

Interview – Ibrahim Jalal

Written by E-International Relations

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This interview is part of a series of interviews with academics and practitioners at an early stage of their career. The interviews discuss current research and projects, as well as advice for other early career scholars.

Ibrahim Jalal is a Yemeni security, conflict, and defence researcher. He is also a Non-Resident Scholar at the Middle East Institute, an Erasmus Scholar, and a co-founder of The Security Distillery. Ibrahim's research examines the UN-led peace process in Yemen, the politics of the Arab coalition, the hybrid rise of the Houthi insurgency, Gulf security, Iran's role in the region, and the evolving security architecture of the Middle East. Ibrahim was a visiting scholar at Macquarie University's Department of Security Studies and Criminology, and has consulted with several entities, including the Overseas Development Institute and Oxford Research Group. His latest articles for the MEI are available here. Ibrahim recently contributed a chapter to *The Palgrave Encyclopedia of Peace and Conflict Studies* on the multifaceted evolution of the Yemen Conflict.

What (or who) prompted the most significant shifts in your thinking or encouraged you to pursue your area of research?

The most significant shifts in my thinking are a consequence of ongoing encounters and experiences. Not only do I attribute these shifts to my parents for placing me on the right track, but most importantly, for keeping their eyes wide open while realising that I'm in charge. I also owe a lot to my professors who have contributed to refining how I see, grasp, interpret, compare, and analyse concepts in different ways. The diversification of my education between Southeast Asia and Europe also pushed my boundaries and enabled me to meet my professors, whose work inspired me to think critically, unlearn, and reconsider ideas. Dr. Knocks Zengeni, Professor Cheng-Chwee Kuik, Professor Sayfi' Anwar, Professor Andrew Tan, Dr. Zaki Ahmed and Professor Gezim Visoka are some of those I'm indebted to for all their advice and support. Then came mentorship. Without it, identifying what career path one wants to pursue and what areas of research to focus on, can be demanding. Life goes on and pathways may change. For instance, five years ago I never planned to start a career in a think tank. Instead, I wanted to pursue a career in the Foreign Service.

Several things prompted me to specialise in conflict resolution, peace-making, Gulf security and Yemeni dynamics. The first is personal. My father, a political scientist and statesman, as well as relatives like former Prime Minister Dr. Hassan Makki, influenced my interests both directly and indirectly. They are examples of values-driven academic politicians. Having lived through the Arab Spring uprising in Yemen first-hand, having observed the decline of transitional peace processes while studying overseas, and having lost many of my loved ones during war, I became interested in exploring the dynamics of the conflict to challenge my perceptions and learn more. My first MSc focused on examining the UN-led Peace Process in Yemen (2011-2017). My second reason is national. I thought that gaining academic training and practical experience in conflict resolution and sustainable peacebuilding, would resonate with needs and priorities back home. In any conflict zone, conflict resolution and peace processes are long-term challenges. Having local experts is crucial to localise liberal ways to resolve the conflict and build peace. Nothing makes me, like many others among the diaspora, feel better than making a contribution back home, regardless of how minor.

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What are the key challenges facing the new unity government in Yemen?

The challenges facing the newly formed unity government are many. At the most general level, the Republic of Yemen Government (ROYG) must improve revenue collection and public services, regain public trust, and strengthen its bargaining position and leverage. Aside from coordinating a team of rivals and mobilising regional and international support, the first challenge is to assume security control in Aden to ensure freedom of movement, interaction with the public, and rebuild the government's popular legitimacy. Secondly, the Maeen government will have to ensure the uncontested collection of revenues, including from Marib, which holds Yemen's revenue-generating Safer Oil and Gas Corporation and fields, to be able to enhance service delivery.

The third challenge is fighting widespread corruption across state institutions, including the security apparatus and military establishment, in order to minimise public expenditure and redirect resources elsewhere. Fourthly, the ROYG has a responsibility to reactivate inactive sources of revenue, such as the UAE-held Belhaf Gas Facility in the Shabwa governorate, in order to increase foreign currency circulation, pay salaries, stabilise the Yemeni Riyal and mitigate some of the hardships that local populations face. Another challenge is the disarmament of militias, the reintegration of non-state forces under the auspices of the Ministries of Interior and Defence, and the reunification of their command-and-control structures to avert disputed security provisions, which would be an unfavourable recipe for stabilisation and recovery efforts. Other challenges relate to the military and the peace process, which are explained in more detail in my latest piece for the Middle East Institute.

The Southern Transitional Council has been included in the Yemeni government. How will this impact the UAE's interests in Yemen and its wider influence in the region?

Considering the pivotal financial, political and military support that the UAE has given to the Southern Transitional Council (STC), which it has supervised since its formation in May 2017, the inclusion of the UAE-backed STC doubtless offers the UAE new hands in the government. It also counters the influence and role of Yemen's Islamist party, Islah. Unlike Saudi Arabia, the UAE claims to have distanced itself from Yemen, but its influence remains considerably strong, having trained, financed and armed more than 90,000 militants in Yemen. For one to think about how strong the UAE's influence is (or at least was), consider that without the armed rebellion in Aden and the UAE's strikes against the Yemeni Armed Forces in August 2019, there would not have been a Riyadh Agreement in the first place. The fact that the UAE intervened militarily is a clear sign of its endorsement of the STC's escalation, and this raises legitimate questions about whether or not it was involved in planning, coordinating and/or initiating the escalation. Moreover, the Yemeni Government, as well as Riyadh, were both pulled into a series of minor battles between the STC and the government throughout 2020, including by means of military escalation in Abyan. This distracted the strategic focus from fighting the Houthis, and eventually played out to the latter's advantage.

The STC pays great respect to the UAE (to the point that, according to several observers, it defends UAE leaders more than the Emiratis) and has made clear that it can advance the UAE's interests in Yemen. For instance, Emirati security and tourism ambitions in Socotra (a mind-boggling archipelago in the Arabian Sea that overlooks maritime shipments passing through the Bab al-Mandab and Hormuz straits) have slowly been advancing, including through the illegal construction of military bases, the installation of Emirati telecommunication infrastructure, and by sending in foreigners without official Yemeni entry permits. Socotra's location, strategically positioned between Bab al-Mandab, the Arabian Sea and the Indian Ocean, alongside its very rare plant species, white sands and mountains, are attractive both in terms of security and tourism.

By looking at the Horn of Africa and the Gulf of Aden, one can see the UAE's geo-economic interests and its battle to control ports through rental agreements and relative deactivation strategies favourable to its home ports. After the Djibouti Government announced the unilateral termination of Dubai Ports World's (DPW) 30-year lease over the Doraleh Container Terminal in 2018, Djibouti's Inspector General, Hassan Sultan, stated that "it became quite clear that DP World didn't want the port to be developed because it never did more than 50 percent of the capacity," in routing "transshipments through its Jebel Ali port in Dubai." The official added: "they were a constraint on the port activity." This is precisely why Aden Port Corporation terminated DPW's contract in Yemen six years earlier. According to Yemen's former Transport Minister, Waed Bathib, DPW reportedly made "promises under the contract

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to raise container traffic from 500,000 20ft-equivalent units a year in 2008 to 900,000". This ultimately "faltered, with throughput dropping as low as 140,000 a year in 2011."

Aden's port was formerly known as the Hong Kong of the East, and it still has the potential to be, especially given its geo-strategic advantages. However, stability is required to pave the way for a mutually benefiting contract investment agreement that can develop the infrastructure, increase capacity and traffic, as well as create jobs. China reaped the benefits in the Djiboutian case by making a \$3 billion investment in Doraleh port, thereby increasing its geopolitical footprint in the Horn of Africa. In fact, it could be the first to do so should Yemen stabilise and should other neighbours fail to make a mutually benefiting offer. Shortly after the termination of the Emirati DPW contract in Yemen, Beijing signed an agreement with the Aden Ports Corporation in November 2013 to expand and deepen the Aden Container Terminal. However, the unfolding instability, marked by the Houthi armed rebellion in September 2014 and the military intervention of the Arab Coalition, has frozen developmental projects, and increased regional interference. The point is, relationships with the Republic of Yemen for neighbours and partners alike, should be based on mutual interests, not exploitation. If there are mutual interests that are beneficial for the economy, the Yemeni Government is unlikely to hesitate in considering preferential conditions for investments into development. This would be better for regional security, stability, peace, and collective growth.

Has the Houthi response to the pandemic compounded the humanitarian crisis in Yemen?

The response of the Houthis to the pandemic has generally been poor and ambiguous. Contrary to the rest of the world, they acknowledged less than five Covid-19 cases until now. Thousands of deaths, if not more, went under-reported and were covered up, according to Maggie Michael of The Associate Press. The Houthis used the pandemic to advance their mobilisation and recruitment of the public, to the point that a junior leader told the public that dying in the battlefield is more honourable than dying due to Covid-19. They also promised to produce a Covid-19 vaccine (the world is probably still waiting for their contribution). In security terms, the Houthis weaponised the pandemic to tighten controls and surveillance, as well as restrict individual freedoms. In general, the Houthis introduced another form of rebel governance during a global pandemic which exhausted the most capable governments around the world. Did all of these dynamics deepen the humanitarian crisis? Yes, mainly because the Houthis denied the existence of the pandemic for so long, a condition under which many people died and under which the virus spread undetected. While acknowledging the limitations of the health system, their lack of data sharing hampered the effective mobilisation of resources, the coordination of a response, and the rehabilitation of health facilities to increase their capacity. My article for the Middle East Institute discusses the Covid-19 landscape in Yemen more broadly and in further detail.

The US has revoked its decision to designate the Houthis as a terrorist organisation. What effect will this have on the Yemeni conflict?

In early February, the new Secretary of State, Antony Blinken, notified the US congress of his intent to revoke the FTO designation. This reassured the humanitarian cluster, who had demanded this shift, and marks a change in US foreign policy towards Yemen as the Biden administration seeks to revive the peace process at any cost. However, it has doubtless emboldened the Houthis to the point that they launched a large-scale military offensive against Marib the next day. On Twitter, many Yemenis and some Western analysts, believe that the revocation of the FTO designation gave the Houthis a free win, made voluntary concessions to Iran, and lost the once-lacking leverage card that the US had wanted. Neither the US, nor the international community, have ever held leverage over the Houthis. The US was complaining about this for the past few years and now they can continue to do so. Who will pay the price? The Yemeni people and the Republic of Yemen. Overall, it is fair to say that the US has, whether inadvertently or otherwise, sent the wrong signals when it imposed and then revoked the FTO designation. The timings were wrong and this hasn't served Yemen.

What are you currently working on?

Currently, I'm working on issues relevant to the revival of the UN-led peace process, including arms control, grievances in the Tehama region, the UN Special Envoy's Joint Declaration proposal, and US foreign policy towards

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Yemen under President Biden. I'm also contributing to the outputs of the Overseas Development Institute's project to monitor, explore and analyse economic, political and security trends of (in)stability, in order to inform humanitarian operations in Yemen. Aside from written outputs, I'm engaged in amplifying the voice of evidence-based research through briefings, roundtable discussions, expert focus groups, and panels. As you can imagine, Covid-19 has made everything virtual. All I see are screens: screens to research, read, draft, write, talk, have coffee, and watch series. Will this be the new way to do many things in a post-Covid-19 world?

What is the most important advice you could give to young scholars?

My first piece of advice for young scholars is, don't spend too much time looking for platforms to publish your work. I was there. If you have an original contribution, publish it anywhere, such as on LinkedIn, a university blog, a student-led think tank, or in a magazine. The truth is, you never know who might read your work regardless of where it is. If it's the right person or organisation, they will likely reach out or at least keep you under their radar. There are many underexplored areas where think tanks, UN entities, private firms and government agencies look for niche experiences, or new graduates with a specialisation. Getting your thoughts out there is important. You have to start somewhere. That could equally be problematic, so be careful with what you want to share.

My second piece of advice is, learn how to use Twitter effectively for policy and academic discussions. Visibility of thought-provoking work is necessary, especially because nonsense is increasingly becoming visible. Without established contacts or referrals, no one knows that you're there if they don't see you. Twitter helps you connect with relevant people in your niche via retweets and comments. When I first started using Twitter based on advice from a friend, Harry Makaleh, the British Ambassador to Yemen commented on my retweet and I told myself, Harry is right, Twitter is a big deal. I had less than 200 followers back then. But no one cares as long as there is added value, which matters. Twitter helps you shed light on content with relevant audiences. Many people appreciate analytically sound opinions, ideas and insights because Twitter is full of observers, less experienced yet actively engaged individuals, established experts, media outlets, commentators, firms, inter-governmental organisations, non-governmental organisations, and diplomatic corps. A professor of mine used to receive media commentary invites through Twitter. I was surprised back then but not now. Looking back, I arguably started my think tank and consulting paths through LinkedIn and Twitter!

My third piece of advice is not to accept all offers. Accept them because they're relevant, suitable and interesting. When offers accumulate, you can start to see a portfolio of expertise. I'm not saying don't be open to regularly learning new things, but not everything is for you, nor should it be. Some offers can unnecessarily distract you. Stay focused. Brand-building takes time, effort and energy. It takes consistency. Network with the right people and talk with the wrong people, because they often have a point. Overall, everything adds or takes something, so choose wisely.

The advice above is meant for recent graduates. If you're still at college, you have more time to plan ahead. Think about producing academic publications, including by co-authoring articles or book reviews with your professors. They can be great resources. Start learning how to write op-eds. Shorter pieces are often harder than longer ones. You need to deliver your argument with less words and learning these skills earlier will save you time later. Go for research assistant positions if you want to sharpen your research skills or think tank internships and fellowships if you want to cultivate policy-oriented skills. Combining both experiences is ideal. Finally, learn from your seniors, professors, alumni and mentors. Some can be more helpful and resourceful than others. Networks are often net-worth, built over time. Enjoy the process because everything has a time!