Introduction

In early 2011, popular uprisings swept through North Africa and the Middle East. In one country after another, beginning with Tunisia and Egypt, and quickly spreading to Yemen, Libya, Bahrain, and Syria, Arab citizens took to the streets calling for the downfall of old autocratic regimes. On January 14, 2011, Tunisian President Zayn al-Abidine Ben Ali was the first Arab leader to fall. He fled his country in a panicked flight to Saudi Arabia after nearly a month of demonstrations by citizens angered by rampant corruption and injustice. The next month, Egyptian President Husni Mubarak became the second autocratic leader to fall on February 11. His departure came after protesters, young and old, male and female, camped for three continuous weeks in central Cairo's *Maydan al-Tahrir* (Liberation Square).

Under a global spotlight created by satellite television broadcasters from every region of the world, participants in Egypt's momentous January 25 revolution chanted many of the same political slogans previously heard on Tunisian streets. These calls for change, mixed with songs of revolution, soon echoed across major cities of the region. Just five weeks earlier, it seemed impossible to have a peaceful exchange of state power in a region of the world long resistant to the spirit of democracy. Now, amazingly, it seemed not only possible but likely to happen in a handful of countries. Nowhere was this more true than Yemen located at the southern tip of the Arabian peninsula. Yet there was an important difference about the Tunisian and Egyptian effects when the waves of change crashed onto Yemen's shores.

During the first quarter of 2011, Yemen was the only country of the Arab world where the pending collapse of government did not come as a

surprise. Long before the first signs of protest rippled through Tunisia in December 2010, and Cairo's citizens began occupying *Maydan al-Tahrir* the next month, Yemeni President Ali Abdallah Salih had faced widespread rebellion in his country. During the previous four years, major cities in Yemen, especially in southern and eastern parts of the country, experienced large street protests on a weekly basis. This fact is important for making sense of recent transformational events in Yemen. Unlike the uprisings in Tunisia and Egypt, Libya and Syria, as well as other Arab countries caught up in the "democratic spring of 2011," the downfall of Yemen's regime was widely anticipated, both inside and outside the country.

Before 2011, there were earlier protests in Egypt, especially during the formation of the April 6 movement in 2008, when badly exploited factory workers organized in a city of the Nile delta. For more than a decade, Palestinians had also protested and fought Israel's military occupation of their lands in East Jerusalem, Gaza, and the West Bank. Iraq had been embroiled in political turmoil since March 2003, following the American-led invasion to topple Saddam Hussein. And throughout 2005 and 2006, the Lebanese capital Beirut experienced dueling protests after the assassination of Prime Minister Rafiq al-Hariri. In fact, Lebanon's government, led by Hariri's son Saad, collapsed two days before Ben Ali's flight from Tunisia. Thus, the political environment in the Arab world was certainly unsettled before the spring of 2011. Public discontents boiled beneath the surface of Tunisia, Syria, and many other countries. Nonetheless, at the start of 2011, few could have predicted Ben Ali's rapid fall from power in Tunisia, and the removal of Mubarak in Egypt, let alone the approaching challenges to Muamar al-Gaddhafi's rule in Libya and Bashar al-Asad in Syria.

The same cannot be said of Yemen, since it was regularly described in media reports as a failing state. Not only was President Ali Abdallah Salih's regime expected to collapse at any moment, but there were genuine concerns the entire Yemeni nation-state might disintegrate along the lines of nearby Somalia across the Gulf of Aden. Beginning in 2004, President Salih's military and security forces confronted a rebellion by religiously inspired Zaydi tribesmen who supported a martyred leader named Hussayn ibn Badr al-Din al-Huthi. The "Huthi rebellion" centered around the old Zaydi capital in Sa'da, a famous mud-brick walled city near Yemen's northwestern border with Saudi Arabia. In successive years, the Yemeni army fought a series of six wars with Huthi fighters who attracted larger numbers of followers. The increased support for the Huthi rebellion

was primarily due to rising public discontent with the regime's clumsy use of heavy artillery and air raids, resulting in hundreds, if not thousands of civilian casualties. By the last round of warfare in 2009, there were hundreds of thousands of internal refugees fleeing battles that had reached the outskirts of Sanaa the previous year.

More than one hundred miles south of Sanaa, separate groups of citizens started peaceful protests in 2007, calling for equality of rights with Yemenis in the north. These daily protests, known as the southern "peace movement" (*al-haraka al-salmiyya*, later shortened to *al-Hirak*), started among a group of former military officers who had been forced to retire in the late 1990s. These officers initially rallied to demand the restoration of their jobs and increased pension payments. But they soon attracted support from aggrieved citizens throughout provinces of the former People's Democratic Republic of Yemen (PDRY), a state that existed in the southern half of Yemen prior to national unification on May 22, 1990. After a brief civil war in the summer of 1994, during which President Salih's northern forces defeated the former PDRY army, many citizens of the south complained of political and economic discrimination while living under "northern military occupation." As Salih brutally cracked down on peaceful protesters in 2008, this radicalized the southern cause. Amidst escalating violence in 2009, supporters of the protest movement began to wave the former PDRY flag, calling for secession from the north just as southern leaders had done in 1994.

Adding to the unrest and instability generated by the al-Huthi rebellion in the north, and calls for secession in the south, there was a series of terrorist attacks in Yemen sponsored by a local branch of al-Qaeda. In January 2009, the Yemeni branch of al-Qaeda merged with exiled Saudi supporters of the international terrorist organization to form al-Qaeda on the Arabian Peninsula (AQAP). By 2010, this Yemeni-based network of terrorists was widely considered the most active and dangerous regional branch of Osama Bin Laden's al-Qaeda. Between 2006 and 2007, its agents carried out small operations against oil pipelines, security personnel, and foreign tourists in Yemen. Then in September 2008, the group carried out a bold assault on the heavily guarded American embassy in Sanaa. This assault involved two vehicles loaded with explosives, and at least five men armed with rocket-propelled grenades and machine guns. More than a dozen people were killed outside the embassy, including a Yemeni-American citizen and her newlywed husband. In the following year, associates and supporters of AQAP were linked to U.S. Army Major Nidal Malik Hasan's shooting of thirteen American personnel

in Fort Hood, Texas, as well as a plot to detonate a bomb on board an American passenger airplane over Detroit, Michigan, on Christmas Day 2009.

During this time, American officials feared that President Salih's regime was so badly weakened by its confrontation with Huthi rebels and southern secessionists that Yemen had become a safe haven for al-Qaeda. From the moment President Barack Obama entered the White House in January 2009, he placed the country near the top of world trouble spots. He even mentioned Yemen's dangers in his inaugural address on the steps of the U.S. Capitol Building. During the spring and summer of President Obama's first year in office, top military and counterterrorism advisors paid repeated visits to Yemen, demanding closer cooperation from President Salih in the fight against al-Qaeda. Fearing that Salih's regime was on the verge of collapse, the Obama administration also announced an emergency aid package during the late summer of 2009. Then, before the incident in the skies above Detroit, Michigan, the American president attempted to confront the threat of AQAP by launching two separate missile strikes in southern regions of the country. The Christmas Day incident by Umar Abd al-Mutallab, a Nigerian-born student who trained in Yemen, raised even greater international security concerns.

On January 27, 2010, Yemen was the focus of an emergency meeting in London, England, arranged by Prime Minister Gordon Brown on the eve of a previously planned international conference on Afghanistan. U.S. Secretary of State Hillary Clinton and British Foreign Minister David Miliband met with the prime minister and foreign minister of Yemen to launch a "Friends of Yemen" group. This group was intended to help stabilize the country by funneling additional financial aid to the regime in Sanaa. One year before the uprisings in Tunisia and Egypt, participants in the London meeting worried that political and economic dysfunction was spreading in Yemen, making it ever more dependent on outside support and assistance. Given the tsunami of rebellions and protests during the previous seven years, the wave of Arab uprisings in 2011 hardly triggered an alert in Yemen. Quite unexpectedly, it raised hopes that Yemen's many problems might be constructively resolved, if given proper direction under a new national leadership.

In other words, the immediate impact of events in Tunisia and Egypt was not that they sparked calls for political change, as happened in Bahrain, Libya, Syria, and elsewhere in the Arab world. Such calls had existed for years in Yemen, accompanied by open rebellion in large sections of the country. Instead, the impact of Tunisia and Egypt was how

they initially helped unite what had previously been disparate sources of opposition in Yemen, while pacifying voices calling for violence. President Salih's regime was certainly in no less jeopardy due to the demonstration effects of Tunisia and Egypt. But at least the voices of opposition in the country no longer called for armed conflict and the dissolution of Yemeni national unity. Most supporters of the southern movement briefly stopped waving the flag of the former PDRY. South Yemenis embraced the slogans heard on the streets of Tunis and Cairo, joining other Yemenis in northern provinces to chant *al-sha'ab yurid isqat al-nitham* ("the people want the downfall of the regime") and *Irhal!* ("Leave!"). Likewise, supporters of the Huthi rebellion joined street protesters to overthrow Salih by peaceful means.

In short, the influence of shared perceptions of what happened in Tunisia and Egypt had a positive effect on Yemen. Much like the 1952 Egyptian revolution, and its follow-on effect in the Yemeni revolutions of the 1960s, the 2011 events in Cairo served as a rallying point for the Yemeni people. Whereas it had appeared in 2009 and 2010 that Yemen was spinning out of control, perhaps splintering into several fragmented states, there seemed a genuine chance for Yemenis in all parts of the country to reformulate their national union on mutually beneficial terms. It did not help matters when the uprising in Libya turned violent in late February and early March 2011. It also did not help when, in late March, King Hamad of Bahrain invited GCC forces from neighboring Saudi Arabia to stamp out the popular uprising in his island state. The change of momentum from the more inspiring and hopeful events in Tunisia and Egypt on the one hand, to the more cynical events in Libya and Bahrain on the other hand, led Salih to conclude mistakenly that he, too, might be able to repress protesters in the streets, and survive as Yemen's ruler.

Once it became clear in May 2011 that there was no alternative to President Salih's stepping down, and putting in place plans for a political transition to a new government, there certainly remained questions about the durability of Yemen's national union. Given developments in preceding years, Yemeni unity and peace were by no means guaranteed. The possibility that Libya's popular uprising could cause the political division of its territory, especially after American and NATO military intervention in the summer raised the same possibility in Yemen. For centuries, the territory of Yemen had been ruled by multiple authorities prior to its modern unification in 1990. This unification was a highly troubled process, and ever since there have been concerns about the health of Yemeni unity.

This book recounts the politics of Yemeni unity by highlighting the regionally fragmented character of the country. I have long considered Yemen's multiple regional divisions to be the most important factor explaining its twists and turns, ups and downs, over the past two decades. These divisions are the main reason why it is mistaken to read Yemeni participation in the 2011 Arab "democratic spring" as a simple follow-on effect of what happened in Tunisia and Egypt. Given that Yemeni protesters rallied around a common national cause, after experiencing separate regional rebellions for several years, the country's multiple internal divisions were certainly a formative element of its politics. And they will continue to be one of the most important factors determining the future direction of Yemeni statehood.

It is possible to analyze the politics of Yemen in terms other than these. For example, one might focus on the misrule of President Salih, and the corruption surrounding his regime, as important causes behind the country's recent political crisis. Or one could focus on the mounting problems of poverty and underdevelopment in this poorest of Arab countries; or perhaps the spread of conservative Islamist sentiments, and the disruptive effects of terrorist attacks by Yemeni al-Qaeda. Other writers have adopted these approaches. But when it comes to explaining Yemen's internal political dynamics, I find that these approaches are less fruitful than an analysis of the country's multiple regional divisions. I am not convinced that President Salih and his family are alone to blame for the country's failures. This is because the regionally configured structure of power inside Yemen will outlive Salih's rule, and likely continue to plague the country's political and economic development. I also think that the problem of al-Qaeda in Yemen is exaggerated since its activities are minor compared to other major political, social, cultural, and economic forces.

Following the dramatic changes in 2011, there is no question that political reform and economic development are urgent matters in Yemen. Ending the networks of corruption, reducing the influence of al-Qaeda, and alleviating shocking levels of poverty, malnutrition, and illiteracy, must all be part of the country's future agenda. Each of these points is addressed in sections of this book. But the book's main purpose is to understand the politics of a population regionally fragmented along multiple lines, quite unlike the north-south division formerly associated with the country. Yemen's multiple regional divisions played an important role in its unification. They shaped the negotiation of national unity leading up to the official ceremony on May 22, 1990. Then in 1993, they fomented conflicts resulting in civil war in 1994; in the late 1990s, they temporarily

helped President Salih consolidate his power over the country; and finally during the 2000s, they greatly contributed to Yemen's near failure as a nation-state.

The significance of these multiple regional divisions was generally overlooked by writers who analyzed the newly unified Yemen in the 1990s. After the achievement of national unification, it was understandable that writers describing the country's politics at the end of the millennium would downplay divisions inside the country. National unity had long been a cherished aim of both governments in north and south Yemen, and the new unionist leadership wanted to stress solidarity among its people. But the fact is that Yemeni unity was plagued by internal divisions from 1990 onward. After the brief civil war in 1994, leading Western scholars disagreed on whether northern or southern leaders were ultimately responsible for the breakdown in unity. Unsurprisingly, their scholarly positions matched their previous areas of specialization on one or the other side of the old border. The American political scientist Robert Burrowes and British anthropologist Paul Dresch, both highly respected scholars of north Yemen, accepted the arguments of north Yemenis who blamed the civil war on the southern leadership of the Yemeni Socialist Party (YSP).[1] Meanwhile, the best known scholar of south Yemen, the late British political scientist Fred Halliday, accepted the arguments of southern YSP officials who blamed the civil war on President Salih, his northern ruling party, and Islamist coalition partners.[2]

I began my field research in Yemen one year after the new union's 1994 civil war. Unlike the previous generation of scholars who tended to focus their field research on one side of the old border, I was fortunate to travel freely in northern and southern regions of the country. This allowed me to formulate my views of Yemen without bias toward one side of a long-standing political contest. What immediately impressed me about the country, as I travelled from one end of its remarkable landscape to the other, was the multiple regional divisions among its people. I found these divisions to be far more significant than the relatively superficial north-south boundary drawn by the British and Ottoman empires in the early 1900s, decades before the middle-twentieth-century Cold War. As I discovered, Yemen's multiple divisions are the key to understanding its politics. Yet the earlier generation of scholars had, for a variety of reasons, downplayed their significance.

[1] Burrowes, 1995(a) and 1995(b); and Dresch, 2000.
[2] Halliday, 1995.

My purpose in unravelling the regional dynamics of Yemen's domestic politics is to offer new perspective on the troubles of its unification in the 1990s, while also analyzing developments in the 2000s, culminating in the events of 2011, which are not found in earlier political studies. Conventional wisdom in the 1990s presumed that Yemen was truly one nation, and that its people represented a unified national body. During my first visit in 1995, I was struck by the opposite: namely, what makes people from different regions distinct from one another, as opposed to the same. One of the most significant aspects of Yemen's multiple regional divisions is how they inform political, social, and cultural viewpoints among the population in varied and complex ways. To speak of one common Yemeni viewpoint is to misunderstand the citizens of this fascinating, enigmatic land.

The land of Yemen and its people are barely comprehensible for two reasons. First, the country's convoluted three millennia-long history holds great relevance in the lives of its citizens. This history is a keystone for anyone wanting to make sense of what happens inside the country today. Second, the country's multiple internal divisions create competing interpretations of Yemeni history, both ancient and contemporary. Thus, today one must attempt to make sense of events based on multiple competing narratives. It is fair to say that the majority of Yemenis lack a good, general understanding of their own country. Instead, they have a particular understanding defined by the location from which they speak, and from which their ancestors lived. If Yemenis have difficulty grasping the wider political meanings of their country, then the task for outsiders is hardly any easier.

Few American, Canadian, and British citizens travel to Yemen. The majority who visit rarely make the effort to go beyond the capital Sanaa and its immediate surroundings, while perhaps visiting Aden or the city of Taiz located between Sanaa and Aden. The city of Sanaa creates a strong first impression because of its majestic appearance on a broad plain between two mountain peaks more than a mile high. It is relatively easy to tour the capital, and visit towns and villages in the surrounding valleys and mountains of the Yemeni highlands. But in order to comprehend Yemen's more complex realities, it is necessary to venture far from Sanaa and meet people from regions along the coasts, in the central desert, and inside a fascinating canyon in the eastern province of Hadramaut. It helps to read local histories about these regions, but most of these histories are only available in Arabic.

PHOTO 1. Sanaa's "Old City" framed by Mount Nugum

One of the best contemporary English-language writers on Yemen is the British author Tim Mackintosh-Smith who spent decades, beginning in the 1980s, gaining familiarity with the land and its people. In 1997, Mackintosh-Smith published his first book *Yemen: Travels in Dictionary Land*.[3] He modeled his work after the chronicles of the 10th century Yemeni historian, al-Hasan ibn Ahmed al-Hamdani, as well as the medieval travelogues of Ibn al-Mujawar. The original subtitle of Mackintosh-Smith's work is taken from a passage of a book written by the late blind poet, Abdullah al-Baradduni, entitled "The Popular Literary Arts of Yemen."

Poetry and literature are central to Yemeni culture. The poet's pen is often the most influential factor in defining social and political realities. Al-Baradduni lived through both revolutions in north and south Yemen during the 1960s, and the national unity process in the 1990s. He passed away in 1999, and now is remembered as one of the country's greatest poets, writers, and political commentators. Mackintosh-Smith opens his book with a quote from al-Baradduni's work:

> Our land is the dictionary of our people – this land of far horizons where the graves of our ancestors sleep, this earth downtrodden by processions of sons and sons of sons.

[3] Mackintosh-Smith, 1997.

If Yemen's landscape is the dictionary that gives meaning to its people, then it is nearly impossible to define a single identity for Yemenis. The country's topography defies the imagination of anyone envisioning a plain desert landscape.

Along Yemen's western coast, there is a rugged, nearly impassable chain of mountains rising above twelve thousand feet. These breathtakingly beautiful mountains capture ample rains pouring into the country from storms off the Red Sea to the west and the Arabian Sea to the southeast. On rare occasions, they even collect snow during winter months. As a result, Yemen has abundant agriculture in its western mountains and valleys. Ancient terraced farmland rests on top of lava flows, which are capable of producing three crops per year. In the southwest, there are tropical forests where a breed of leopard unique to Arabia once roamed. There are vast desert sands in the central interior region. Its eastern edge forms the mouth of Hadramaut's canyon system. Each of these regions has unique characteristics which, over the centuries, preserved political and cultural diversity inside the country.

Early in Tim Mackintosh-Smith's book, he explains some early advice he received about the use of a specific dictionary for classical Arabic. The spoken dialect in Yemen is close to the classical language used during the

PHOTO 2. Mountain stream in al-Udayn, Ibb region of leopard