YEMEN OFFERS LESSONS AT DIFFERENT SCALES
By Stacey Philbrick Yadav, Hobart and William Smith Colleges

In August 2005, I casually informed a Yemeni official with whom I was friends that I was planning to travel to Aden without papers. After waiting for months in Sana'a for a travel permit that would allow me to leave the capital, I was frustrated and worried I was reaching the limit of what I could learn from the same people at the same *qat* chews. Traveling without a permit meant that I would have to travel by bus—I would not be able to buy a plane ticket, and a private car would be stopped at every checkpoint. Instead, a fellow graduate student—an American man whose project differed from mine and who had been able to secure an almost (but not entirely) unrestricted permit—could buy two bus tickets and we could gamble that when the bus was stopped, no one would ask him questions about his respectfully *abaya*-clad traveling companion. Acknowledging that the government was not going to issue me permission to talk to members of the opposition outside of Sana'a, my Yemeni official friend nonetheless procured for me a pseudo-legitimate permit just in case. If it were held up next to the real thing, the differences would be clear. Over the course of the day-long bus trip, however, we were stopped a few times, but I was never questioned directly. By the time we arrived in Aden, I had a growing confidence in my ability to circumvent what I saw as politically-motivated restrictions. Until, of course, I tried to use my pseudo papers to check in to a hotel.

This episode shows the kind of mundane ways in which research is structured and shaped by identity, politics, and encounters with and evasion of officialdom, highlighting methodological issues that have shaped and will continue to shape academic research on Yemen. In part because of research conditions themselves, understanding the politics of Yemen is challenging and inevitably partial, in both senses of the term.[1] Political scientists who write about Yemen have also often adopted an ethnographic approach, whether by disposition or by necessity. Most frame their claims in terms of a particular region, subnational group, or issue area, knowing that there will be other parts of the country, or other groups to which their claims cannot extend. Certainly, this was true when there were two Yemens, North and South, but it also characterized the literature on "unified" Yemen, and remains the case today, as a four-year civil war has fragmented both Yemen and Yemenis' shared sense of political community.

Yet our discipline places overwhelming value on the generalizable, meaning that Yemen scholars' tendency to focus on the particular, the local, and the contingent in a single case has surely contributed to Yemen's peripherality in the literature on Middle East politics and in the discipline as a whole. This should not be the case. The politics of Yemen, and most especially the politics of the current war, raise questions that, if

taken seriously, could enrich the practices of political science at four scales: theoretical, methodological, ethical, and political. These challenges are interlinked, but distinct.

THEORY: RETHINKING IDENTITIES AND THE IMPLICATIONS OF FRAMING

Theoretically, engaging with Yemeni politics should push political scientists to think about what we know and what we think we know about the nature of identity and the relationship between groups, individuals, and institutions. Most anyone who talks about Yemeni politics will cite Lisa Wedeen's 2008 *Peripheral Visions,* but fewer seem to have seriously reckoned with her arguments about the way Yemenis articulate identities or how "contemporary claims to group affiliation are beholden to the institutional and discursive legacies that shape possibilities for political action."[2] That her claims are made in a way that can initially seem hyperparticular to Yemen should not lead to the impression that its politics are in some way exceptional or inscrutable. Instead, they should be read as both a substantive part of the argument and a lesson at a theoretical scale. Engaging them seriously could help move scholars from blunt and reductive descriptions of Yemen's war and "identity politics" toward a focus on practices of persuasive story-telling about belonging, in which we ask "what kinds of stories inspire persons to embrace certain senses of imagined political community, [or] memberships in particular political peoples."[3] While there are many good reasons to view belonging as both particular and contingent, it is particularly helpful in helping us to think about how and why people and groups *change*.

One apt illustration of this approach comes from a subject close to my own research: the politics of Yemen's largest Islamist organization, Islah. I am often at a loss when asked to comment on what

Islah has been doing during the war. On the one hand, it is a straightforward question: like most other members of the displaced cabinet of President 'Abd Rabbuh Mansour Hadi, Islah leaders left the country in Yemen in 2015, headed to Riyadh, and have supported the war to restore Hadi to power from afar. Yet other prominent Islahis have been abducted and killed by Houthis, have been detained, tortured, or killed in secret prisons run by Saudi Arabia's coalition partner, the United Arab Emirates, have publicly criticized all sides in the war on humanitarian grounds, or have fled to Qatar, an adversary of the UAE and Saudi Arabia, where they write and speak publicly against the Coalition. This, surely, is an answer about *Islahis,* not Islah. And yet it is only through this mapping of the party's practical dissolution at the leadership level that I can more confidently argue that Islah should not be thought of as a party so much as a networked series of alliances pulling in diverse directions, a network that shows how the war is changing individuals and institutions, and a network that contributes to some of those changes.

Then there are armed groups that the media and some policy analysts describe as "Islahi militias." It is worth noting that political scientists are usually more circumspect in describing them only loosely as "Islah-aligned." Scholars' reticence to describe them as "Islahi militias" reflects the varied bases on which such militias are organized, including tribal and family solidarity, regional identity, the role of powerful individual leaders, and sometimes a religio-political or sectarian ideology. In other words, the relationship between party and militia is neither direct nor clear. Looking jointly at the eroding coherence of the Islah party at the leadership level and the diverse social bases of militias that carry this loose label, we might reasonably ask what it means to "be Islahi" in Yemen today. Surely it

does not mean what it did in the late 1990s, when student activists lobbied the administration and wrote editorials calling for the closure of a gender studies center at Sana'a University. Nor is it the same as when Islah joined with the Yemeni Socialist Party in 2006 to mount a joint campaign for the presidency in opposition to former President Saleh's authoritarian encroachment, or when that same alliance jointly boycotted the 2009 election because they could not agree among themselves on the status of women leaders in the party. To "be Islahi" in the current moment is also distinct from what it meant when a woman from Islah led crowds of protesters in Change Square in 2011, or when young members of Islah and the Houthi movement, now on opposite sides of a protracted civil war, participated on the same side in a public debate over the nature of the civil state in 2012. I do not offer these examples to make any claim about Islah itself, but to underscore those of other Yemen scholars that "claims to and experiences of group solidarity can both change over time and come and go quickly," and that "recognizing context and specificity does not require eschewing generalization."[4]

METHODOLOGY: NARROWING OPPORTUNITIES BUT NEW COLLABORATIONS

If political scientists working on Yemen are inclined to offer accounts that stress the theoretical significance of particularity and contingency, this move itself might be imbricated with the methodological challenge of working *in* Yemen. As the episode above only begins to illustrate, even before the war, researchers faced many restrictions on travel, which had a substantive effect on the types of methods that they could reasonably adopt. Prevailing practices of gender separation also posed a barrier to any kind of comprehensive account. Prior to the 1990s, this meant that the literature on Yemeni politics, produced almost exclusively by male

scholars, both reflected and perpetuated Yemeni women's marginalization, largely through the ways in which such research conceived of what counted as "public."[5] This shifted as more (foreign) women began to conduct research that capitalized on their ability to work with men and women alike.[6] But even with the promise of greater representation and broader access, travel restrictions, political surveillance, and a climate of insecurity have meant that most of the political science literature on Yemen in the past 20 years has been disproportionately focused on the politics of Yemen's major urban centers. In a country where more than 70 percent of the population lives outside of those urban centers, this too poses a challenge.

Under the current conditions of war, however, the picture is worse. The vast majority of scholarship on Yemen by political scientists is now conducted outside of Yemen. As the wider politics of the Gulf run through Yemen, some scholars have been able to conduct research on the war from adjacent locations in the MENA region. However, following the high-profile detention of researchers in the Gulf last year, many worry that they and/or their interview subjects will face similar risk.[7] Shifting focus to analysis of satellite and social media is a short-term solution for some kinds of research questions, perhaps, but does little to avoid the kind of partial and fragmented knowledge that already exists.[8] It also raises associated questions about "the effects of distance, boundaries, and scale on perceptions of events" in the context of political violence[9]

If an increase in foreign women researchers opened up the possibility of a better understanding of the roles of Yemeni women in political life in the 1990s and 2000s, the contributions of a growing number of Yemeni researchers has also improved the quality and

reach of scholarship on Yemen. Yet under the conditions of the current war (and, frankly, before as well), Yemeni scholars have been subject to harassment, suppression, and in some cases, even death. Today, the war has closed many Yemeni scholars off—both figuratively and literally—though social media has allowed for the continued dissemination of research, such as that conducted by the Yemen Polling Center.[10] A privately-run survey firm based in Sana'a, the YPC distributes its high-quality survey data related to many relevant features of the war in Yemen and produces essential data that will support sustainable post-war reconstruction. Transparent in its methodological practices and working to overcome the aforementioned limitations of Yemen's research environment by deploying mixed-gender teams in the communities where they already live, the YPC provides geographic range, gender representation, and social trust in an environment under significant strain. A recent Facebook post promoting a YPC working paper highlighted these commitments:

One of our female interviewers is conducting an interview with a resident in Amran in this picture. Our interviewers are all from the areas they work in to make sure they speak the same dialect as the interviewees and to build trust. This also gives them the necessary connections to negotiate with local authorities, if it becomes necessary. Half of our enumerators are women! This enables us to interview both genders equally.

#yemen #amran #ypc #polling #research #interview #middleeast #reform#advocacy #peace #salam #pollinginwartime

Yemeni scholars are also contributing to innovative forms of collaborative research. The Center for Applied Research in Partnership with the Orient, a research center based in Bonn, promotes and funds research by teams of Yemeni and foreign scholars working jointly on the requisites of peacebuilding.[11] This initiative is designed to "bridge the increasing academic isolation of Yemeni academics and the inaccessibility of Yemen to international researchers in light of the ongoing war in Yemen by bringing both sides together in joint research and publication efforts."[12]

ETHICS AND POLITICS: WHAT SPEAKING ABOUT YEMEN DOES

If collaboration has made it possible to address some of the methodological challenges of research on Yemen's war, it has not resolved all of the ethical questions the war raises about representation and overrepresentation. It is a gross understatement to say that Yemenis living under a partial blockade for four years, or who are categorically banned from entering the United States struggle for self-representation to audiences outside of Yemen.

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When foreign scholars decide—as we inevitably must—which voices to amplify, which sources to cite, which Yemeni scholars to partner with, we have to be mindful of the potential effects of these choices on the people in question, on those whom we do not (and often cannot) amplify, and on the work itself. These questions are made acute by particular features of the war in Yemen like the Saudi-led blockade, but the ways scholars respond to this challenge can both draw from and contribute to broader conversations about ethics in the field of political science.

Each of these three scales—the theoretical ways in which scholars conceive of identity, belonging, and institutional change; the methodological ways in which we study these questions in a fragmented

landscape and outside of it; and the ethical implications of those ways of knowing—intersect with what is a fundamentally political question. To what extent does (or should) scholarship on Yemeni politics also constitute an intervention in the politics of Yemen? The war in Yemen is one with local, regional, and international antagonists and the way the war is described by scholars (as a "proxy war," for example, or as a "sectarian conflict") has implications for the modes of conflict resolution that are pursued by policymakers who read our analyses. In this way, political scientists who study Yemen are in a bind: present too much complexity and Yemen will seem inscrutable; present too little and participate in a reductionism that cannot be intellectually supported. At this scale, the challenge feels most intractable.

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[1] Anne Norton. *95 Theses on Culture, Politics, and Method.* Yale University Press (2004), 59.

[2] Lisa Wedeen. *Peripheral Visions: Publics, Power, and Performance in Yemen.* University of Chicago Press (2008), 219.

[3] Rogers Smith. "The politics of identities and the tasks of political science." In *Problems and Methods in the Study of Politics,* edited by Rogers Smith, Ian Shapiro, and Tarek Masoud. Cambridge University Press (2004), 61. For a discussion of the normative dimensions of distinguishing identity from identification, see Amartya Sen, *Identity and Violence: The Illusion of Destiny.* W.W. Norton (2006).

[4] Wedeen, *Peripheral Visions,* 216.

[5] Stacey Philbrick Yadav. 2010. "Segmented Publics and Islamist Women in Yemen: Rethinking Space and Activism." *Journal of Middle East Women's Studies* 6 (2):1-30. My own argument against conceiving of women's spaces as outside of the public is indebted to a very tough lesson learned during fieldwork through the intervention of a particularly patient Yemeni mentor. This experience is recounted in "Ethnography Is an Option: Learning to Learn In/Through Practice," in *Political Science Research in the Middle East and North Africa: Methodological and Ethical Challenges,* edited by Janine A. Clark and Francesco Cavatorta. Oxford University Press (2018), 166-167.

[6] Jillian Schwedler. 2006. "The Third Gender: Western Women Researchers in the Middle East." *PS: Political Science and Politics* 39 (3):425-428.

[7] Following Matthew Hedges' detention and prior to his conviction (and eventual pardoning) by the United Arab Emirates, for example, the Middle East Studies Association's Committee on Academic Freedom issued a statement on research conditions in the UAE that moved beyond objections specific to the Hedges case. https://mesana.org/news/2018/11/15/press-release-on-deteriorating-security-conditions-for-researchers-in-the-united-arab-emirates

[8] Elizabeth Monier. "Online Media as Research Topic and Research Tool: Fact, Fiction, and Facebook," in *Political Science Research in the Middle East and North Africa: Methodological and Ethical Challenges,* edited by Janine A. Clark and Francesco Cavatorta. Oxford University Press (2018), 208-217.

[9] Sarah Parkinson. "Seeing Beyond the Spectacle: Research on and Adjacent to Violence," in *Political Science Research in the Middle East and North Africa: Methodological and Ethical Challenges,* edited by Janine A. Clark and Francesco Cavatorta. Oxford University Press (2018), 81.

[10] http://www.yemenpolling.org/consultancy/about.php

[11] https://carpo-bonn.org/en/

[12] Facebook post, CARPO director, Marie-Christine Heinze, March 5 2019.