITABLE CONDITION (EC) + EC + EC ——— time ———> FAULT LINE

Background

Yemen has been in cyclical conflict since the 1960s and on a path of state collapse for nearly a decade.¹ The country's ongoing armed conflict and political fragmentation was prompted by the 2011 antigovernment protests that led to the overthrow of President Ali Abdullah Saleh, accelerated with the 2014 Houthi takeover of the capital Sana'a, and escalated to its present form after the 2015 Saudi-led military intervention. According to the 2018 UN Panel of Experts report, "Yemen, as a State, has all but ceased to exist. Instead of a single State there are warring statelets, and no one side has either the political support or the military strength to reunite the country or to achieve victory on the battlefield."² Yemeni society has paid a heavy toll, with various UN agencies characterizing the situation in Yemen as "the worst humanitarian crisis in the world."³ As of late 2020, more than half of the conflict's estimated total of 233,000 deaths had come from "indirect causes such as lack of food, health services and infrastructure."⁴

Yemen's strategic importance, due to its sizeable population and key location at the crossroads of the Arabian Peninsula and Horn of Africa, has turned it into a competi-

**SOCIOCULTURAL
FAULT LINES are
"exploitable
sources of
instability in the
human domain;
they can be real
or perceived."**

^a Sociocultural Fault lines result from the combination of several Exploitable Conditions with observable effects interacting and hardening to create a new, more resilient constellation. GCKN's Exploitable Conditions exist temporally, whereas Fault Lines develop over time and eventually burrow into the fabric of society, making them more difficult to mitigate and resolve.

tive arena for regional actors. Iran, Saudi Arabia, and the United Arab Emirates (UAE) have all sought to improve their regional power and influence by backing one of three Yemeni coalitions contesting national-level power: Iran backs Ansarallah, aka the “Houthis”; Saudi Arabia backs the Internationally Recognized Government (IRG), which is also referred to as the Government of Yemen (GoY); and the UAE backs a patchwork of militias, including the Southern Transitional Council (STC). The STC and other UAE-backed militias are nominally part of the IRG, but they often compete with Saudi-backed IRG forces for territory and resources across former South Yemen. In addition, Ansarallah is associated with the heterodox form of Shia Islam practiced in Yemen (Zaydism), while the IRG counts diverse and oft-competing Sunni militias in its ranks.

Fault Lines Analysis provides a template for distilling key elements of Yemen’s complexity by focusing on the sources of instability that Yemeni and foreign actors have exploited and will continue exploiting for advantage over their adversaries. Fault Lines Analysis is derived from GCKN’s Exploit-

able Conditions Framework, which identifies 12 conditions in the OE that actors could exploit when competing with the United States and its partners. All but one of the 12 conditions are relevant for contemporary Yemen: Multiple Sovereignties, Ineffective Government, Economic Inequality, Illicit Networks, Environmental Threats, Demographic Pressures, Resource Scarcity, Infrastructure Deficits, Divided Societies, Mobilizing Ideologies and Cross-Border Encroachment. The remaining condition—“Technification” of Society—potentially looms on Yemen’s horizon but is not currently impacting Yemen’s stability.

This study identifies four key fault lines in Yemen’s OE. Three of the four fault lines revolve around identity issues—specifically national, religious, and kinship identities.

- **The first fault line, *Statehood Narratives***, examines competing proposals to define and control the Yemeni nation-state. Its exploitation is made possible by the confluence of Multiple Sovereignties, Ineffective Government, Divided Societies, Mobilizing Ideologies,

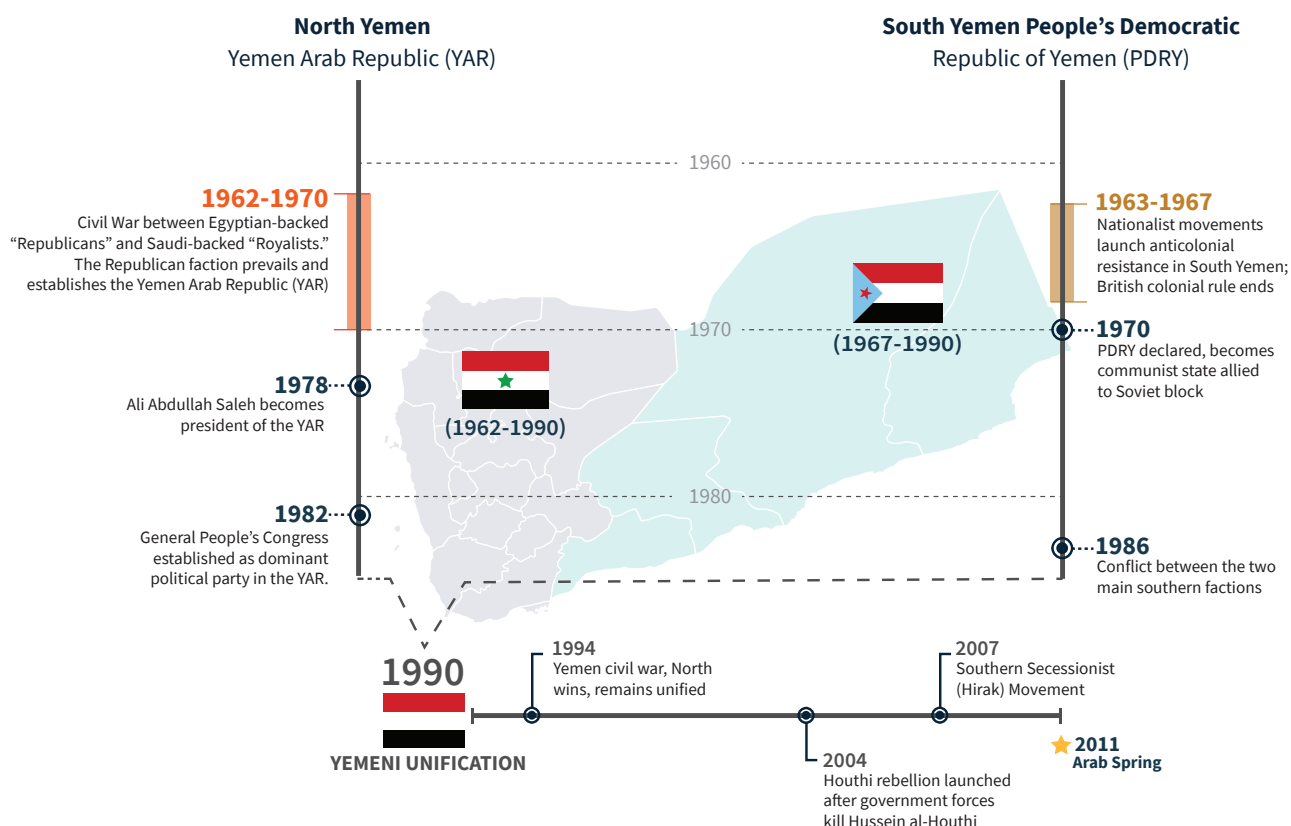


Figure 1. North and South Yemen Timeline, (1962-2011), GCKN.

and Cross-Border Encroachment. This fault line distinguishes between three essential narratives that are put forth as roadmaps for the reconstituted Yemeni state: Ansarallah's "anti-imperialist" Zaydi revivalist state; the IRG's unitary federal state, which is recognized by the United Nations; and, the STC's calls for Southern secession and returning Yemen to its pre-1990 two-state status quo.

- **The second fault line, *Mobilized Religion***, considers how different actors exploit religious cohesion in both the Zaydi and the Sunni communities. The exploitation of this fault line is facilitated by the presence of Cross-border Encroachment, Divided Societies, and Mobilizing Ideologies.
- **The third fault line, *Kinship Networks and Alliances***, explores how kinship identity is a key driver of Yemeni politics. The salience of this fault line is facilitated by the conditions of Multiple Sovereignities, Ineffective Government, Economic Inequality, and Illicit Networks.
- **The fourth fault line, *Political Economy of Conflict***, assesses how the war has altered political-economic structures in Yemen. The opportunities for economic exploitation are considered in the context of the conditions of Economic Inequality, Illicit Networks, Environmental Threats, Demographic Pressures, Resource Scarcity and Infrastructure Deficits.

FL1: Statehood Narratives

Three distinct *Statehood Narratives*, each associated with a particular political coalition, dominate Yemen's political space and contribute to state instability. The first, associated with Ansarallah, consists of a traditionalist narrative harkening back to the pre-1960 "imamate" and emphasizing Yemen's "tribal nationalism" and Zaydi heritage. The second, associated with the IRG, is a contemporary narrative focused on realizing Yemen's potential as a stable, politically representative nation-state. The third, associated with the STC, considers Yemen to be two distinct nation-states, a North and a South. These divergent narratives have partially driven prior conflict in Yemen: the 1960s civil war in the North was between supporters of the imamate and Egypt-backed secular nationalist military officers, while the 1994 civil war was between the Northern-led government and secessionists from the South.

Narrative 1: Ansarallah's *Statehood Narrative* considers Yemen's natural political system to be a religiously inspired, inward-looking state whose center of gravity lies in the country's tribal northern highlands. This narrative is inspired by the "imamate," a traditional form of political organization rooted in Zaydism, a heterodox branch of Islam prevalent in Yemen. Traditionally based in Yemen's northern highlands, the political and spiritual ruler of the Zaydi community is the "imam," a title which in principle, though not always in practice, was earned rather than inherited. A prospective imam was to be a morally upstanding scholar-warrior as well as a *Sayyid*, or someone who could trace his lineage to the Prophet Muhammad's grandsons Hussein and Hassan. In the face of injustice and bad government, a prospective imam was expected to rise up; Hussein's

grandson Zayd, for whom Zaydism is named, did so in a failed 8th-century attempt to overthrow the ruling Umayyad dynasty. The imamate system privileged *Sayyid* families, granting them political and economic benefits by virtue of their lineage. Yemen's *Sayyid* community is estimated to comprise 7-12 percent of the country's population; most but not all of them are Zaydi, and most but not all of them are Ansarallah supporters.⁵ Following a power struggle and civil war throughout the 1960s, *Sayyid* families and tribal supporters of the imam were militarily defeated and politically marginalized. A new class of relatively secular politicians, with support from Gamal Abdel Nasser's Egypt, took power, and the imamate model of statehood was discarded and replaced by a new regime that broadly resembled the 1970s military-led republics of Egypt, Iraq, and other Arab states. Many of these new leaders, including then-Lieutenant Colonel Ali Abdullah Saleh, were nominally Zaydis but from lower-status, non-*Sayyid* families.

Ansarallah and Iran have exploited the affinity between the proto-imamate *Statehood Narrative* and Iranian foreign policy rhetoric in mutually beneficial ways. Ansarallah is not the sole representative of Yemeni Zaydism, but the group has managed to monopolize the Zaydi political arena, thanks in part to its ideological alignment with Iran. Zaydi opponents of Ansarallah accuse the group of adopting practices and traditions that are foreign to Yemen and to Zaydism more broadly. The political narrative presented by Zaydi revivalism emphasizes Yemeni tradition but is also influenced by revolutionary Shia movements and shares with them a heavy reliance on Shia symbolism and history, including ideas of martyrdom; pan-Islamic aspirations combined with an emphasis on nationalist self-sufficiency; and strong criticism of the policies of the United States and Israel, as well as those of the Gulf kingdoms, who are seen as puppets of the former two. In Ansarallah's narrative, Yemen's political Zaydi roots align with the Shia revivalist

YEMEN TERRITORIAL CONTROL MAP (2022)

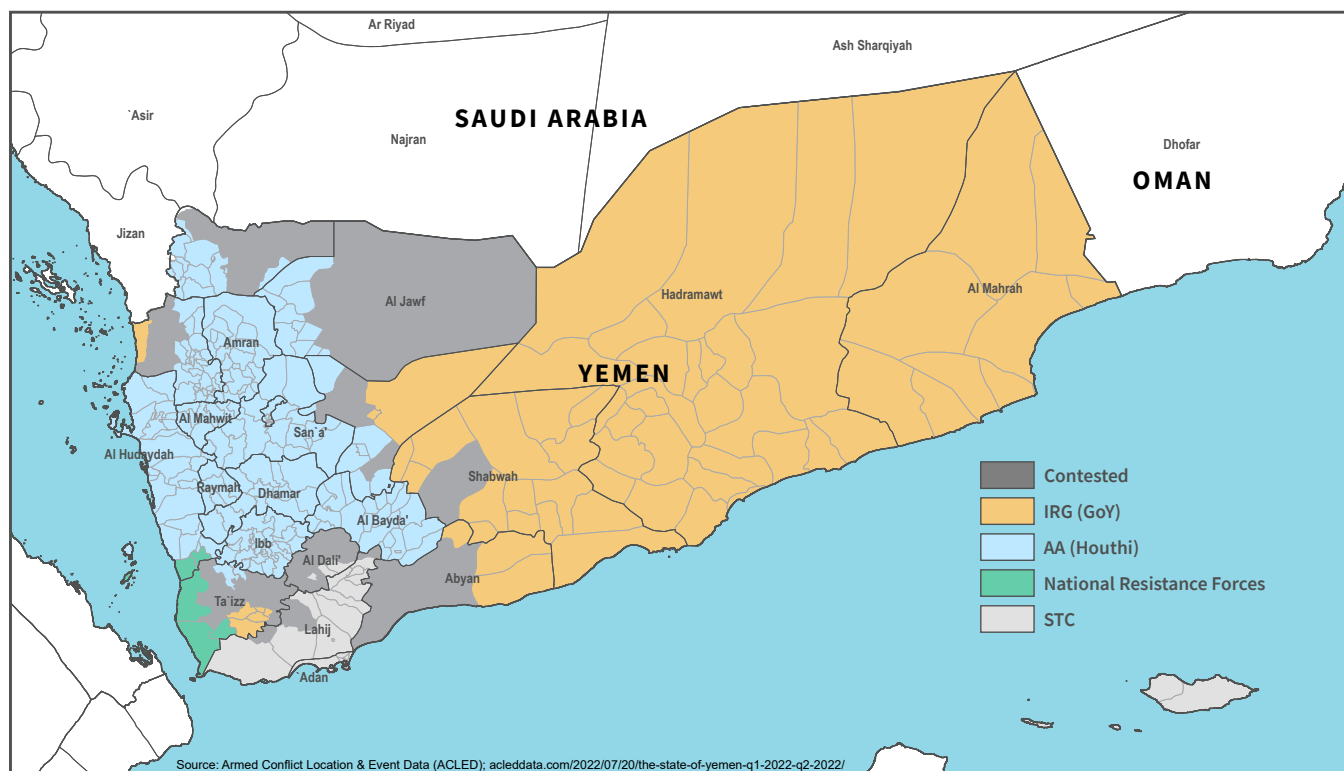


Figure 2. Yemen Conflict Q2 2022, Territorial Control Map, GCKN.

underpinnings of Iran’s Islamic Revolution, making it a natural fit for the Iranian-led “Axis of Resistance.” Ansarallah’s ability to withstand the Saudi-led military campaign has bolstered the “Resistance” narrative and broadened its appeal among Arab publics. Iran, in turn, has exploited a shared Shia identity to establish a low-cost, high-payoff strategic alliance that has deepened in the past decade.⁶ Ansarallah and other members of this axis consider themselves the rightful leaders of the Muslim community, based on their political stance and their leaders’ descent from the Prophet Mohammed. In their view, the non-*Sayyid* Al Saud family’s control over Islam’s holiest cities—Mecca and Medina—is a historical anomaly. Echoing Iranian foreign policy, Ansarallah views Israel and the United States as leading a conspiracy to loot and destroy Yemen, with help and complicity from the Gulf monarchies. Iranian influence on Ansarallah’s strident political ideology is encapsulated in the group’s slogan: “Allahu Akbar, Death to America, Death to Israel, Curse on the Jews, Victory to Islam.”

Narrative 2: The IRG is associated with a *Statehood Narrative* that envisions Yemen as a liberal, nominally democratic, unified federal state. The contemporary contours of this narrative first emerged in the 1960s, among opponents of the imamate. They crystallized with the rise to power of Saleh and his political party, the General People’s Congress (GPC). During his two decades as President of the unified Republic of Yemen, which ended with his 2012 negotiated resignation, Saleh ruled over a nominally democratic Yemen, where liberties and press freedoms were relatively high compared to neighboring countries. Saleh’s fall was seen as a chance to improve on this theoretical liberal democratic—though in practice kleptocratic—model by creating a more stable and less corrupt political system. A key element to achieving this vision was the idea of a federal state with a weak central government and strong regional governments, based on a new administrative map drawn up by Yemen’s 2013 National Dialogue Conference (NDC). The NDC, a Saudi-backed body whose goal was to chart a consensus political blueprint for Yemen in the post-Saleh era, was viewed with suspicion by both Ansarallah and Southern groups; Ansarallah’s representatives refused to endorse the NDC’s final agreements, and the group’s takeover of Sana’a in 2014 all but buried the prospects of them ever being implemented. Nonetheless, the IRG continues to be considered the vessel through which the NDC’s statehood model will be implemented. Indeed, the UN Security Council’s recognition of the IRG as Yemen’s legitimate government stems from the assumption that it will seek to implement the NDC’s main agreements, pursuant to UN Security Council Resolution 2140 (2014).⁷

Saudi Arabia and its allies in Yemen have effectively exploited the appeal of the liberal democratic *Statehood Narrative* to garner international support and recognition for the IRG. The UN Security Council recognizes the IRG as the legitimate government of Yemen due to Saudi support and based on the tacit assumption that it will someday reunite Yemen and implement key NDC provisions. That assumption ceased being realistic long ago, as the Riyadh-based IRG is unable to hold the city of Aden, much less Sana’a, and is considered highly corrupt and militarily ineffective. Abd Rabbo Mansour Hadi, the

FL1: Exploitable Conditions



Cross-Border Encroachment



Divided Societies



Ineffective Government



Mobilizing Ideologies



Multiple Sovereignties

IRG's president until April 2022, was the victor of a 2012 single-candidate election for what was to be a short transitional term. Corruption within the IRG is purportedly as bad, if not worse, than it was in Saleh's notoriously corrupt kleptocracy. The IRG depends entirely on Saudi Arabia, a religiously conservative absolute monarchy with little ideological affinity to the democratically minded elements of the IRG's *Statehood Narrative*. Despite all this, Saudi Arabia and its allies have effectively tethered their Yemen efforts to a vague, broadly palatable *Statehood Narrative* that has sustained the IRG's international recognition as Yemen's legitimate government.

Narrative 3: The STC is associated with the Southern *Statehood Narrative*, which considers contemporary Yemen to be made up of two separate states: North Yemen with Sana'a as its capital and South Yemen with Aden as its capital. The STC receives support from the UAE and has become a "political umbrella" for an array of Emirati-backed groups that are not necessarily aligned with the STC's narrative.⁸ While the STC is nominally part of the IRG, the coexistence has been uneasy in part due to their contending views on Yemeni statehood. Before 1990, Yemen was two separate states: the Yemen Arab Republic, or North Yemen, ruled by Saleh and the GPC, and the USSR-allied People's Democratic Republic of Yemen, or South Yemen. The unified Republic of Yemen was established in 1990,

with Yemen Arab Republic leader Ali Abdullah Saleh as its president. Many southerners opposed the terms of unification; in 1994, war broke out between southern secessionists and the Saleh government. Broadly speaking, southerners now associated with the IRG supported Saleh and the GPC, while tribes and leaders now associated with the STC fought for secession. The civil war ended in a northern victory and seizure of southern resources that left many in the south resentful and dissatisfied. The decentralized Southern Movement (Hirak) emerged as a response, and in the mid-2000s it began organizing mass protests calling for greater southern autonomy from the central government in Sana'a. The STC has positioned itself as a more centralized heir to the Southern Movement, and as such envisions a two-state model that conflicts with the Ansarallah and IRG conceptions of Yemen as a unitary state.

The UAE and political elites from former South Yemen have jointly exploited the Southern *Statehood Narrative* in ways that undermine the IRG's authority and create instability within the anti-Ansarallah coalition. STC leaders, who are in theory subordinate to IRG leadership, have declared the de facto autonomy of areas under their control and consistently use the language of southern autonomy in their political discourse. STC leaders from the Yemeni governorates of al-Dhale and Lahij, many of whom fought for or supported southern independence in Yemen's 1994

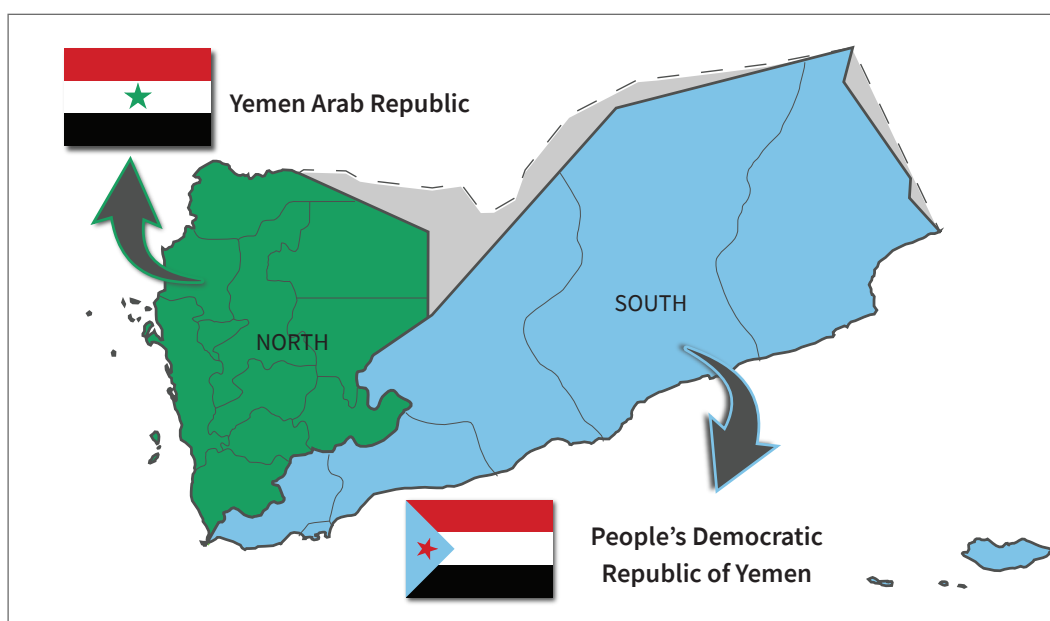


Figure 3. Map of North and South Yemen Prior to Unification

Source: https://commons.wikimedia.org/wiki/File:Divided_Yemen.svg.

civil war, have been especially effective in exploiting the Southern *Statehood Narrative* without fully committing to the idea of partition. The STC and other southern militias with a weaker commitment to the Southern *Statehood Narrative* receive vital support from the UAE. The exploitation of the Southern *Statehood Narrative* has created tensions within the broader Saudi-led coalition fighting Ansarallah, of which the UAE is a key member. In the name of southern autonomy, many of these militias have taken control of territory and resources across former South Yemen, often after forcefully expelling or subduing IRG forces. The continued exploitation of the Southern *Statehood Narrative* has therefore remained a persistent source of weakness and instability within the IRG and the Saudi-led coalition writ large.

The existence of three distinct *Statehood Narratives* does not preclude the emergence of new ones, especially if additional actors become involved in Yemen. Yemen's three dominant *Statehood Narratives*—Ansarallah's proto-imamate, the IRG's unified federal state, and the STC's southern secessionism—have crowded out alternative statehood models. Legacy narratives of socialism and pan-Arabism persist in Yemen's political environment, though they carry little weight in the contemporary context. While the consolidation of Yemen's *Statehood Narratives* into three quasi-governments appears to have made them so, this fact does not exclude their fracture or amalgamation, or the emergence of entirely new narratives.

Yemen Post-Arab Spring Timeline

2011

Nationwide protests against President Saleh turn violent



Hadi elected transitional president (2012-2014)

2012

2014

National Dialogue Conference collapses, Houthis take over Sana'a, Hadi flees to Aden and then Riyadh



Saudi-led military campaign launched to expel Houthis from Sana'a

2015

2016

Houthi ballistic missile targets Riyadh, Saleh killed by Houthi gunmen



Southern Transitional Council (STC) established

2017

2019

UAE withdraws from Yemen, tensions build between Internationally Recognized Government and STC in Aden and beyond



IRG President Hadi replaced by eight-member Presidential Leadership Council, headed by Rashad al-Alimi

2022

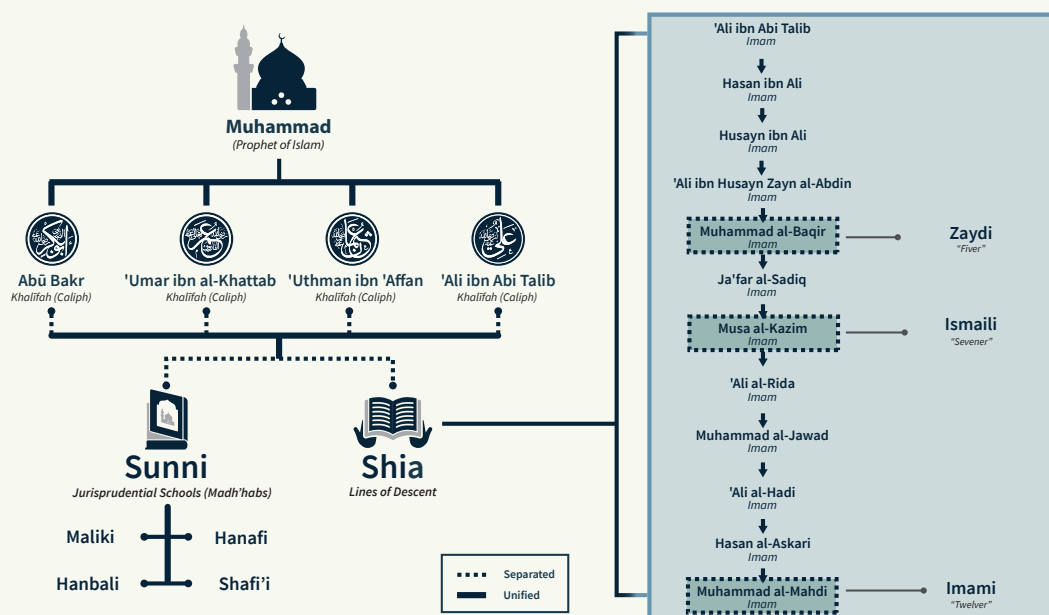


Figure 4. *Sunni and Shia Religious Divides in Yemen*, GCKN.

A Different Sunni-Shi'ite Divide: Yemen's Muslim Heterodoxy

Yemen's population is a Sunni-Shia mix, similar to countries such as Lebanon, Iraq, and Bahrain. However, Yemen's Sunni-Shi'ite divide is unique, and direct comparisons to other countries based on surface similarities can be misleading.

Yemen's Sunni population follows a school of jurisprudence known as the Shafi'i school. It is one of the four main Sunni schools of jurisprudence and is mostly prevalent at the southern and eastern edges of the Muslim world, specifically Indonesia and East Africa. The Shafi'i school is considered more accepting of Muslim heterodoxy than other schools, especially when compared to the Hanbali school, which informs Islamic jurisprudence in Saudi Arabia and is favored by Salafi-Jihadist movements.

Zaydism is a heterodox branch of Shia Islam that emerged in the 8th century AD, when its adherents broke away from what became the dominant form of Shia Islam, as currently practiced in Iran, Iraq, and Lebanon. Zaydis diverged from what became Shia orthodoxy regarding who should be the imam (descendant of the prophet and leader of the Muslim community). They are sometimes known as "Fiver" Shi'ites because the divergence occurred over who should be the fifth imam. Adherents of what is now mainstream Shia Islam are often called "Twelvers," as they believe that the twelfth imam—known as the Mahdi—went into hiding and will one day reappear. Yemeni Zaydism has traditionally been relatively tolerant of other Islamic schools of thought, although Ansarallah's ideology is rooted in one of Zaydism's more doctrinally rigid currents.

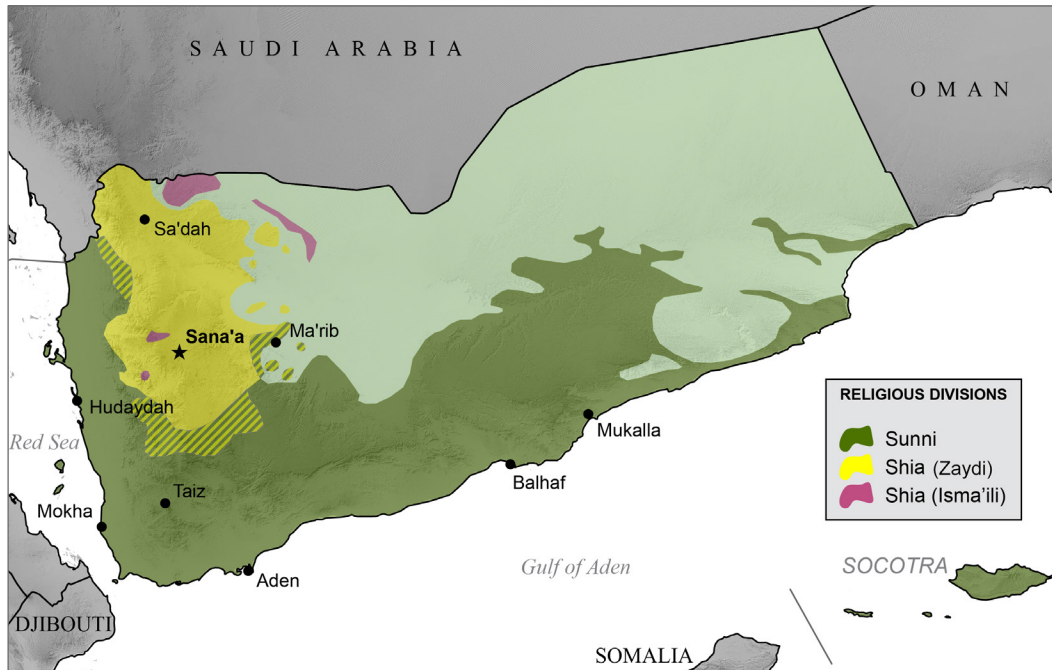


Figure 5. *Religious Division in Yemen*, GCKN.

FL2: Mobilized Religion

Religion has become a key lever of mobilization in Yemen, sharpening and potentially exacerbating existing divisions in the country. The country's Muslim population is roughly divided into a Sunni majority (estimated at approximately 55-65 percent) and a large Zaydi Shi'ite minority (approximately 35-45 percent). In former North Yemen, where most of Yemen's population resides and which is largely under Ansarallah's control, Zaydis constitute a greater share of the population than they do in Yemen as a whole. The Zaydi population is mostly clustered in the northern highlands and has historically ruled over the Sunni population of North Yemen's southern mountains and coastal areas. There is a great deal of heterogeneity and doctrinal divergences within the nominally Sunni and Zaydi populations, and religious divisions in Yemen are less contentious than in other Arab countries. This is often attributed to a history of coexistence stemming from the tolerance and moderation of Yemeni religious practice and jurisprudence. These differences have nonetheless been politically salient at different points in Yemeni history, including the present. From the 1960s until Yemeni unification in 1990, religious mobilization was muted due to South Yemen being run as a Marxist state and North Yemen ruled by the secular GPC. Ansarallah's recruitment and activism in the 1990s was partially in response to this marginalization and the concurrent spread of Saudi-sponsored Salafism in the Zaydi heartland. During the 2000s, religious divisions became increasingly prominent, as religiously motivated movements gained strength in Yemen and the region writ large.

Ansarallah has been the most effective actor in mobilizing religion to its advantage.⁹ The group evolved from a Zaydi revivalism movement and is anchored by an inner core that revolves around the al-Houthi clan. Ansarallah's brand of Zaydism derives from the

FL2: Exploitable Conditions



Cross-Border
Encroachment



Divided
Societies



Mobilizing
Ideologies

doctrine of Badr Eddine al-Houthi (father of current leader Abdel Malek) and other Zaydi scholars from the 1970s, who were inspired by the Shia revivalist movement that took hold in Lebanon, Iraq, and Iran that same decade. As with Shia revivalist movements elsewhere, Ansarallah's precursor movement recruited from marginalized non-Sunni populations while also appealing to *Sayyid* families whose influence had been curtailed by the rise of secular nationalist military rule.¹⁰ Ansarallah's inner group is known as the "Saada Core" in reference to the governorate in which the group originated. Saada Governorate, the heartland of Zaydi learning, was largely forgotten by the Saleh government during the 1980s. This neglect, combined with grassroots activism by Saudi-trained Wahhabi scholars, provided the space and impetus for Zaydi scholars to embark on political activism that eventually centered on the "Believing Youth," a revivalist training and vocational program that evolved to become the kernel of Ansarallah. Mobilized under the banner of Zaydism and called to action by its leader Hussein al-Houthi, the Believing Youth morphed into an armed rebellion after al-Houthi was killed by government forces in 2004. The group's current leader, Abdul Malik al-Houthi, is Hussein al-Houthi's younger half-brother. Since taking over Sana'a in 2014, Ansarallah has sought to reorganize Yemeni society through tightly controlled, if at times bombastic, messaging. It has also sought to "re-engineer" parts of Yemeni society along ideological lines, akin in some ways to the system that emerged from Iran's Islamic Revolution.¹¹ In essence, the group has sought to establish its political Zaydism as the de facto state ideology. Underlying its rhetoric are constant references to religion, in particular the speeches and writings of Hussein al-Houthi, which are themselves a mixture of religious history, jurisprudence, and contemporary politics.

The IRG's key mobilized Sunni group in former North Yemen is the Islah Party. Islah was established in 1990 as a Saudi-backed, Muslim Brotherhood-affiliated "Sunni tribal" party that would help consolidate various smaller patronage relationships. The party's nucleus came from the Hashid Confederation, northern Yemen's largest grouping of tribes. Islah's Sunni ideological dimension allowed it to reach beyond the tribes. Like other groups inspired by and/or affiliated with the Muslim Brotherhood, Islah ideologues seek a greater role for conservative Sunni jurisprudence on issues of political, public and family life. Many Islah members from northern tribal areas are bound less by ideological affinities than by political and patronage networks. Indeed, Islah is relatively pragmatic in its ideology—from its founding in 1990 until Saleh's overthrow in 2011, Islah was the main opposition party and was known for moving effortlessly between the government and the opposition.¹² The party's official name is "The Yemeni Congregation for Reform," and the Arabic word "Islah" means reform. Alongside the Houthis and the southerners, Islah was able to co-opt much of Yemen's organic 2011 protest movement, with help from Qatar and Saudi Arabia, who together were the main guarantors of Yemen's transitional period, known as the "GCC Initiative." Qatari media—most notably *al-Jazeera*—played an important role in cultivating a new political class that led transitional governments in Egypt and Tunisia and became the main armed political opposition in Libya and Syria. In Yemen, Qatari media cultivated figures associated with Islah and Political Islam more broadly.

The IRG also includes various Salafists and one-time Salafi jihadists. The line between Salafists and Salafi jihadists can be a fine one. Salafists draw personal and political guidance from the early generations of Islam, relying on the Quran and the Hadith (sayings and deeds of the Prophet Muhammad) as their two key sources of jurisprudence. Salafi jihadists prioritize the idea of armed jihad, and a culture of global jihad has emerged since Arab jihadist battalions fought the Soviets in Afghanistan in the 1980s. “Quietist” Salafists are less inclined to violent activism, instead content with the political status quo, so long as certain more basic conditions are met. Most of Yemen’s Salafi scholarship is of Saudi origin and its adherents began

clashing several decades ago with groups that subsequently became part of Ansarallah in the northern highlands.¹³ In recent years, Salafi groups have organized into formal militias, usually based on regional or tribal groupings. Although they remain a peripheral component of the national-level political landscape, Yemen’s Salafi militias have become important local-level players. Tribal militias scattered throughout Yemen are often described as “Salafist” and labelled as Salafi jihadist by Ansarallah. Yemen’s Sunni groups remain divided, with Islah and Salafi militias often fighting over territory, most notably in Taiz, Yemen’s third city. Perhaps due in part to the robust Salafi mobilization, Salafi jihadist movements such as al-Qaeda in the Arabian

HOUTHİ LEADERS

Badr Eddine al-Houthi (1926 -2010)

(Ansarallah Progenitor)

A prominent Yemeni religious scholar associated with the “Zaydi Revivalism” of the 1970s. His offspring constitute the inner core of Ansarallah’s leadership. Most prominent among them are current Ansarallah leader Abdul Malik al-Houthi and Abdul Malik’s deceased half-brother Hussein, the group’s spiritual and ideological leader.



Hussein al-Houthi (1959-2004)

(Ansarallah Spiritual/Ideological Leader)

Ansarallah’s key spiritual and ideological figure. A powerful orator and skilled exploiter of tribal politics, Hussein was at the center of the growth and development of the Believing Youth, a network of vocational Zaydi training centers that eventually evolved to become Ansarallah. A member of the Yemeni Parliament from 1993-1997, he became increasingly critical of President Ali Abdullah Saleh’s government after leaving parliament. Al-Houthi was especially focused on foreign policy, criticizing Saleh’s dealings with the United States and becoming sharply critical of Israel. Al-Houthi became a fugitive in the mountains of northern Yemen and was eventually killed by government forces in 2004. His tribal allies and ideological supporters revolted against the government, leading to an intermittent, escalating armed conflict throughout the 2000s.

Abdul Malik al-Houthi (1979 or 1982-present)

(Current Ansarallah Leader)

Badr Eddine’s youngest son, he became a top Ansarallah leader following the death of his half-brother Hussein. Under his command, Ansarallah transformed into an organized militia able to militarily challenge Yemeni government forces. A hardliner who was steeped in religious learning from an early age, he is considered a skilled orator and effective battlefield commander by his followers. He assumed overall leadership of the movement in 2010, following the death of his father.



Peninsula (AQAP) and the Islamic State in Yemen (ISY) do not have the mass appeal that similar groups have achieved in Afghanistan, Syria, or Iraq.¹⁴ AQAP was nonetheless able to mobilize in sufficient numbers to control territory in Hadhramaut, Shabwah, and Abyan Governorates in the early and mid-2010s. Amid the unrest of 2011 and 2012, the group overtly expanded its territorial control, only to be pushed out by local tribes and Yemeni military forces that subsequently coalesced into the IRG. While AQAP and ISY share a propensity toward using violence for political ends, the two groups generally have an adversarial relationship based on tactical and jurisprudential disputes.

The continued exploitation of the Mobilized Religion fault line is likely to encourage dogmatism and could perpetuate social divisiveness along confessional lines. Ansarallah often claims that opponents are targeting its members because they are Zaydi, while Ansarallah's opponents characterize the group as beholden to Iran and disconnected from traditional Zaydism.¹⁵ Both Ansarallah and the Salafists have run schools and training centers in which cadres are indoctrinated and often taught basic battlefield skills. Yet sectarian violence remains less salient in Yemen than in other countries of the region. Mass-casualty attacks attributed to AQAP in 2012 and 2013, for instance, failed to ignite a sectarian war. Yemen's unique form of Shia Islam and the moderation of the Shafi'i jurisprudential school of Sunni Islam that dominates in Yemen are thought to be partially behind this. The current conflict has mostly been understood in political, rather than religious terms. Relationships between leaders in Ansarallah and AQAP, or Ansarallah and Islah, appear to be common, particularly when there is a shared tribal connection or mutually beneficial patronage network in place. For Ansarallah and AQAP, religious ideology is important, but it does not supersede the importance of political pragmatism.¹⁶ Many of the Salafi militia fighters, for instance, are there primarily for reasons of kinship and livelihood.¹⁷ Although kinship identity remains fundamental, sectarian identity has become newly important to many because of the ongoing conflict.¹⁸

FL3: Kinship Networks and Alliances

Relations between kinship-identity groups—families, clans, and tribes—are a key driver of national-level Yemeni politics that may at any time challenge the stability of centralized state government. Yemeni tribal politics are difficult to generalize about, given that they often involve arcane, labyrinthine interconnections. Rather than attempting to offer a detailed explanation of tribal dynamics in Yemen, this study highlights their importance as an exploitable fault line. Yemeni politics are in large part shaped by the internal dynamics of tribes and their relations with one another, particularly those occupying adjacent territory. Tribal political calculations are “always active,”¹⁹ and shifts in allegiances that may seem sudden and drastic at a national level are often logical at the local level.²⁰ The quest to secure a favorable balance of power with territorially adjacent communities is a key driver of intertribal dynamics.²¹ Tribes are not monolithic, and the ongoing conflict in Yemen has split tribes, clans, and even families.²² The absence of a central government has forced many tribes and provincial power centers to fill the gap and ensure basic services in their communities.²³ As a result, throughout Yemen, local

militias and tribal groups often have more direct authority than any other political entity.²⁴ Although contemporary tribal politics are traditionally associated with the northern highlands, the current conflict has “re-tribalized” the south.²⁵

The Saleh-era central government exploited the primacy of kinship ties to establish calibrated patronage relationships with tribal leaders, which were then exploited by other actors when Saleh was overthrown. Saleh characterized the management of tribal politics as “dancing on the heads of snakes,”²⁶ and through the GPC he assiduously pursued the creation of tribal patronage and influence networks, often at the expense of governing. In the 1990s, both Ansarallah and the Islah Party developed their own political networks through grassroots activism and proselytizing across North Yemen. In the South, AQAP and Southern activists established clandestine networks and tribal coalitions to further their own goals. The patronage and influence networks of all four of these groups—Ansarallah, Islah, Southern activists, and AQAP—centered on tribal and kinship coalitions. Thus, the fracturing of the GPC’s tribal patronage network that accompanied Saleh’s ouster provided all four groups with an opportunity for expansion. The AQAP network’s gains in the immediate post-Saleh era were quickly reversed, as tribal militias in Abyan and Shabwa governorates sided with the IRG and quickly subdued AQAP and its allies. Both the IRG—via the Islah Party—and Ansarallah were especially effective in coopting remnants of Saleh-era tribal-patronage networks. Saleh allies who

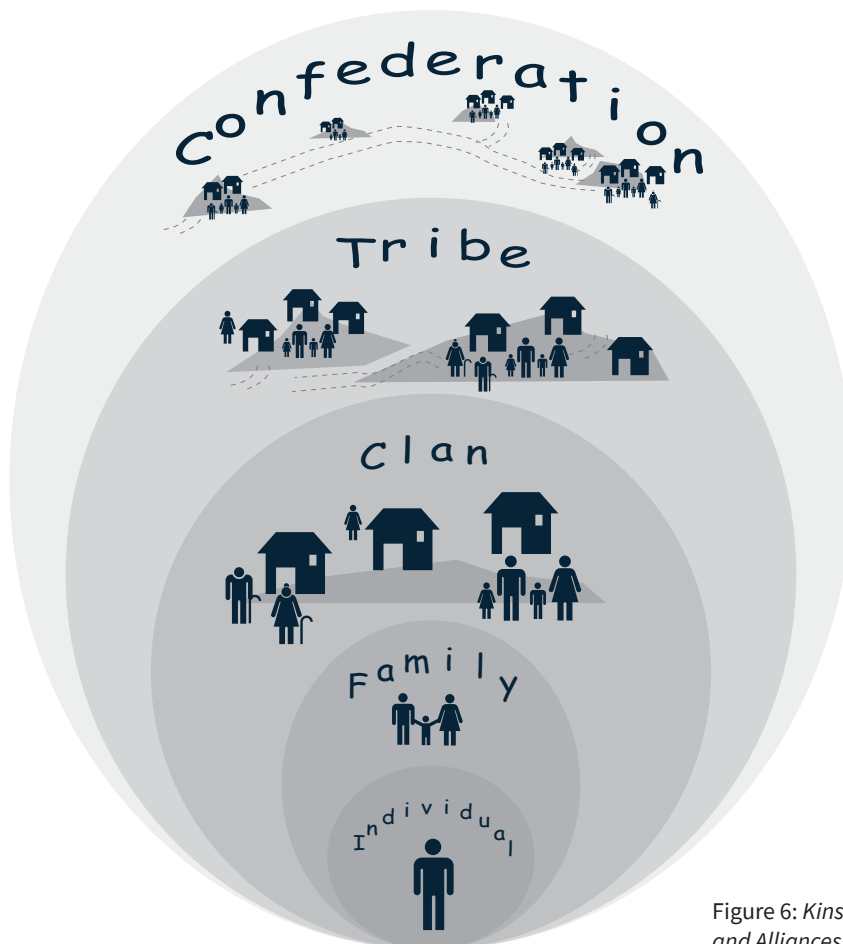


Figure 6: Kinship Networks and Alliances, GCKN.

FL3: Exploitable Conditions



Illicit Networks



Ineffective Government



Multiple Sovereignties

joined the the Ansarallah Coalition became known as the GPC's "Sana'a Wing," while those who abandoned and cast their lot with Islah—including Hadi and long-time Saleh confidant Ali Muhsin al-Ahmar—became known as the "Legitimacy Wing."^b Saleh's Pratorian Forces, most notably the Republican Guard, have meanwhile remained in the hands of the Saleh clan and emerged as an independent force, led by Saleh's nephew Tariq and known as the National Resistance or the Joint Forces. The National Resistance holds important territory on Yemen's Red Sea coast and is itself "a coalition of coalitions" that includes Saleh's Guards of the Republic, as well as tribal militias from the Salafi Giants Brigade and various coastal militias from the Tihama Resistance.²⁷

Ansarallah has effectively exploited kinship networks and alliances to establish a coalition around its core of ideological supporters. The group's 2014 takeover of Sana'a was made possible by a calculated campaign to gain allegiance from the tribes of Yemen's northern highlands, through a combination of force, diplomacy, and intermarriage. Since 2011, Ansarallah militants "have resorted to targeting the recalcitrant tribes one by one, occupying their areas with military force and in some cases destroying the homes of tribal figures in several governorates, often using explosives."²⁸ Yemen's *Sayyid* families, which are a key component of Ansarallah's inner core, traditionally live among the tribes but maintain a distinct status, often acting as mediators in tribal disputes or guarantors of transactions and agreements. In Ansarallah's statehood model, members of the ideological core act as "supervisors" (*mushrifeen*), with the job of monitoring loyalty and compliance among less committed tribal elements of the group's coalition.²⁹ Ansarallah leaders have also been successful in establishing deep-rooted coalitions with northern tribes through intermarriage. The al-Houthi clan's roots are in the *Sayyid* class, but they have married extensively into important tribal families and many of the group's key leaders are from non-*Sayyid* tribal families.



Ma'rib Governorate Locals.

Source: [https://commons.wikimedia.org/wiki/File:Ma%27rib_Locals_\(2286622268\).jpg](https://commons.wikimedia.org/wiki/File:Ma%27rib_Locals_(2286622268).jpg)

Still, many tribes or tribal factions on the periphery of the Ansarallah coalition, sometimes called "Houthiized" tribes, do not share the ideological fervor of Ansarallah's core and are instead driven by more parochial concerns.³⁰ After seizing control of Sana'a, Ansarallah created a "tribal honor document," which "imposed tribal taxation and explicitly obliged the tribes to provide fighters for the war"; in 2018, they established the General Authority for Tribal Affairs "to monitor the actions of tribal sheikhs in support of the Tribal Cohesion Council."³¹ Ansarallah leaders consistently emphasize the group's commitment to Yemeni tribal nationalism rhetorically and through displays of tribal identity, such as carrying a traditional dagger (*jambiya*) or wearing distinguishing garments associated with tribal culture. Ansarallah's military power is itself a combination of tribal

^b Ali Abdullah Saleh, who as president was Ansarallah's sworn enemy and led the fight against the group throughout the 2000s, allied with Ansarallah in 2014 and played a key role in facilitating their takeover of Sana'a in September of that year. Saleh, however, was killed by Ansarallah gunmen in late 2017 based on suspicion that he intended to shift his allegiance toward the IRG and Saudi Arabia. In the aftermath, some of Saleh's family members established their own splinter faction, with support from both the UAE and Saudi Arabia.

former GPC operatives, Western-oriented intellectuals, northern highland tribes opposed to Ansarallah, tribal and clan militias from Shabwah and Abyan Governorates, tribes from Marib Governorate and the Upper Hadhramaut, and members of the Islah Party.^{33, c} Managing the expansive tent under which its allies operate has been difficult for Saudi Arabia.³⁴ The Islah Party, for instance, is believed to have its own political program, and in the key

IRG strongholds of Marib and Taiz, Islah's dominance has created resentment among some of the IRG's local tribal allies. Southerners within the IRG, especially in Aden, resent Islah for its role after the 1994 Civil War. The commitment of many IRG components to an Islah-led government is often contingent on the nature of relations with Ansarallah and affiliated tribes from nearby areas. Ansarallah has exploited this friction by using tribal reconciliation mechanisms to peel support from the IRG, especially in areas where Islah has monopolized power at the expense of non-Islah tribes. Those most committed to a nominally liberal-democratic, unitary federal state in Yemen that is embedded in the international community, are likely to include members of the extensive Yemeni diaspora; elites from the landed, technocratic, and intellectual classes; and figures with strong links to Saudi Arabia. Most of the IRG's tribal supporters are driven more by concerns linked to resource access and the tribal balance of power than a

[illegible]

Source: CIA, https://legacy.lib.utexas.edu/maps/middle_east_and_asia/yemen_admin_2012.jpg

commitment to the IRG's *Statehood Narrative*.^d

Kinship alliances and networks are fluid and dynamic, constantly presenting actors with opportunities for exploitation. Tribal patronage networks require attention and often entail the provision of regular stipends, government jobs, or other revenue sources to a local leader, who is then able to gain community support through their dispensation. Tribal or community leaders must therefore be able to provide community members with protection, social status, and/or material goods. While leadership may be inherited or otherwise derived from tradition, new leaders may be created or rehabilitated based on their willingness to enter into an alliance or coalition with a particular patron.

For years, Saudi Arabia has provided regular monthly stipends to many Yemeni tribal leaders in exchange for political support.³⁵ Since 2014, the provision of weapons and ammunition to tribal militias has become a key patronage mechanism employed by all foreign backers. Key actors in Yemen have sought to revive exiled leaders from the vast Yemeni diaspora in attempts to recreate past patronage networks. Tribal allegiances and patronage networks can be fickle. As one Arab sociologist phrased it, loyalty is not bought but rather rented.³⁶

d Furthermore, UAE-backed groups within the IRG regularly take actions that undermine the authority and legitimacy of the IRG, most notably in controlling territory and monopolizing resources in certain areas of the south. In addition to the STC, UAE-backed groups include tribal groups and networks from coastal Hadhramaut; militias from various southern areas and cities known as "Security Belt" and "Elite" forces; and a smattering of tribal "Salafist" militias from across former south Yemen, most notably the Giants Brigades. Many of these Emirati-backed groups have adversarial relations with particular IRG factions, often those associated with Islah.

FL4: The Political Economy of Conflict

Yemen’s ongoing conflict has exacerbated existing trends of growing poverty, scarcity, and environmental degradation. The conflict has “disrupted markets and institutions and destroyed social and economic infrastructure, while inequalities have sharply increased.”³⁷ Yemen’s aquifers have been steadily depleted in recent decades and water scarcity has become a main cause of preventable diseases in both urban and rural areas. Environmental threats and natural resource scarcity notwithstanding, food and water insecurity in Yemen has been largely due to human activities, including embargos, extensive laying of landmines, destruction of basic infrastructure, and other actions meant to weaken political opponents. Qat, a water-needy plant whose leaf acts as a stimulant when chewed, is one of the few cash crops available for impoverished Yemeni farmers to grow. Its already high demand has increased during the ongoing conflict; according to one claim, most agricultural land in the north is used for qat rather than food crops.³⁸ Yemen’s population continues to grow while basic infrastructure and institutions, from clinics to schools, have been destroyed and eroded by conflict. Desertification is increasing due to climate variability, drought, and sandstorms, putting further pressure on agricultural activity.³⁹ The severity of these environmental and human security challenges varies across different parts of Yemen, but acute situations are widespread. Meanwhile, Yemen’s key economic institutions have been either destroyed, degraded, or divided between areas of control. Yemen effectively has two central banks and two currencies. The Yemeni military has also split into various factions, with both Ansarallah and the IRG claiming to control the bulk of the former government’s forces.

The conflict has transformed the Yemeni economy into a complex tangle of war-related activities. Despite the national-level conflict and competition, at local levels some form of economic equilibrium has been reached.⁴⁰ This equilibrium entails a semi-anarchic system of “mini-states” in conflict with one another but across which goods flow to mutual benefit. Qat and weapons are key goods that flow relatively seamlessly

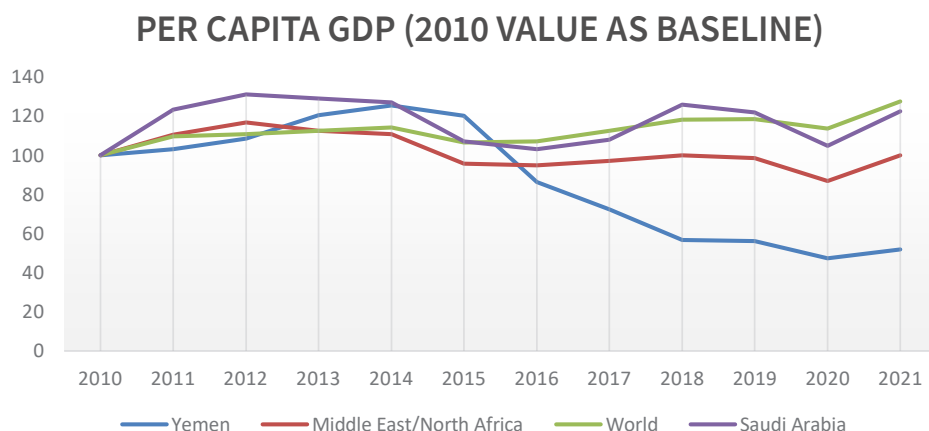


Figure 8: Global Per Capita GDP, GCKN.

Source: World Bank Data Bank.

FL4: Exploitable Conditions



Illicit Networks



Economic Inequalities



Environmental Threats



Infrastructure Deficits



Resource Scarcity



Demographic Pressures

across lines of control, and the networks transporting them often transcend political, tribal, and religious divisions. The smuggling of Iranian weapons from eastern Yemen to Sana'a and Saada, for instance, has created a convergence of interests among groups that are neither allied nor necessarily sympathetic to one another's political program. Attempts to disrupt smuggling networks, establish new ones, or revive older ones can lead marginalized elites to potentially seek cover under a different quasi-government umbrella. Saudi attempts to control smuggling in al-Mahrah Governorate, for instance, have faced pushback from smugglers who see local competitors as seeking to supplant them with foreign help. The lucrative nature of smuggling has created a network of parties interested in preserving smuggling routes and preventing centralized regulation of trade. The demand for weapons, ammunition, and military equipment has provided external actors willing to circumvent international prohibitions with an easy entry point through which to gain influence in Yemen, specifically by arming groups and standing up militias.

The Political Economy of Conflict has created an environment ripe with opportunities for exploitation and incentives to perpetuate conflict. Without alternative economic structures available, young men continue to be driven toward war-related livelihoods, whether as fighters, smugglers, or supporters of local militias. The Saudi blockade and Ansarallah's political and social repression "have left the Yemeni population with few other options for regular employment" beyond war-related activities.⁴¹ This makes Yemen likely to remain in conflict for the foreseeable future while the possibility of humanitarian or ecological disasters looms. Ansarallah in particular has exploited difficult conditions by cultivating a narrative in which disasters are attributed to the actions of external entities. COVID-19, for instance, was summarily described as "a U.S. biological weapon"⁴² by the group, while the spread of poverty, famine and disease across the country is almost exclusively attributed to the Saudi embargo.

Man enjoying his qat in Sana'a, Yemen, January 2009.
Source: https://commons.wikimedia.org/wiki/File:Qat_man.jpg



Exploitation of Yemen's Fault Lines

Domestic and external parties have exploited and will continue to exploit Yemen's four key fault lines. The list of actors involved or potentially involved in this exploitation is extensive and includes key factions among the national-level coalitions (Ansarallah, IRG, STC); regional powers deeply involved in Yemen over the past decade (Iran, Saudi Arabia, UAE); global powers seeking geopolitical advantage through Yemen (Russia and China); and transnational radical ideologues (ISIS and al-Qaeda).

Domestic elites have exploited Yemen's various fault lines with the goal of achieving political power in the post-Saleh era. They have exploited **Fault Line 1, Statehood Narratives**, to position their coalitions as legitimate contenders for national-level power. Zaydi elites marginalized by the Saleh regime, including many *Sayyid* families, have rallied around the Houthi clan and the proto-imamate *Statehood Narrative* to regain some of their lost political and economic clout. Islah Party leaders and Saleh-era elites, meanwhile, have effectively latched on to the reformist IRG *Statehood Narrative* to maintain their privileged position. Southern political networks that once held power over the independent state of South Yemen have, for their part, leveraged the Southern *Statehood Narrative* to improve their own political fortunes in the post-Saleh era. Domestic elites have also exploited **Fault Line 2, Religious Mobilization**, to undermine rival coalitions, curry favor with external backers, and establish networks that transcend tribal affiliation and patronage. Zaydi elites, Islah leaders, and Salafi activists have all been most effective in exploiting the power of *Religious Mobilization*. Yemeni political elites have also exploited **Fault Line 3, Kinship Networks and Alliances**, to sustain their coalitions—and weaken those of their opponents—at the grassroots level. Zaydi leaders in the northern highlands associated with the Houthis have done so with great success, as have the various regional, provincial, and local leaders who have managed to insert themselves into positions of influence within the IRG. Finally, Yemeni political elites have exploited **Fault Line 4, The Political Economy of Conflict**, to enrich themselves and strengthen their coalitions by providing access to scarce resources and recruiting fighters from among the destitute population. Political leaders with control over the domestic distribution of scarce goods, such as food and fuel, have profited from conflict-induced scarcity to bolster their own political and economic fortunes. For instance, networks controlling Hodeidah Port, the sole international import entry point into Ansarallah-controlled territory, benefit materially and politically from the status quo. Local leaders controlling key nodes in Yemen's smuggling networks, especially those along land and maritime borders, similarly benefit from the persistence of the conflict economy. The exploitation of all four fault lines by domestic elites, in sum, is a self-perpetuating activity through which local elites improve their own political and economic position but reduce the chances of durable national-level political stability.

Regional powers Saudi Arabia, Iran, and the UAE have all exploited Yemen's fault lines in a quest for geopolitical advantage. Iran has arguably done so most deftly by exploiting *Statehood Narratives* and *Religious Mobilization* in a way that furthers Iran's own foreign

policy goals. Iran has also exploited *The Political Economy of Conflict* to flood Yemen with military assistance that has allowed Ansarallah to control much of North Yemen despite the prolonged Saudi military campaign. Saudi Arabia, for its part, has for years successfully exploited Yemeni *Kinship Networks and Alliances* to remain on friendly terms with the population from Yemen's northern highlands, particularly those living in areas near the border with Saudi Arabia. Ansarallah's control of this area has eroded the impact of Saudi influence networks, but the kingdom's deep pockets and cross-border kinship connections make this fault line a powerful and persistent lever of influence. Saudi Arabia has also effectively exploited *Religious Mobilization* since the 1970s, facilitating and encouraging the spread of Wahhabism throughout Yemen, particularly Saada Governorate. Since 2011, though, Saudi exploitation of *Religious Mobilization* has been a double-edged sword, providing it with a base of motivated allies in the Islah Party while at the same time making it harder to sustain a coalition that also includes groups opposed to Political Islam. The UAE, meanwhile, has effectively exploited the Southern *Statehood Narrative* to prevent the Saudi-backed Islah from seizing power; this has, however, weakened the IRG by fracturing southern support and preventing central control of key resources. In addition, the UAE has effectively exploited *The Political Economy of Conflict* to establish allied militias and gain influence, in some cases control, of strategic Yemeni territory that is theoretically under IRG control but in practice held by Emirati allies and proxies.

Russia and China have only been marginally involved in the exploitation of Yemen's fault lines, though both countries recognize the area's strategic importance and have sought to establish military footholds in nearby, less complex terrain—China at its base in Djibouti and Russia through ongoing negotiations to establish a base on Sudan's Red Sea coast. As members of the UN Security Council, both Russia and China can exploit Fault Line 1, *Statehood Narratives*, by conferring or withholding recognition of the entities representing the various statehood models. Although both countries officially recognize the IRG as the legitimate government of a unified Yemen, they pursue "conservative and nuanced foreign policies" that

hedge by cultivating positive relationships with all key domestic factions, while refraining from involvement in internal Yemeni security issues.⁴³ This policy of strategic diversification is reflected at the regional level, where Russia and China enjoy good relations with Iran, Saudi Arabia, and the UAE. Relationships with powerful regional states, particularly Saudi Arabia, are likely to guide Russia's and China's Yemen policies for the time being. Despite the alignment of their anti-U.S. narratives with Ansarallah's "anti-imperialism," Russia and China are likely to calibrate their actions to ensure they do not upset existing relations with Saudi Arabia and the UAE.⁴⁴ Thus, Yemen remains a "penny stock" for Russia and China, a place where minor resource investments are made to humiliate or embarrass the United States but no major commitments should be expected.⁴⁵ Indeed, their most consequential exploitation of Yemen's instability may be the employment of diplomatic and informational tools to drive a wedge between the United States and Saudi Arabia. The emergent Saudi narrative of the United States as an untrustworthy partner in Yemen provides both countries with a potent informational tool, especially as it also allows them to indirectly highlight and extol Ansarallah's military prowess, which is almost exclusively based on the use of non-NATO weaponry.

China is unlikely to emerge as a more active exploiter of Yemen's fault lines unless the country becomes a more stable investment environment. However, China could seek to establish links with subnational domestic elites that control key resources or territory, given the persistence and increasing entrenchment of the wartime economy. China is already exploiting Yemen's war economy, even if indirectly, by providing Iranian entities with components for key weapons systems supplied to Ansarallah, particularly UAVs.⁴⁶ Chinese light weapons are abundant in Yemen, and it is unlikely that the Chinese government is unaware of the pathways through which these arms flow into the country.⁴⁷ According to the UN Panel of Experts, these weapons come to Yemen via Iran, while electronic components used in Iranian weapons designs arrive through various intermediary countries.⁴⁸ China may also seek to negotiate for control over Yemeni natural resources, including energy and mineral deposits, as well as access to or control over

ports. Yemen's location provides a convenient maritime link from East Asia to the Mediterranean, which could eventually turn it into a flashpoint in the context of Chinese efforts to establish dominance over this trade route, via the One Belt One Road Initiative. China maintains strong and deepening relations with both Saudi Arabia and the UAE, making it likely that Chinese influence in Yemen for now would come through either or both countries. With China especially interested in the region's maritime trade potential and the UAE seeking to become a regional logistics hub, growing Emirati-Chinese relations could well acquire a Yemeni component in the future, particularly given the UAE's influence in Yemen's Red and Arabian Sea ports.

Global jihadist and other radical Sunni actors historically target areas with weak central governments, large rural Sunni populations, and mountainous or otherwise complex topography. Yemen has all three of these elements, and jihadists—particularly those affiliated with ISIS and al-Qaeda—may again seek to exploit Yemen's fault lines to establish havens in Yemen's communally governed, predominantly Sunni, remote mountainous terrain. At present, the depth of Saudi and Emirati involvement in Yemen crowds out such actors, but jihadist groups may still seek opportunities to exploit the various fault lines to their advantage. While Sunni *Religious Mobilization* remains diffuse in Yemen, the possibility remains for greater unity among mobilized Sunni groups in the future. The fine line that distinguishes the three key Sunni groups often identified in Yemen—Islah, Salafists, and Salafi jihadists—provides an opportunity for ideological actors to weave between these different categories according to political expediency. Thus, former AQAP militants may rebrand as non-jihadist Salafists without making major ideological sacrifices, and quickly go from being adversaries to allies of the Gulf countries, even if only temporarily.⁴⁹

Risk Assessment

Based on this analysis, we suggest several competitive scenarios that could impact regional stability:^e

Implication 1 | China, Russia Deepen Regional Influence via Yemen

Russia and China deepen their involvement in Yemen in order to gain increased regional influence.

MODERATE RISK
LIKELY and CRITICAL

Expected Likelihood	7.4
Expected Consequence	6.3

Implication 2 | Events in Yemen Strengthen Iran, Upend Gulf Security Architecture

Regional involvement continues to prolong Yemen war and shifts Gulf security architecture in Iran's favor.

MODERATE RISK
HIGHLY LIKELY and CRITICAL

Expected Likelihood	7.8
Expected Consequence	7.3

Implication 3 | Conditions Allow for Birth, Expansion, or Renewal of Sunni Violent Extremist Organizations

Yemen becomes a base for transnational jihadists to attack U.S. regional interests.

MODERATE RISK
EVEN CHANCE and MODERATE

Expected Likelihood	6.1
Expected Consequence	5.5

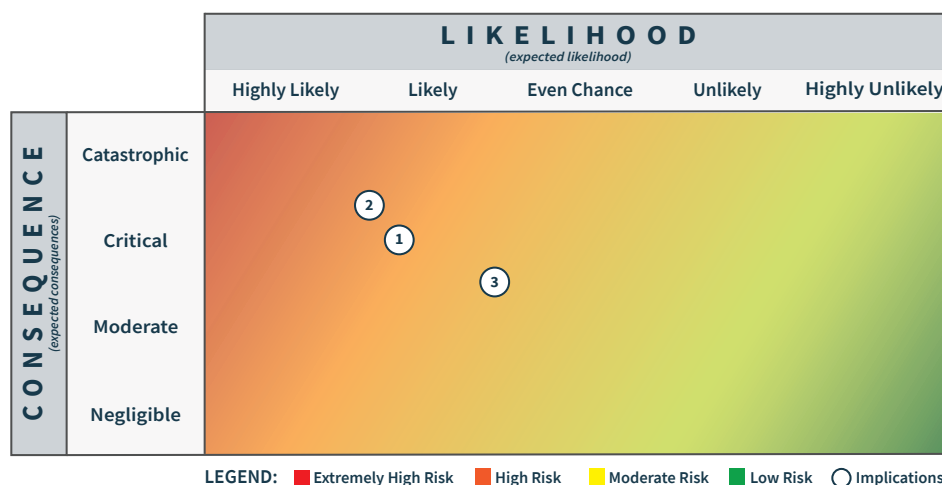


Figure 9. *Likelihood and Consequence Matrix*, GCKN.

^e The following assessments are based on input and scores provided by various Yemen Subject Matter Experts consulted by GCKN.

Implications of the Fault Lines for the U.S. Army

Yemen is of strategic importance to the United States primarily due to its location at the southern edge of the Arabian Peninsula, next to Saudi Arabia—the world’s largest oil producer—and along Bab El Mandeb, a key global maritime chokepoint. Yemeni actors could induce a shock the global economy, whether by attacking Saudi oil infrastructure or interdicting maritime traffic across Bab El Mandeb. Ansarallah’s possession of advanced Iranian weaponry, including aerial and naval drones and a variety of precision-guided munitions, may soon put this capability within the group’s reach. Yemen’s rural, mountainous terrain provides Ansarallah with a near-impenetrable topographical and sociocultural fortress. The complexity of Yemen’s physical and human terrain makes it a particularly challenging operational environment for the U.S. Army. Sunni jihadist ideologues have described it “as a near ideal jihadi sanctuary” due to “its large rural population, rugged terrain, [and] highly independent tribes.”⁵⁰

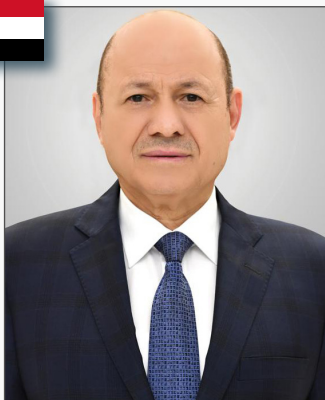
The conflict in Yemen has strained the U.S. partnership with both Saudi Arabia and the UAE, insofar as both countries have openly criticized the extent of U.S. security support related to Yemen. Saudi Arabian media outlets were especially vocal in their criticism of U.S. strategic partnership in the wake of Ukraine-related tensions and a series of drone and missile attacks by Ansarallah against Saudi oil infrastructure. The Saudi-led campaign in Yemen has been politically divisive, with some considering that the “incompetence of Saudi Arabia and U.S. disconnect from the region”⁵¹ has empowered Iran and its allies. The importance of managing these security partnerships is an added challenge in this complex environment.

The Yemeni conflict has occurred at the intersection of two distinct levels of post-Arab Spring regional competitive dynamics, one between Saudi Arabia and Iran and the other between the UAE and Political Islam movements supported by Qatar and Turkey. The key regional competitive dynamic affecting events in Yemen is Saudi-Iranian competition, typified by the IRG-Ansarallah dichotomy. At the same time, Emirati efforts to contain the influence of Muslim Brotherhood-linked parties supported by Turkey and Qatar has also exerted strong influence in Yemen. Thus, the UAE and Saudi Arabia have approached the Yemeni battlefield with different objectives and different means of achieving them over the past decade, despite being allies in the Saudi-led campaign against Ansarallah. Saudi Arabia’s focus has been on empowering the IRG to defeat Ansarallah and by extension weaken Iran. For the UAE, the key focus has been on limiting the influence of Islah and other groups associated with Sunni Political Islam, while at the same time expanding the Emirati economic footprint by controlling strategic infrastructure and terrain. These competing priorities have been further complicated by the role of Qatar, which began as a member of the Saudi-led coalition fighting in Yemen but was expelled and put under embargo by both Saudi Arabia and the UAE, in part due to Qatar-sponsored media coverage of Yemen, which was sympathetic to Islah and critical of Emirati policies. During the embargo, Qatari media tone toward Emirati policies in Yemen became even more strident, adding to tensions within the IRG.

THREE QUASI-GOVERNMENTS



Abdul-Malik al-Houthi
Houthi Movement Leader
(2010 - present)



Rashid al-Alimi
*Head of the Internationally
Recognized Government*
Presidential Leadership Council
(2022 - present)



Aidarus Abdulaziz al-Zoubaidi
*Southern Transitional Council
President*
(2018 - present)

Ongoing changes in regional strategic priorities could have an impact on the Yemeni battlefield. The end of the Qatar embargo in 2021 signaled Qatari-Emirati rapprochement, with potential consequences in Yemen. In December 2020, a national unity government including representation from both the IRG and the STC was established, but it was plagued by ineffectiveness and infighting; in early 2022, the UN Panel of Experts still described the situation between the IRG and the STC as “tense.”⁵² A ceasefire for the holy month of Ramadan went into effect in early April, and shortly thereafter longtime IRG President Hadi was forced aside and replaced by an eight-man “Presidential Council” that theoretically represented all Saudi and Emirati-backed factions in Yemen. Although these developments have been greeted with optimism, key differences among the various factions unified under the IRG are likely to remain, in large part the result of the different ways in which Yemen’s various fault lines have been exploited in recent years.

Sunni Violent Extremist Organizations (VEOs), such as AQAP and ISIS, remain active in Yemen, though their capabilities have been substantially degraded in recent years. Nonetheless, numerous factors may help perpetuate these groups’ resilience and potential for renewal: the confluence of interests between VEOs and the Saudi-led coalition as a result of a shared enemy in Ansarallah;⁵³ the divisive effects of exploiting Mobilized Religion;⁵⁴ the potential collapse of the tribal system, which would lead to a security vacuum that VEOs would seek to fill;⁵⁵ the perceived failures of U.S. counterterrorism policy;⁵⁶ the recruitment boost created by Ansarallah advances the prospects of an independent southern state;⁵⁷ and the fine line between VEOs and Salafi militias,⁵⁸ which could see mercenary Salafist militias becoming more ideologically motivated and bringing “relatively advanced tactics and weapons systems” to newly reconstituted VEOs.⁵⁹ At the same time, the implications for the United States may not be what they once were, given that not only are Yemen’s Sunni VEOs at present focused on internal matters,⁶⁰ but they conceive of Iran and its proxies as their key existential threat; the United States is no longer seen as the hegemon/threat that it was in the 1990s and 2000s.⁶¹

Conclusion

Yemen's internal divisions and the Saudi-led interventions have created a seemingly intractable crisis. Yemen is experiencing a series of overlapping and self-reinforcing dynamics that may well converge to create even greater turbulence than that of the preceding decade, especially if the effects of environmental degradation become more acute. The fault lines outlined in this report are enduring potential sources of instability and result from Yemen's current sociocultural conditions combining and hardening. Opportunistic actors will exploit these complex conditions for political advantage, primarily through the exploitation of these sociocultural fault lines.

Given the fragmented nature of contemporary Yemen, it is natural that *Statehood Narratives* are a key fulcrum along which various parties seek to gain advantage over one another. Ansarallah and its Iranian partners have arguably been the most effective of the factions in harnessing Yemen's fault lines in the service of their *Statehood Narrative*, bringing together a comprehensive vision in which religion, tribalism, and perpetual conflict can coexist and present a modicum of stability under the group's watchful

eye. The contrast with the IRG is significant when viewed expansively to include all Emirati-backed groups; the IRG is unable to harness Yemen's other fault lines in the service of its *Statehood Narrative* because it lacks a coherent *Statehood Narrative* of its own, since it is little more than an umbrella organization for a diverse range of competing actors.

Fault lines are not static, and Yemen is constantly evolving. Although the four fault lines identified in this study have, to some degree, been a regular feature of Yemen for the past half-century, changes in the broader OE may give rise to new fault lines or change the nature of existing fault lines. Given the number of exploitable conditions present in Yemen, domestic and external actors will continue seeking to exploit these sociocultural fault lines for their political advantage. As a result, Yemen will remain a challenging strategic arena where neglecting or misinterpreting socio-cultural particularities can easily lead to costly oversights when formulating national security policy or military operations.



Research Methodology

Modified Grounded Theory

Analytic judgements in this Fault Line series are grounded in select social science research techniques comprising a specific methodology developed by GCKN social scientists. This process occurs in phases, relying on GCKN's Exploitable Conditions Framework, open-source research, scholarly literature, and vetted subject matter experts in the region of study. The methodology is a combination of multiple data analysis procedures fused with a rigorous co-creation process.

At GCKN, this co-creation involves fusing expertise from social scientists, defense community researchers, geographic information system specialists, intelligence analysts and, most importantly, GCKN's subject matter expertise (SME) network—the cornerstone of the GCKN's methodology. Many of these SMEs contribute under condition of anonymity to preserve working relationships in the region of interest, and so are listed in the notes by assigned numbers, rather than by name. While GCKN conducts the bulk of the research and writing, the methodology systematically guides input from regional experts to ensure maximum validity of the judgments.

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