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Revolution, War and Transformations in Yemeni Studies

Laurent Bonnefoy *In: 301 (Winter 2021)*

Almost twenty years ago, Sheila Carapico made the case for the development of **Arabian Peninsula studies** as an alternative to the growing field of Gulf studies.

A wider regional approach, she argued, would better highlight the numerous connections and flows between Yemen and the six monarchies of the Peninsula.^[1] Such a framework is as relevant now as it was then. For example, since 2015, the military intervention in Yemen's civil war by a Saudi-led coalition has brutally embodied the notion of intraregional entanglement at the level of the Arabian Peninsula. Progress toward a wider scholarly approach has been slow and driven by circumstance more than intellectual commitment and self-reflexive thinking. While few academics or research projects have deliberately followed Carapico's invitation, changes in knowledge production suggest that research on Yemen is increasingly informed by a Peninsular-wide framing.

Shifting contours of knowledge production on and in the region are at least partially a matter of funding. Budget lines are frequently channeled by the monarchies themselves, as well as by the oil and armament industries, through the establishment of academic chairs and centers that have helped **construct the "Gulf"** as a coherent space over the last four decades. Narratives surrounding **the Gulf as an exception** remain prevalent: Allegedly, this "club" of wealthy Arab monarchies exists in a class of its own, largely shaped by modernist infrastructures, neoliberal policies and overwhelmingly cosmopolitan societies. This approach ends

up sidelining Yemen, which is positioned as an imagined antithesis of the well-ordered space of the six monarchies.^[2] The Gulf monarchies contributed even more directly to the externalization of Yemen (as well as Iraq and Iran) through their repeated efforts to block its membership in the Gulf Cooperation Council (GCC). The Arab uprisings of 2011—opposed by the monarchies (with the notable exception of Qatar) and gradually subdued by counterrevolutionary forces—also set Yemen apart when its authoritarian ruler, Ali Abdallah Salih, was ousted in February 2012, due to months of largely peaceful mobilization. The books, projects, papers and articles on Yemen published in recent years are a continuous reminder that Yemen does not lie in a remote corner but interacts with the wider world in creative and, at times surprising, ways. Examining the transformations of knowledge production on Yemen over the course of the past decade brings up the question of how the war—as opposed to revolution and other social and political dynamics—became the predominant lens through which Yemen is understood and how scholars and observers have responded to or resisted this framing. Despite (and perhaps partially because of) the war, humanitarian catastrophe and international indifference since 2015, Yemen's interdependence has become increasingly evident to researchers and is reflected in new forms of **transnational research**.

Creative Shifts in Scholarship on Yemen

Many Yemenis and other experts or researchers working on Yemen frequently highlight the fact that it is overlooked, treated as a mere pawn in broader regional interests by decision makers, journalists and other observers who repeatedly frame Yemen as a security threat. The shortcomings of knowledge production on Yemen are real, yet the recent evolution of scholarship, linked to the changing national or international context as well as internal

debates between researchers and experts, is worthy of study. Even during the war that started in 2015, constructive approaches to research have not disappeared, although they operate now in a different mode and are constrained by specific dilemmas. Scholarship on Yemen in the early 2000s was much more innovative than what was published elsewhere in the Peninsula at that time. It rarely intersected with Gulf Studies and was built upon the works of anthropologists and historians such as Robert Serjeant and Hussein al-Amri who had focused on Yemeni society for decades and provided data and analysis that is still influential. Innovative approaches emerged, in large part, because of the latitude the Yemeni state granted to researchers—through a lack of capacity or a lack of interest in regulating such research. Monographs on party politics, Islamist movements and the repression of activists and specific groups in civil society were published in different languages without systematically generating the kind of crackdowns that were prevalent elsewhere in the region.

During the 2011 uprising, many scholars adopted the method of participant observation to analyze mobilizations, with which they were often sympathetic. Their engagement transformed research and set a new tone that was filled with enthusiasm and discussions of “civil state,” gender, minorities, art and activism—all topics that were not seen as relevant elsewhere on the Peninsula. New forms of knowledge production linked to donor-led projects, as much as ones launched in disciplinary and academic frameworks, shaped perceptions and tended to set Yemen apart from the rest of the region.

The period following the 2011 uprising or “Yemeni spring” was thus one of great dynamism in which both academic researchers and policy experts attempted to bring to the fore features of Yemen’s experience that set it apart from GCC countries and those that were connected to broader regional dynamics. This period also saw the emergence of a new generation of scholars—an increasing number of whom were born in Yemen—with greater

access to the field. Yet Yemeni academics and intellectuals, particularly those who have published largely in Arabic, have too often seen their analyses insufficiently valued by their international colleagues. Before the beginning of the conflict, notable exceptions included **Muhammad al-Mutawakkil**, a professor of political science at Sana'a University who was assassinated in 2014, or before him 'Abdullah al-Baraduni and Raufa Hasan who became influential figures within Yemen as well as among foreign scholars. These three Yemeni intellectuals, at the crossroads between academic and activist fields, all highlighted in their multiple publications—unfortunately seldom available outside of Yemeni bookshops and libraries—the importance of local knowledge in their work as well as the centrality of traditional identities and experiences that characterize Yemeni society (tribal genealogies, the role of poetry, religious identities). They also considered these features to be compatible with modernization, not in contrast to those processes, which is seen for example in al-Baraduni's encyclopedia of popular literature or al-Mutawakkil's exploration of the links between Islam and human rights.^[3]

Overcoming the Polarization of War

In the context of the war since 2015, the relative ignorance of Yemeni intellectual production among many experts (and some researchers) has recently been described by historian Isa Blumi as tantamount to “**speaking over Yemenis**,” or an expression of neo-colonial domination (albeit with little nuance since he lumps together a wide range of publications from academic work to think-tank papers). Some Yemeni analysts, like the Middle East Institute's Nadwa al-Dawsari, criticize foreign experts and academics who appear to be sympathetic to the Huthis and who consider the Saudi and Emirati military interventions in 2015 to be the main sources of Yemen's destruction. The fact that the war has rendered fieldwork for foreigners largely impossible has only

made these tensions more explicit. Accusations of either lack of objectivity or disinformation have become widespread.

Thus, **narratives** that have emerged in the context of the armed conflict and that either depict it as a proxy war, a sectarian one or as American-backed aggression against a Third World country are the object of increased controversy.

This polarization reveals how war has transformed research itself, generating certain dilemmas as well as imposing ethical and political commitments. The enthusiastic tone of papers written when young men and women took to the streets and challenged the autocratic rule of Ali Abdallah Salih and then gathered to imagine the political future of their country between 2011 and 2013 is now long gone. Elite rivalries, geopolitics and violence have become the more prevalent topics. Since 2015, specific agendas (focusing on peacebuilding and reconstruction in particular), vocabulary (such as famine, bombardments, sectarianism), images and methodologies (particularly ones that seek to map violence or militant and military structures) have reconfigured both expertise and research. Such approaches, spearheaded by some think tanks and foundations, are generating a new political economy of expertise that not all academic researchers accept. Some, more or less explicitly during recent academic conferences in Europe for example, believe that their participation entails too many compromises and clashes with their professional ethics since it risks turning them into “experts”—a category they disdain because of its connection to the world of mass media, think tanks and policy outlets. Others, however, understand that political statements and public outreach through engagement with the dominant agenda of think tanks and the media are part of their role as academics despite the fact that this necessitates some oversimplification and public and institutional exposure.

Such a transformation in the nature of research does not only affect foreigners. Over the course of the conflict, many Yemeni academics have left the country, searching for opportunities

abroad, as well as for protection, as universities have become contested spaces. They too are often deprived of access to the field and once out of the country have little opportunity to return, especially due to the closure of Sana'a airport and much of the north. Those who have stayed in Yemen frequently face pressure from the parties in conflict, have little access to financial resources and face legal constraints that limit their capacity to establish partnerships with institutions in Houthi-controlled areas. They too often remain under the radar of international research networks. Notable and important exceptions include recent online works by Ali al-Khuwlaqi on local history of Yafi', Bilkis Zabara on gender, Ahmad al-Daghshi, Bushra al-Maqtari and Maysa Shuja' al-Deen on Islamist movements, Abdulsalam al-Rubaidi on critical literature and Ali al-Jarbani on law.

Recent hybrid approaches to knowledge production seek to create links between Yemeni researchers, displaced Yemenis and foreign researchers with significant experience in the country. Initiatives like that of the Center for Applied Research in Partnership with the Orient (CARPO) based in Bonn, Germany, are funded mostly by European countries and institutions and promote research partnerships through transnational teams. Elevating the work of Yemeni researchers, although in a different, more directly applied way, for example through trainings and workshops for political actors, is also the ambition of think tanks like the Sanaa Center for Strategic Studies, Arabia Felix Studies and the Yemen Policy Center. These organizations have built impressive networks in just a few years. Translations of publications, for example into French by anthropologist Franck Mermier, are also important ways to make the voices of Yemenis heard in the academic field.

The war has encouraged a feeling of responsibility among those who became acquainted with Yemeni society before the conflict started. The fact that many Yemenis are now confronted with violence and humanitarian tragedy adds significant layers of emotion and subjectivity to the process of research, some of

which scholars have reckoned with **publicly**. For most, **abandoning Yemen** and switching permanently to another field was never really an option. A few years ago, during an annual peer evaluation carried out by my academic institution, the French Centre National de la Recherche Scientifique, I was advised to switch fields since Yemen was inaccessible to me. While I have developed a new project on Oman, I have not abandoned research on contemporary Yemen and am doing my best to continue engaging with the evolving (and frankly heart breaking) situation in a creative way.

Archaeologists and heritage specialists, like the late Mohanad al-Sayani, director of Yemeni antiquities, who passed away from COVID-19 in August 2020, are confronted with a specific kind of urgency. Destruction of historical sites through bombardments as well as intensive trafficking of artifacts have not only changed their tools (excavations are now impossible) but are also turning them into caretakers documenting a fast-disappearing heritage to raise international awareness. Such feelings of responsibility come with the desire to do justice to the complexity of the situation in Yemen. Dilemmas arise for many when this responsibility entails talking to the press or to institutions, diplomats, elected representatives, intelligence officers or NGOs. Interactions with each of these actors are not neutral and can generate frustration as well as criticism from those who prefer to stay in their disciplinary “ivory tower.”

Researchers must also deal with the emergence of younger colleagues or students who became interested in Yemeni society in the context of the conflict but have never been there. Does this fact render their analyses fundamentally irrelevant? Certainly not. Some **issues of access** are ameliorated, though imperfectly, by social media and the circulation of publications online (including local newspapers and archives like Loay Amin’s **Yemen Archive** platform), as well as by the capacity to carry out interviews from afar using video. Resources on Twitter, Facebook, TikTok or elsewhere, once contextualized, are material that even

anthropologists and ethnographers in the field would not ignore. These resources, made necessary by the context of Yemen at war, are thus challenging what state of the art social science work actually entails when it comes to **methodology**. The conflict in Yemen has at least partially curtailed innovative field-based research and the analysis of a wide range of new social dynamics. Cultural production, the transformation of rural and urban relations, changes within households or between generations and genders, as well as dynamics within political parties or transformations in Islamist movements, remain largely unexplored—and, in many ways, unexplorable using traditional methodologies.

Consequently, knowledge production on Yemeni society in the midst of a severe and long-lasting conflict is now to a large extent truncated. Focus on warfare and inter-elite rivalries is encouraged by the media and think tanks at the expense of changing social dynamics that are mostly **visible from within**. For example, analysts or NGO actors who wish to highlight local and everyday peacebuilding initiatives feel their approach is frequently discounted due to the focus on nationwide dynamics and on the belligerents.

Returning Yemen to Arabia

Yet here is where hybrid models of research and a new transnationalism are poised to shape knowledge production in a constructive way. Adapted to a new context and employing original methods and questions, knowledge production is not at a standstill nor entirely shaped by issues that are directly contingent on the daily evolution of the battlefield (war fronts, casualties, donor strategies, humanitarian catastrophes, political equilibria). Explorations of the deeper transformations are certainly marginal, but they exist and provide valuable insights. Certain online initiatives like **al-Madaniya magazine**, which publishes alternative

perspectives including positive ones on creativity and history, embody the vivacity of studies on Yemen. Another example of shifts in focus is recent interest in the Taiz area, the most populous governorate in the country. Sitting between Aden and Sana'a it has a kind of third-party identity that is neither northern nor southern and has been marginalized in the dominant historiography and often remains **outside the scope** of researchers. The same is true of marginalized populations, like the *muhamasheen*, who now find powerful encouragement from growing **transnational research** on Blackness and anti-Blackness, or even work that addresses peacebuilding but through the lens of the **creative arts**.

Perhaps because of the multi-sited nature of much recent work on Yemen, work by many (foreigners and Yemenis) who are forced to write from afar has begun to shed new light on transnational flows, returning to Carapico's push to situate Yemen firmly in the realm of Arabian Peninsula studies, if not a broader global scale. Nowhere is this as clear as in studies of Yemen's economy, thanks to a variety of initiatives such as *Rethinking Yemen's Economy*, which is being carried out by CARPO, DeepRoot Consulting and the Sana'a Center for Strategic Studies with funding from the European Union. Any reconstruction in post-conflict Yemen will require foreign aid and investment and thus the animating dynamics of foreign economic intervention need to be better understood. The disciplinary lens of international relations and Yemen has also gradually returned after decades of relative neglect. In addition to the links between various Islamist movements and their Gulf donors, the political dependence of all parties and fighters on supporters outside Yemen is an issue that has changed how national Yemeni politics are understood by analysts. Such is the case, for example, with the Southern movement, which has links to the United Arab Emirates that should be considered seriously.

The connections and interactions within the Arabian Peninsula, as well as with Iran when it comes to the Houthi movement, however, remain sensitive matters with high stakes. British PhD student Matthew Hedges was accused of being a spy and sentenced to life imprisonment in Abu Dhabi in 2018 (he was later pardoned), and Yahya al-Sewary was abducted in 2019 in al-Mahra, Yemen. It is a fact that researchers and experts who seek to explore the **transnational linkages** that connect Yemen to the Arabian Peninsula do so in an increasingly difficult and constraining environment.

Beyond the Peninsula, interactions between Yemen and the wider Middle East have also become the object of recent studies. Marine Poirier, for instance, has extended her analysis of networks linked to the former ruling party of Ali Abdallah Salih by exploring the adaptation of regime elites to the Egyptian terrain, as part of the **large Yemeni diaspora** in Cairo. The trajectories of **Yemeni diplomats** after 2011 as studied by Judit Kuschnitzki is another example that highlights new transnational approaches to Yemen.

While reflections on the Yemeni diaspora were numerous in the 1990s, studies of **Yemeni mobility** fell into neglect until the current conflict. Since 2015, work on the individual trajectories of residents in the **refugee camp of Markazi** in Djibouti or elsewhere as studied by Bogumila Hall and Solenn Al Majali, as well as the transformation of **migration policies in Saudi Arabia** and its effect on the livelihoods of Yemenis, are all indicative of a capacity to simultaneously carry out work from afar and shed light on very meaningful domestic social dynamics.

Yemen at war is continuously reconfiguring the field of Yemeni studies, forcing scholars and experts to adapt to an evolving context, to develop innovative methods and to answer new questions, largely shaped by the conflict. It would be a mistake to view the current situation as only limiting and constraining.

Researchers have done more than simply acknowledge how much and why Yemeni civilians are victims of a terrible, seemingly

endless war. New constraints on researchers' access to the field as well as the emergence of a new generation of researchers coming from Yemen are bringing forth novel perspectives and hybrid forms of research that should be valued as something more than a response to exigency. They are relevant and compelling in their acknowledgement of the interconnections between Yemen and the wider region, helping bring to fruition, albeit maybe unintentionally, the long-held aspiration for a field of Arabian Peninsula studies in which Yemen is no longer marginal but is indeed central.

Endnotes

[1] In her text, Sheila Carapico highlighted how much Gulf studies programs were directly shaped by power and in particular the interests of Western powers. Sheila Carapico, *Arabia Incognita: An Invitation to Arabian Peninsula Studies*, EUI RSC, 2002/12, Mediterranean Programme Series.

[2] Laurent Bonnefoy, "Review of Ahmed Kanna, Amélie Le Renard, and Neha Vora, *Beyond Exception. New Interpretations of the Arabian Peninsula*," *Arabian Humanities*, 14, 2020.

[3] Abdallah al-Baraduni, *Funun al-adab al-sha'abi fil-Yaman* (Beirut: Dar al-Barudi, 1998). Muhammad 'Abd al-Malik al-Mutawakkil, *Al-islam wal-l'lanat al duwaliyya li-huquq al-insan* (Sana'a: Matabi' Sana'a al-haditha, 2004).

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