



POLITICS DESPITE THE WAR: YEMENI POLITICAL ELITES IN CAIRO

By:
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COVER PHOTO: Portraits of Yemeni political leaders from the Southern Transitional Council, Aiderous al-Zubaidi (L) and Ahmed bin Breik (R), hang from a kiosk at the intersection of Dokki Street and Iran Street in Cairo, Egypt, in 2021 // Photo credit: Marine Poirier.



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INTRODUCTION

Seven years of war in Yemen have wrought widespread destruction and economic devastation and seen hundreds of thousands flee from their home country. Like many of their compatriots, a great number of Yemeni politicians now live abroad, where most struggle to maintain their power and relevance. While attention often centers on leaders of warring factions, this paper examines the situation of (once) influential Yemeni politicians as they try to preserve their positions and local connections in exile,^[1] eyeing the challenges and opportunities of a post-war environment.

In order to do so, this paper focuses on Cairo, one of the regional hubs where Yemeni politics has reorganized since the conflict's outbreak, and where many political elites have found refuge. It examines how their geographical resettlement has impacted their lives and capacity to act politically. Political elites here are defined as individuals who consider themselves (and are considered) "professional" politicians. They have made a career and generated an income from their activities and positions within political parties or central, specialized institutions of government. This includes elected representatives as well as senior civil servants and leaders of major political parties, active and retired. Rather than dismissing them as irrelevant to the dynamics of the war, this paper studies political elites sociologically. This means examining their practices, resources and discourses, as well as their roles in remodeling institutional orders.

Today, there are two main rival political authorities in Yemen: the Houthi de facto authorities based in Sana'a and the internationally recognized government (IRG) mainly based in Riyadh. The Southern Transition Council (STC), who participates in the IRG, also wields important influence in the South where it acts since its establishment in 2017 as a semi-autonomous entity.^[2] Each has institutions, such as a presidency and an assembly, and representatives, in Yemen as well as in other countries. Since the beginning of the war, Yemeni politics has played out in two complementary spaces: *exopolitics*, defined as an oppositional political space outside the territory of political reference;^[3] and *endopolitics*, defined symmetrically as a political space located within the territory of political reference but created and maintained from abroad. Interestingly, there is no clear break between the country's interior and exterior. Yemeni political elites think of domestically-based politics and foreign-based politics as being in constant interaction rather than blunt opposition. To them, exile is temporary, and they strive to (re)position themselves in local politics through both *exopolitics* and *endopolitics*.

^[1] Exile here refers to the fact of living abroad due to war, not to the administrative category of asylum seekers and refugees.

^[2] One could argue that there are other competing forces exercising influence and acting as de facto "governments" on the ground, such as the National Resistance led by Tareq Saleh on the west coast and the pro-Islah militias in Marib.

^[3] Stéphane Dufoix, *Politics of Exile. Hungarians, Poles and Czechs Czechoslovaks in France after 1945* [FR], (Paris: Presses Universitaires de France, 2002).

Cairo has found itself at the center of this new political geography, while other regional cities play host to a range of Yemeni political factions. Among them are Riyadh – long the foreign political center of the IRG – as well as Abu Dhabi, Dubai, Muscat, Amman, Beirut and Istanbul. Istanbul,^[4] and to a lesser extent Doha, are home to many Islah party representatives, Beirut and Muscat to some pro-Houthi figures, while loyalists of former President Saleh and his son Ahmed, as well as Southern factions, can be found in Abu Dhabi and Dubai. Yemeni political elites' foreign residencies are indicative of economic and social hierarchies (for instance, living in Riyadh, Abu Dhabi or Amman requires greater financial resources than living in Cairo) and opportunities (Amman has become a privileged location for meetings with the United Nations, the European Union and international donors/actors, while Muscat is the entrypoint for mediations with the Houthis). Political elites circulate frequently between these regional hubs, in contrast with the limited mobility affecting the vast majority of Yemenis.^[5]

This research is part of a broader sociological study on the transformation of the Yemeni ruling class since 2011. It draws on more than 25 interviews conducted with Yemeni MPs, members of the IRG parliament presidency, members of the STC assembly, former members of the IRG, presidential advisors and members of Tareq Saleh's National Resistance forces, as well as leaders of Yemeni political parties based in Sana'a, Aden and Marib, and direct observations of these political actors in the arenas of peacebuilding, diplomacy and in their daily sociabilities.^[6] Based on these research materials, this paper shows that political elites in exile cannot be understood simply through their respective political labels and the fixed identities these connote. In an environment where there is a tendency to read political dynamics through a pre-war lense, familiar actors are now playing a different game. They do not occupy the same positions because politics itself has changed, and its rules and principles have evolved. They lean on uneven combinations of tribal, political, economic and social resources, which have risen and fallen dramatically due to war and forced expatriation. These elements are indispensable to understanding how exiled political elites navigate the turmoil, remodel their activities, initiate professional transitions or withdraw into the family sphere.

^[4] Mustafa Aljabzi, *Religion as an alternative ideology in Yemen* [FR], PhD dissertation in sociology, Rouen University, France, in progress.

^[5] This contrast did not disappear with the pandemic, which led to new obstructions to the mobility of ordinary Yemenis.

^[6] Interviewees were granted anonymity in order to speak freely.

THE CAIRO HUB AND THE NEW POLITICAL GEOGRAPHY OF YEMEN AT WAR

Egypt has long been a privileged destination for Yemenis seeking refuge abroad. The country welcomed exiled opponents of the Zaidi imamate before providing military and political support to the newly-formed Yemen Arab Republic following the 1962 Republican Revolution.^[7] It simultaneously hosted and supported members of southern liberation movements both prior to South Yemen's independence and after the formation of the People's Democratic Republic of Yemen. For decades, Egyptian schools and universities trained thousands of Yemeni students, while equally large numbers of patients visited for medical care.^[8] Today, as the war rages on, "Egypt is one of the rare outlets for Yemenis," stresses a Yemeni MP. "Here we feel as if we are at home sometimes."^[9]

The Egyptian refuge

Since the outbreak of war in 2014-2015, the Yemeni population in Egypt has grown significantly. No official statistics are available and estimates vary greatly. According to an employee at the Yemeni Embassy in Cairo, it rose from 100,000 in 2014 to 500,000 by 2019.^[10] A representative of the Yemeni parliament said he was confident that over 800,000 Yemenis lived in Egypt in 2020.^[11] Despite the imprecise nature of these figures, it is clear that the number of Yemenis seeking temporary residency in Egypt is expanding, with only a small minority registering as refugees and asylum seekers.^[12] Their presence is particularly noticeable in central Cairo and Giza and, to a lesser extent, in eastern Alexandria.

Whereas visa and residency requirements in other regional countries, such as Lebanon and Jordan, have become stiffer since the war's outbreak, Egyptian authorities have maintained a relatively favorable policy for Yemenis. Yemenis under 18 and over 50 do not require a visa to enter the country, but others need

^[7] Sadeq al Safwani, "Yemeni Opposition in Egypt Against the Rule of Imams from the Hamid al-Din Family 1918-1962 [AR]," Cairo: Mu'assasat arwiqa li-l-dirassat wa-l-tarjama wa-l-nashr, 2018.

^[8] Sadeq al Safwani documents the development of scholarships for Yemenis, hailing from both northern and southern Yemen, who studied in Egypt as early as the 1930s: Sadeq Al Safwani, "The foundation of the Yemeni student missions in Egypt (1930s) [AR]," *Arabian Humanities* 12, 2019, <http://journals.openedition.org/cy/5314>. On medical mobilities, see: Beth Kangas, "Hope from Abroad in the International Medical Travel of Yemeni Patients," *Anthropology & Medicine* 14:3, 2007, 293-305.

^[9] Yemeni MP, personal interview by the author, Cairo, Egypt, October 19, 2021.

^[10] Employee of the Yemeni Embassy, informal conversation with the author, Cairo, Egypt, September 2019. According to Ali al-'Ayssa'i, president of the Yemeni community in Egypt, there were 7,500 Yemeni families in Cairo in 2010. Ali al-'Ayssa'i, personal interview by the author, Cairo, Egypt, June 3, 2022.

^[11] Representative of the IRG parliament, personal interview by the author, Cairo, Egypt, February 5, 2020.

^[12] As of March 2022, 10,409 Yemenis were registered with UNHCR in Egypt, compared with over 140,000 Syrians and over 55,000 Sudanese. UNHCR, "Egypt Fact Sheet," March, 2022, <https://www.unhcr.org/eg/wp-content/uploads/sites/36/2022/04/Egypt-Factsheet-March-2022-2.pdf>

a visa and a security clearance issued by Egyptian authorities. Travelers coming from Yemen usually gain access by presenting a medical report on arrival at Cairo airport, the easiest way of securing an entry visa. They then apply for a tourist residency, which does not allow its holder to work in Egypt and must be renewed every six months at growing expense.^[13] Other residency permits are available for students and their parents, Yemenis married to Egyptian nationals, as well as business or real estate investors.^[14]

Yemenis residing in Egypt have access to more resources, services and benefits than in other neighboring countries, such as the opportunity to enroll their children in public schools, low-cost living, proximity to Yemen (with regular flights to Aden and Sayoun) and the perceived ease of integration. Yemenis are familiar with Egypt, having been brought up on Egyptian music, cinema and *musalsalat* (soap operas). Even in the most remote villages, generations of Yemeni children were taught by Egyptian teachers from the 1970s through the 1990s. More privileged Yemenis traveled to Egypt for family holidays, medical care, professional training and official visits. Some spent their youth there, studying at Ain Shams or Cairo University, and still own a family flat in the city center. Many have dense networks of Egyptian contacts and, crucially, of Yemeni expatriates – extended family and friends, colleagues and business partners – on which they relied to set up in Cairo.

Political elites often visited Egypt prior to 2014, and many were abroad when the Saudi-led coalition's intervention began in March 2015. Fighting and political tensions in 2014 spurred the expansion of regionally and internationally sponsored dialogue and de-escalation initiatives, enabling considerable geographical mobility for Yemeni political elites. Political pressure and the perception of growing insecurity in Yemen also prompted these elites, particularly the most well-off, to travel in the early stages of the conflict, both before the Houthis' formal takeover in January 2015, and soon after President Abdo Rabbu Mansour Hadi's departure to Riyadh in March. Their decision to flee the country was predicated on more than financial resources, namely their respective abilities to draw on preexisting social networks and ensure a livelihood abroad. In other words, temporary expatriation was inseparable from the possession not only of economic and social capital (well distributed in Yemeni upper classes) but also of cultural capital (less evenly distributed).^[15]

^[13] This time consuming and costly process has pushed many Yemenis into situations of clandestinity. For details on residency conditions and Yemeni refugees' daily hardships in Egypt, see: Qoboul al-Absi, "The Struggle Far from Home: Yemeni Refugees in Cairo," Sana'a Center for Strategic Studies, January 14, 2021, <https://sanaacenter.org/ypf/the-struggle-far-from-home/>; Mona Salim, "Yemeni pain on the Nile bridge [AR]," Al-Safir al-Arabi, October 15, 2019, <https://assafirarabi.com/ar/27508/2019/10/15/الم-يماني-فوق-جسر-النيل/>; Afrah Nasser, "Yemenis in Cairo. A life of despair," Mada Masr, August 19, 2018, <https://www.madamasr.com/en/2018/08/19/opinion/u/yemenis-in-cairo-a-life-of-despair/>

^[14] For details, see: "Residency [AR]," Yemenis in Egypt, <https://yemenisinegypt.com/دليل-الواصل-الجديد-الإقامة/>

^[15] Cultural capital refers to high school diplomas, language skills and incorporated social ease accumulated and transmitted in the family, which boost the internationalization of the elite. See: Anne Catherine Wagner, "Dominant classes in the face of globalization [FR]," *Actes de la recherche en sciences sociales*, vol. 190, no. 5, 2011.

Today, Egypt is one of the most important destinations for Yemeni elites displaced by the war. It is a major transit hub to Europe and North America and home to a wide range of Yemeni political actors. Since the outset of the conflict, Egypt has been home to supporters and representatives of all major political organizations: the General People's Congress (GPC), the Islah party, the Yemeni Socialist Party, the Nasserist Unionist People's Organization, the Southern Transitional Council (STC), the recently formed Political Bureau of the National Resistance forces led by Tareq Saleh and to a lesser extent, the Houthi movement. More and more of these actors have found themselves in Cairo, as changes in the balance of power in Yemen have given rise to new waves of migration.^[16]

Political and social resettlement

As the conflict drags on and their resources diminish, elites and their families tend to move to Egypt, sometimes after spending a few years in Riyadh, Amman or Istanbul.^[17] Interviewees explained that financial, family and social concerns brought them to Cairo. Among the most attractive opportunities Cairo offers is quality education, including international secondary schools and renowned public and private universities. Inaccessible to other social groups due to their high cost, private schools and universities act as a springboard for the upper class toward scholarships and professional careers abroad, especially in the US.

Many elites initially rented in the city center around Dokki and Manial, two areas where Yemeni expatriates have historically established themselves, before moving further east and west, into the more upper-class suburbs of New Cairo and Giza, particularly the cities of Sheikh Zayed and 6th of October. As a STC activist and representative explained, living in Sheikh Zayed (located in Giza, around 30 kilometers from downtown Cairo) is the most convenient “because of the schools.”^[18] Since leaving Yemen in 2013, he has lived “everywhere” in Cairo, including Manial, Dokki, Mohandessin and Faysal. A father of nine, he explained, “You chose the city center for proximity to work and social activities. You choose Shaykh Zayed to prioritize your family.” This sentiment is widespread among the elite: “If you want a home for yourself and family, go to Sheikh Zayed. If you want an apartment for work, choose the city center.”^[19]

^[16] Among GPC representatives, some followed President Hadi when he fled to Riyadh in 2015, before choosing Egypt as their primary residence. Others stayed in Sana'a until the alliance between the Houthis and former President Ali Abdullah Saleh ended with the latter's killing in December 2017. After Saleh's death, some went into hiding and were able to escape Sana'a and later flee to Oman, the UAE or Saudi Arabia. Eventually, many established temporary homes in Egypt.

^[17] Some are returning back to Yemen – to Aden, Hadramawt and the West Coast in particular.

^[18] STC activist and representative, personal interview by the author, Cairo, Egypt, December 22, 2021.

^[19] Representative of the Yemeni community in Egypt, personal interview by the author, Cairo, Egypt, December 21, 2021.

Some interviewees have sold properties in Yemen to buy an apartment or a house in compounds in Giza and New Cairo, far from the traffic, pollution and nuisances of downtown. There, they have an opportunity to adopt a lifestyle that brings them closer to the Egyptian upper-class and cosmopolitan urban bourgeoisie. Many feel they are living “the European life,”^[20] as shown in colorful advertisements for residential compounds distributed along Cairo’s highways. Residents go to the gym, jog in the parks of their gated communities and enroll their children in socially distinctive private sports clubs. They meet in the malls, coffee shops and international restaurant chains that have flourished in the area and promote a globalized consumerist culture that is nonexistent in Yemen. If elites travel in the city itself, they often do so in their own vehicle. In exile, a car functions as an important social marker. So does the suburb one lives in; its mention relates economic and social status, and affects elites’ reputations.

This cosmopolitan style of living contrasts with that of most Yemenis in Egypt, who live in crowded, informal working-class neighborhoods like Faysal or Ard el Lewa. Elite lifestyles do vary, as households have different backgrounds and cannot draw on the same economic, social and cultural resources that they had in Yemen. Despite the importance of solidarity networks within the upper-classes, many families struggle to maintain their social status as their assets have declined in the context of forced expatriation. Some elites have maneuvered more easily, in particular those who are well integrated in international peace-building efforts, or who can rely on economic resources that were little disrupted by the war, or have gained value, such as land estates and businesses.

Structures such as the Yemen Business Council (*Majlis al-a‘mal al-yamani*) and the Council of Yemeni Community Dignitaries (*Majlis a‘yan al-jaliyya al-yamaniyya*) formalize networks among businessmen in the Egyptian food industry, catering business and textile and real estate sectors. The expansion of the community has given rise to many lucrative businesses targeting customers with varying purchasing power. Yemeni restaurants have flourished, ranging from affordable *makhbiz* under the Dokki bridge and along Al-Ahram road, to high-end venues on the Nile corniche and in Mohandessin. From 2014 to 2019, more than \$4.5 billion was invested by Yemenis in real estate in Egypt, mainly in the Cairo and Giza governorates.^[21]

Yemeni entrepreneurs investing in Egypt include political elites and their relatives. Some explain that they have suspended their political careers to concentrate on their family’s business as a way to generate income, both in Yemen and abroad. One MP explained that he had completely lost interest in politics, and chosen

^[20] MP and Shura Council member, personal interview by the author, Cairo, Egypt, June 13, 2021 and May 20, 2019.

^[21] “Yemeni real estate in Egypt - Infographic [AR],” NewsYemen, February 9, 2019, <https://www.newsyemen.life/new/38133>

instead to focus on his business.^[22] Remaining economically sustained and securing new investments across Yemen and abroad, potentially pave the way for him to re-enter politics in the future.

^[22] Yemeni MP, personal interview by the author, Cairo, Egypt, October 27, 2021.

POLITICAL LEFTOVERS FOR THE DIASPORA?

Yemeni political elites enjoy relative freedom in Cairo, as long as their political activities remain discreet. No party offices or formal party activities are permitted, but party representatives, and more generally, political elites, mobilize on a regular basis. These include former and current cabinet members, diplomats, members of parliament and party leaders, who meet with international representatives and diplomats, develop social networks, rally supporters and build political alliances. For many, Cairo acts as a political safe haven, where they are able to “breathe” and escape the “narrow” and oppressive political and social environment in Yemen or Saudi Arabia.^[23]

Competing for international recognition

Political elites often note how their focus has changed since the beginning of the war and their departure from Yemen. A party leader and Shura Council member explained in 2019 that “my [attention] is turned 75 percent toward the outside (abroad) and 25 percent toward the inside (Yemen), while in 2011 it was the opposite.”^[24] He spends most of his time meeting with diplomats and international representatives, offering regular analysis on Yemen and participating in regional peacebuilding initiatives.

Elites’ ability to ensure their expertise is recognized internationally is central to securing their political future. However, this recognition is not exclusively predicated on their accumulation of “international capital”^[25] or capacity to master the idioms and “good practices” of international organizations.^[26] Indeed, contrary to younger segments of the Yemeni intellectual or cultural elites, political elites in Cairo have limited dispositions to “cosmopolitanism”.^[27] Many only speak Arabic, and few boast a university degree, albeit an international one. They can, however, rely on the connections that they developed with diplomats, foreign experts and journalists during their political careers in Yemen. As the conflict escalated, these interpersonal relations strengthened. Since 2014, international

^[23] Former minister of the Sanaa-based government, personal interview by the author, Cairo, Egypt, September 2019; cabinet member of the IRG, personal interview by the author, Cairo, Egypt, September 2019; Yemeni MP, personal interview by the author, Cairo, Egypt, October 26, 2021.

^[24] Party leader and Shura Council member, personal interview by the author, Cairo, Egypt, May 20, 2019.

^[25] International capital is built from the set of social, cultural, linguistic, economic and symbolic resources linked to one’s familiarity with different countries, see: Anne-Catherine Wagner, *Social Classes and Globalization* [FR], (Paris: La Découverte, 2007). This concept draws from Pierre Bourdieu’s theory of capitals: Pierre Bourdieu, “The Forms of Capital”, in John Richardson (ed.), *Handbook of Theory and Research for the Sociology of Education* (New York, Greenwood, 1986), 241-258.

^[26] Asmara Klein, Camille Laporte, and Marie Saiget, *The Good Practices of International Organizations* [FR], Paris: Presses de Sciences Po, 2015.

^[27] Don Weenink, “Cosmopolitanism and Established Ressources of Power in the Education Arena,” *International Sociology*, vol. 22, 2007, p. 492-516.

actors working in Yemen have moved their operations outside the country, relying on the familiar faces of the former regime found abroad rather than the unstable networks of actors that have formed during the war, to which they rarely have access. In many ways, former ruling and opposition party leaders, ministers and bureaucrats speak “their” language and have been successful in presenting themselves as the necessary bulwarks against “sectarianism”, “extremism” and “separatism.” In doing so, they have also advocated for the defense of their own political legacy and legitimacy.

GPC leaders abroad, for example, attempted to revive the party by unifying its fragmented leadership after the death of former President Saleh in 2017. GPC MP and Assistant Secretary-General Sultan al-Barakani was among those who worked to mobilize the party’s rival factions. Keen on presenting himself as a uniting force, he organized lunchtime gatherings of GPC representatives and followers, businessmen and tribesmen, as well as delegates of foreign chancelleries. Over the years, his home in Cairo became again the political hub it had been in Sana’a, rallying Yemeni public figures across party divides around a generous table.^[28] Simultaneously, he developed his online presence, posting videos of his speeches and written declarations, as well as images and brief minutes of these lunchtime meetings. By doing so, he contributed to keeping the GPC alive as a party, despite the suspension of its formal activities abroad.^[29] At a distance from both Yemen and the political center of the IRG in Riyadh, he embraced the role of a party leader, defended his position within the GPC and remained a key interlocutor and intermediary for foreign diplomats and peacebuilders. He progressively recovered his political prominence by lobbying his peers and counterparts, and was chosen as speaker of the IRG parliament in 2019. His communication techniques developed: an office was established a few streets away from his apartment in Dokki, documenting and formalizing his activities as speaker, while a new institutional Twitter account and website were launched. Offline, he continued to host large banquets and audiences – ritual activities during which he stages and performs state authority.

More generally, IRG MPs successfully mobilized in exile to seek international recognition and secure financial support. After fleeing Yemen, they were excluded from the Houthi-dominated parliament in Sana’a and their salaries were stopped.^[30] In some cases, MPs’ assets were seized and they were later sentenced to death for joining the “aggression” (*al-‘udwan*).^[31] Following months of mobilization, an

^[28] Observations by the author, Cairo, Egypt, 2018-2021.

^[29] Its executive and consultative bodies meet irregularly, if at all, without a quorum or clear agenda, and operate largely outside of the party’s organizational structure based in Yemen.

^[30] In 2021, the compensations of 144 MPs had been cut off by authorities in Sanaa. Reports on MPs rights’ violations are published regularly by the Inter-Parliamentary Union: <https://www.ipu.org/parliament/YE>; Yemeni MP, personal interview by the author, Cairo, Egypt, December 10, 2021.

^[31] “Houthi Authorities Seize Assets of Government MPs, Add to Shura Council – Aramco’s Ashoura, The Yemen Review, September 2019,” Sana’a Center for Strategic Studies, October 14, 2019, https://sanaacenter.org/publications/the-yemen-review/8221#Houthi_Authorities_Seize_Assets_of_Government_MPs_Add_to_Shura_Council

extraordinary session was convened by President Hadi in Seyoun in April 2019, and participating MPs regained a stipend, albeit one paid irregularly.^[32] This assembly gathered for a second time in Aden, in May 2022, to swear-in the newly formed Presidential Leadership Council and give a vote of confidence to the government in front of the UN Special Envoy to Yemen, the US Special Envoy to Yemen, and GCC and EU ambassadors.^[33] International support for the assembly, both symbolic and material, is essential for MPs. According to an MP, it took months of “intense diplomatic efforts” to convince international organizations that the IRG parliament was the legitimate representative of Yemen.^[34] Without international recognition, MPs supporting the IRG can hardly consolidate their position in the domestic “field of power”,^[35] as their authority is disputed locally, and their access to state resources and their constituents is scant.

**Editor’s note: A previous version of this policy brief misstated the month that the Yemeni parliament met in Aden in 2022. The Sana’a Center regrets the error.*

Maintaining a connection with the “interior”

In exile, Yemeni political elites stress the need to maintain their links with “the interior”, meaning Yemen. They do so through extensive use of social media and instant messaging services such as WhatsApp and Facebook Messenger. They follow the news, and communicate with family members, friends and colleagues inside Yemen and spend time negotiating and settling disputes from afar. Party leaders cultivate bonds with different factions of their organizations, domestically and abroad. As much as possible, they try to sustain their role as political entrepreneurs and middlemen.

To accomplish this, many elites rely on trusted associates and family members in Yemen. The war has precipitated a reorganization of traditional prerogatives and division of labor within families, in particular local political work and businesses. In some cases, siblings or children have taken over the day-to-day management of residential, commercial, agricultural and industrial real estate, and even run

^[32] According to interviewees, this allowance, paid in Saudi riyals, amounts to 4,000 to 5,000 dollars, while MPs’ salary in Yemen used to amount to 300,000 to 500,000 Yemeni rials (prior to the war, the equivalent of 1,000 to 2,000 dollars). Some still receive this compensation from authorities in Sana’a, which now amounts to less than 300 dollars. Yemeni MPs, personal interviews by the author, Cairo, Egypt, December 20, 2020, June 13 and December 10, 2021; Abu Dhabi, UAE, March 22, 2022. Officially, 138 MPs attended the Seyoun meeting. Other sources reported 118: “Game of Parliaments– The Yemen Review, April 2019,” Sana’a Center for Strategic Studies, https://sanaacenter.org/files/TYR_April_2019_en.pdf

^[33] Ali Rabie, “Yemeni ‘presidential’ [council] sworn-in in Aden, with an international, Gulf and regional presence [AR],” Al-Sharq al-Awsat, April 20, 2022, <https://aawsat.com/home/article/3601536/«الرئيسي-يؤدي-اليمن-في-عدن-بحضور-دولي-وخليجي-واممي»>

^[34] 123 MPs attended the session according to its rapporteur, see: “Parliament session from the temporary capital, Aden, to give the government confidence [AR],” Yemen Satellite Channel, YouTube, April 21, 2022, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=ekDho7xUvjw>

^[35] Yemeni MP, personal interview by the author, Cairo, Egypt, October 26, 2021. Among these are the Inter Parliamentary Union, the Arab Inter-parliamentary Union, the Arab Parliament (Arab League) and the Asian Parliamentary Assembly.

^[36] Pierre Bourdieu, “The Field of Power and the Division of the Labour of Domination,” in François Denord et al. (eds.), *Researching Elites and Power*, Springer Open, 2020, p. 33-44.

tribal affairs. This is the case for an MP and tribal sheikh, who explained how his younger brother now “plays the tribal role” in Yemen. He said, “While I focus on central political activities, he focuses on local matters. I communicate with him regularly, but I don’t follow everything.”^[36] A Shura Council member and tribal leader stressed his constant communication with “his people” in Yemen, and ability to manage current affairs “through WhatsApp”, like other sheikhs from the highlands who reside in the 6th of October city.^[37] Others have been cut off completely from their constituency, either because they have no one to hand over their duties to, because it is impossible to visit or because it is politically too risky. One MP living in Cairo has a constituency in an area now controlled by the Houthis, and explained that he had stopped communicating with his extended family and constituents to avoid putting them in danger.^[38]

A few have been able to travel to Yemen to visit their constituencies and provide support to the local communities. An exiled MP who spent a month in his district complained of “not having the means to do anything”. “We are far away now... We cannot carry out projects in our districts. We cannot provide services to its inhabitants. We accomplish very basic things, we stay connected, we try to find solutions to people’s problems. When people come to Cairo for medical care, we try to help them with our humble resources,” he said.^[39] Supporting constituents traveling for medical purposes often compensates for the scarce support provided inside Yemen.^[40] Wealthier politicians boast about the philanthropic initiatives for Yemenis abroad they have developed during the war. Drawing on income generated by his land and industry, a party leader and MP based in Cairo underlined how he “collected money during Ramadan for the poor and needy”, and “supported those requiring medical care and the disabled who can no longer work.” He said, “I give from my own pocket, I give a lot for that. And I feel joy when I carry out these actions. People come to me and ask me to help them solve their problems.”^[41]

Political elites strive to sustain the patronage networks and redistributive practices on which they built their careers and political legitimacy. Government institutions, already fragile before the war, have been undermined by armed groups who have captured public resources and established parallel institutions, in both the north and south of Yemen. Many politicians have thus lost a core source of legitimacy: their ability to “serve” and to “deliver” public goods and services. This is largely

^[36] Yemeni MP, personal interview by the author, Cairo, Egypt, May 21, 2019.

^[37] Yemeni party leader and MP, personal interview by the author Cairo, Egypt, May 20, 2019.

^[38] Yemeni MP, personal interview by the author, Cairo, Egypt, October 26, 2021.

^[39] Yemeni MP, personal interview by the author, Cairo, Egypt, October 19, 2021. His district is situated in IRG-controlled territory.

^[40] Yemeni MPs, personal interviews by the author, Cairo, Egypt, June 1 and June 6, 2022.

^[41] Yemeni party leader and MP, personal interview by the author, Cairo, Egypt, May 26, 2019.

due to their restricted access to public resources and disrupted distribution channels, but also the progressive draining of their personal assets. Some have successfully reorganized their patronage networks to serve Yemeni communities abroad by courting the financial support of a wealthy business diaspora. But politically, their focus remains squarely on Yemen, as they need to show that they are able to supply resources and “solve people’s problems.”^[42] Put more simply, one’s political legitimacy still depends on proving one’s connectedness, even more so when it is challenged by a myriad of Yemen-based actors.

This was salient in the debates held during the parliament session in Aden in May 2022. Abdelrahman Mu’zeb, a GPC MP who recently became president of the parliamentary bloc of the Political Bureau (affiliated with Tareq Saleh), called on the government “to make it mandatory for all state officials to stay inside [the country].” Speaking to his fellow MPs and government officials, he added: “If you cannot stay here, then hand in your resignation when you leave the airport! What are you doing in Cairo, or in Riyadh? Yemen is full of competent people.”^[43] Other MPs picked up on this comment to express their will to “remain in the homeland”, and work, as much as possible, “alongside the Yemeni people” in Aden and in other areas under IRG control. Given sufficient security and economic measures, the political momentum initiated by the establishment of the Presidential Leadership Council could encourage more political elites to return to Yemen.

Striving to be visible and relevant

Most of the activities of political elites in Cairo do not appear to be overtly political. They consist of lunches, gatherings, weddings and funerals, as well as cultural events organized in collaboration with the Yemeni Embassy and other associations.^[44] Former ministers and advisors, as well as party representatives and MPs, frequently attend such events, which serve as venues for political discussion. Much as the consumption of qat in Yemen opens avenues for political debates and presents an opportunity for deliberation and decision-making,^[45] Cairene spaces and moments of “ordinary” sociability provide outlets for negotiating new political alliances and initiatives.

More broadly, social media, online press and Yemeni satellite television broadcasts

^[42] Yemeni party leader and Shura Council member, personal interview by the author, Cairo, Egypt, May 20, 2019.

^[43] Recorded session of the parliament, see: “Parliament session from the temporary capital, Aden, to give the government confidence [AR],” Yemen Satellite Channel, YouTube, April 21, 2022, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=ekDho7xUvjw>; Mu’zeb is a GPC MP who participated in the Sanaa-based parliament from 2016 to 2018, when he fled to Cairo. He became president of the GPC bloc in the IRG parliament in May 2019 before rallying behind Tareq Saleh in January 2022. He is currently the president of the parliamentary bloc of the Political Bureau of the National Resistance forces. Abdelrahman Mu’zeb, personal interviews by the author, Cairo, Egypt, June 22, 2011, and May 11, 2022.

^[44] See: “The Yemeni Community in Egypt [AR],” Facebook, <https://ar-ar.facebook.com/ye.egypt/>

^[45] Lisa Wedeen, “The Politics of Deliberation: Qat Chews as Public Spheres in Yemen,” *Public Culture*, 19(1), 2007, p.59-84.

featuring political elites give the impression that diaspora politics mainly consists of the symbolic staging of political authority. By posting pictures, statements and short videos, as well as giving interviews and offering TV commentary, political elites try to embody fragmented institutions and organizations. They also publicly display their connections and capacities to inform decision-making and public opinion. Thus the media plays an important role in curbing the decline of political and social influence caused by exile, by providing elites with a platform to express themselves, and assert their authority.

Elites engaging in formal and informal political activities are nonetheless affected by a loss of faith in their capacity to work effectively for their fellow citizens. Although their agenda is filled with official meetings, conference calls and social mundanities, they complain of not having much to do: “politics today is a lot of emptiness. It’s in a sleeping state.”^[46] Many question their political vocation. They are aware of their limited capacity to curb regional conflict dynamics and feel the political game is mostly out of their hands. As previously noted, some have completely abandoned politics. They focus instead on securing a safe environment for their families, investing in small businesses in Egypt and considering a complete shift to the private sector. Others are testing new forms of mobilization, such as building on tribal solidarities.

This is particularly the case for political leaders who also hold the title of tribal sheikh, which has gained value in the transnational field of peacebuilding. The conflict has prompted think tanks, international organizations and mediation experts to support initiatives aimed at studying and mobilizing “local actors” and tribes in particular.^[47] This renewed interest in tribal dynamics has allowed a segment of the political elite to accumulate new resources, including informal consulting positions, extended social networks and prestige. They actively participate in peacebuilding initiatives in the region, where they share their internationally-recognized expertise and endorse the role of local mediators. These political sheikhs often insist on the fact that their involvement is “personal” and draws on their social position as well as their political stance. A Shura Council member and tribal sheikh explained that “I’m involved in the peace process because I have a sense of responsibility. I don’t get paid [...] I don’t owe anyone. What I do is benevolent.”^[48] Another sheikh and MP stressed, “I refused to join any of the parties and different movements produced by the war. I am not with either side. I refuse to participate in the war, but I have no problem, with no one.

^[46] Yemeni party leader and staff member of the IRG parliamentary presidency, personal interview by the author, Cairo, Egypt, March 5, 2020.

^[47] Editor’s note: The subject of tribes’ participation in peacebuilding efforts was a component of the Sana’a Center program “Supporting Broader Inclusion and Participation in the Yemeni Peace Process,” implemented with CMI – Martti Ahtisaari Peace Foundation and funded by the European Union.

^[48] Yemeni party leader and Shura Council member, personal interview by the author, Cairo, Egypt, May 20, 2019.

I talk with the Houthis and with ‘the legitimacy’ (a reference to the IRC).”^[49] He recently participated in the creation of a new tribal mediation initiative abroad, but seemed guarded about its potential outcomes: “Nothing is certain. It could work and it could not work. Both are possible, success and failure. We will surely fail, but we will try first. I don’t think it will be a solution for everything, but we’re doing something pragmatic, realistic.”^[50]

^[49] Yemeni MP, personal interview by the author, Cairo, Egypt, June 13, 2021.

^[50] Yemeni MP, personal telephone interview by the author, Cairo, Egypt, December 10, 2021.

CONCLUSION

Keeping up with politics, even symbolically, is a condition of survival for many displaced elites, many of whom have lost their position in the domestic political arena, and whose capacity for action, material resources and legitimacy have been disrupted by the war. Political elites in Cairo strive to continue to exist politically, maintaining as much as possible the vitality of their institutional coteries, their connections in Yemen and their ties to foreign diplomats and organizations. International recognition has been a key to reasserting their positions in the national field of power. In return, local notoriety, such as tribal status, has enabled some elites to find an international platform to voice their opinions and even consider professional transitions.

Simultaneously, a number of political elites in Cairo appear not to have the energy or economic resources to seek political power and compete for international recognition. Even when they do so, they have low expectations. Over the years, some have limited their participation in public activities, refusing to join or explicitly support any of the warring parties in Yemen. This does not necessarily mean that they are willing to end their political careers or that they are entirely politically marginalized. Their apparent inactivity actually entails considerable effort, as well as material and symbolic resources, which enable them to safeguard their independence. Declining (or claiming to repeatedly decline) offers to support one party or another, or join a government or a new coalition, requires steadfastness as much as economic and political autonomy. And these resources tend to decline as the war drags on.

Surprisingly, though Egypt officially supports the Saudi-led coalition and IRG, it offers the opportunity for elites to draw back politically. It is much harder for elites to maintain their independence in other regional environments. Here, actors who do not strongly support the IRG, former supporters of the Houthi movement and enduring independents have been able to temporarily retreat from mainstream politics. This should not be construed, however, as synonymous with their retiring, or standing on the political sidelines. On the contrary, due to their silence – as well as their intermediary position as consultants and, sometimes, their prior experience at mediation – many political elites see themselves as “in reserve” and seem assured of their political future. Though they might turn down positions today, they are looking ahead to post-war institutions they could reform and national political positions they could occupy. In this sense, political elites’ restraint should not be mistaken for surrender or the collapse of traditional politics.

The internationalization of the Yemeni political scene during the war has offered opportunities for former regime elites to find new positions and resist

social downgrading in exile. It has also propelled to the fore a new set of actors – mainly military leaders, but also highly educated, cosmopolitan newcomers. The remodeling of the Yemeni political elite, in terms of social composition and recruitment dynamics, needs to be further investigated, as it is shaping new forms of governance and principles of legitimacy in Yemen, and provides a rare insight into how states and regimes are made and unmade in wartime.

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