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**Digital Diasporas: The Yemeni Diaspora and
The Political Marketplace**



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School of Government and International Affairs

A thesis submitted for the degree of

Doctor of Philosophy

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Abstract

This thesis critically examines the role diasporas play in political marketplaces in the 21st century. It explores the ways the internet and social media are now reshaping how diasporas identify, form communities and mobilise in homeland conflict, using the Yemeni diaspora as a case study. Drawing on desk research of Yemeni diaspora actors and interviews with Yemenis in the diaspora, it seeks to add to the theoretical literature on diaspora studies and conflict transformation, as well as building on existing empirical research towards the conflict in Yemen.

Adding nuance to traditional diaspora scholarship, the thesis uses Alex De Waal's concept of the political marketplace as a theoretical framework to explore the ways in which diasporas engage with the political dynamics of the homeland, and how they mobilise in conflict management and resolution in political marketplaces like Yemen's. It studies the Yemeni diaspora in the UK in particular as a microcosm of diaspora activity, testing the conclusions drawn from the research by applying them to a host state which is home to longstanding and well-established Yemeni communities, as well as waves of migrants displaced by conflict and instability since 2011. It also considers the gendered nature of Yemeni diaspora mobilisation in the ongoing conflict. The thesis concludes that the internet and social media are fundamentally reshaping diasporic processes such as identity and community formation and mobilisation in conflict, with important implications for scholars of diaspora and conflict transformation, as well as practitioners in the conflict and peacebuilding fields.

On a theoretical level, this thesis applies a unique and innovative approach, combining key elements of the diaspora studies and conflict transformation literatures to create a new theoretical framework for understanding diaspora mobilisation in homeland conflict. This framework enables the researcher to capture the complex and constantly evolving ways in which the Yemeni diaspora identifies, forms community, and engages with the politics of its homeland. However it also offers a versatile model for future research seeking to understand the role of diasporas in other fragile, conflict-affected, or patrimonial states. On an empirical level, this thesis contributes new knowledge of how Yemeni diaspora communities have evolved globally - but particularly in the UK - since 2011, in the context of the ongoing conflict and the explosive proliferation of the internet and social media. It therefore provides valuable insights and evidence for diplomats, policymakers, journalists and programming professionals working to deliver peacebuilding, humanitarian and development agendas in Yemen.

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Thank you to my friends and peers - especially Graihagh - who spent countless hours proofreading, discussing ideas, and keeping me grounded when I lost sight of the bigger picture - I am truly grateful. To my family and friends, I offer my heartfelt thanks. Your encouragement, support, and understanding over the past five years have been a constant source of strength. To my Mum, Granny and Maddie especially, you have reminded me time and again why this work is so important to me and you believed I would get to the finish line even when I didn't believe it myself. Your belief in me has kept me focused and motivated, and I could not have done this without you.

And finally, I owe a special debt of gratitude to the interviewees and to all the Yemenis in the diaspora who have so graciously shared their stories, insights, and perspectives. Your willingness to open your hearts and homes, to share not only your experiences but also your culture, heritage, and even your delicious food, has made completing this research the most enriching and meaningful experience of my professional career. Your warmth, resilience, and commitment to peace and prosperity in your homeland have been a constant source of inspiration, and this thesis is as much a reflection of your voices as it is of my own research. Thank you for your trust and generosity - I dedicate this research to you.

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Note on Spelling and Translation

The transliteration of Arabic words in this thesis follows the system employed by the International Journal of Middle East Studies (IJMES). All Arabic words are italicized, except for those commonly used in English (e.g., Islam, Sunni, Ramadan) names, and proper nouns. Place names are rendered according to their accepted transliterations. Arabic terms are only italicized on their first appearance and are not italicized in subsequent occurrences. Arabic terms are defined on their first appearance. In some cases, Arabic plurals appear in English form, where this is the norm (e.g., 'Yemenis', 'Sana'ais'). All translations from Arabic to English, unless otherwise stated, are the author's own.

Introduction

Post-War

By Amina Atiq

*I emptied this ship escaping ramathan family dinners
bilingual laughter's and salvaged loud speaker conversations
on a £5 talk-talk phone card. I hear my distant cousin shouting my name*

the dial tone has spoken, hurry before the credit ends...

*I climbed the back window and hid the Yemeni sailors from the scratching
floorboards, listening from behind the boiler rooms and Thachters blind*

promises to reward our descendants' British citizenships

they drowned with the warships and never saw the daylight of Liverpool's port

A poet stands on the stage of the Eurovision song contest in Liverpool, reciting a love poem to her beloved city in a thick Scouse accent and welcoming friends and strangers visiting from across borders, streamed online to be viewed by millions. A young fashion designer from Sheffield stages an immersive performance and photoshoot featuring designs combining contemporary streetwear with traditional fabrics and cuts from the southern Arabian Peninsula, promoting narratives of coexistence and anti-racism that will later be featured in

Vogue. A peace activist and human rights advocate travels from Cairo to Georgetown to accept the 2023 Hillary Clinton award for her work with a humanitarian organisation in a country on the other side of the world. A father in Somerset picks up his children from school between emailing Members of Parliament and conducting workshops with civil society organisations thousands of miles away via Zoom. A political analyst recounts stories of her homeland for an Al Jazeera documentary on the Gaza war, recorded online from her apartment in Stockholm. A young man talks into his iPhone from a hospital ward in Cairo, recording a live video for Instagram thanking his audience – mainly located in Birmingham – for their donations, which have paid for life-saving cancer surgery for the child sitting next to him. A pro-peace activist and political commentator, weary after long, painful years of calling for peace in a world that wants war, paints on a canvas in her kitchen in Lisbon, conjuring memories of childhood and slowly healing the unresolved traumas of war. A man sips an americano in a coffee shop in London, exchanging WhatsApp messages with the families of victims of forced disappearances in his home city.

Though scattered across the world and engaged in a myriad of different activities, all of these people have something in common: Yemen. Some were born there and migrated overseas in search of new opportunities or to escape political instability and war. Others were born overseas, returning to their ancestral homeland to visit their families in bustling cities or mountain villages during summer holidays. All – regardless of their individual stories and

circumstances – have retained a deep connection to Yemen, and all remain actively committed to building a better future for their fellow Yemenis back ‘home’. These Yemenis, with their myriad identities, communities and ways of engaging or ‘mobilising’ in the affairs of their homeland, represent Yemen’s diaspora.

In the rapidly evolving landscape of twenty-first century global politics, diasporas are playing an increasingly vital role, not just as cultural or economic entities but as political actors deeply involved in the affairs of their homelands. As globalization shrinks distances and collapses traditional barriers, developments in technology, especially the rise of the internet and social media, are fundamentally reshaping how diasporas identify, build communities, and mobilize during times of conflict. These digital tools provide unprecedented avenues for diasporas to influence political and social dynamics from afar, challenging previous conceptions of diaspora engagement. For the international community, including policymakers, peacebuilders, and humanitarian practitioners, this shift carries profound implications. The potential for diasporas to either stabilize or destabilize conflicts demands a nuanced understanding of their role as intermediaries between home and host countries. Recognizing the power and influence of these dispersed populations is crucial for fostering more effective conflict resolution strategies and international cooperation in an increasingly interconnected world.

Yemen presents an ideal case study for examining the evolving role of diasporas in global politics due to its long and storied history of migration, coupled with the neopatrimonial nature of its political system. For centuries, Yemenis have been migrating, establishing strong diaspora communities across the globe, from the Gulf to Europe and beyond. This long-standing tradition of migration has created deep transnational ties, positioning the Yemeni diaspora as a significant actor in both local and international political arenas. Furthermore, the neopatrimonial structure of Yemeni politics—where personal loyalty and patronage often supersede institutional governance—makes diaspora engagement even more pivotal in shaping political outcomes. The ongoing conflict in Yemen, marked by a complex web of local, regional, and global actors, further underscores the importance of this transnational dimension. The Yemeni diaspora, facilitated by technological advancements, is intricately involved in the conflict, from providing humanitarian aid to shaping narratives and influencing diplomatic efforts. Yemen's unique combination of historical migration patterns, political dynamics, and its prolonged, internationalized conflict make it a critical lens through which to explore the transformative potential of diasporas in twenty-first century geopolitics.

This thesis provides a critical analysis of the influence diasporas exert within twenty-first century political marketplaces. It investigates how the internet and social media are transforming diaspora identity, community formation, and mobilization in homeland conflicts, with the Yemeni diaspora serving as the

primary case study. Through desk research on Yemeni diaspora participants and interviews with Yemenis abroad, the thesis contributes to the theoretical literature on diasporas and conflict studies, while also expanding empirical research related to the Yemen conflict.

The thesis applies Alex De Waal's concept of the political marketplace as a theoretical lens to examine how diasporas engage with homeland political dynamics, as well as their role in conflict management and resolution in political environments like Yemen. Focusing on the Yemeni diaspora in the UK, the research views it as a reflection of broader diaspora activities, testing research conclusions by applying them to a host nation with established Yemeni communities and recent waves of migrants displaced since 2011. It also explores the gendered aspects of Yemeni diaspora mobilization in the ongoing conflict. The findings suggest that the internet and social media are fundamentally altering diaspora processes, including identity formation, community building, and conflict mobilization, with significant implications for scholars, as well as for peacebuilding practitioners.

The thesis begins with a comprehensive review of the literature across the multiple disciplines this thesis traverses, followed by the presentation of the theoretical framework and the research methodology. The research findings will then be presented and critical analysis will ensue to answer three overriding research questions:

1. How is the proliferation of the internet and social media reshaping diasporic processes of identity formation, community building, and mobilisation in homeland conflict?
2. What are the implications of this for our theoretical understanding of the concepts of diaspora and diaspora mobilisation?
3. What positions and roles do diasporas occupy in the political marketplaces of their homelands?

Chapter 1 focuses on the existing academic literature pertaining to Yemen, providing an overview of literature on Yemen's history, political economy, and complex social dynamics, and considering how these factors paved the way for the current conflict. It focuses in particular on the myriad constructions of Yemeni identity, as well as the politics of patronage and neopatrimonialism, considering how these complex phenomena have laid the groundwork for the political crises and violence that the country has witnessed since 2011. It goes on to explore existing academic frameworks that have attempted to conceptualise the ongoing war, examining the differing academic perspectives on the barriers standing in the way of peace and development in Yemen today. Finally, it places these frameworks into the context of the Yemeni diaspora, offering an overview of the literature on migration from Yemen and the evolution of Yemeni diaspora communities around the world – both before and since the political upheaval of the period from 2011 onwards.

Chapter 2 reviews the growing body of scholarship in the field of diaspora studies, beginning with a thorough examination of the myriad understandings

of the term diaspora and the evolution of the concept with the development of the field. It then presents and examines the dominant academic theories and frameworks pertaining to the 'diasporic processes' relevant to this thesis: Firstly, it exploring the ways in which academia has conceptualised the ways in which diasporas form identity and community. Then, it explores scholarly understandings of why and how diasporas mobilise in the politics and conflict of their homelands, also briefly considering how the existing literature has sought to conceptualise the impacts of this mobilisation. It critically analyses throughout the gaps and limitations in the existing literature, proposing areas where further study is needed or could complement the existing body of theoretical work in this field. Finally, this chapter situates the diaspora studies literature in the context of the twenty-first century conflict environment, touching briefly on the ways in which the conflict studies field has sought to offer frameworks for the new era of conflict that has arisen as a result of globalisation and advances in technology.

Chapter 3 moves away from reviewing the existing literature, towards constructing a theoretical framework for this thesis drawing on the frameworks outlined in Chapters 1 and 2. It presents Alex De Waal's concept of the 'Political Marketplace', as outlined in his book, *The Real Politics of the Horn of Africa* as the primary framework for this thesis, critically engaging with key concepts such as horizontal communities and identity based politics, the price of loyalty, rentierism and integration with global systems, violence and turbulence, and the

role of the public sphere.¹ It analyses De Waal's articulation of the role and position of diasporas in the political marketplaces of their homeland, highlighting the ways in which this thesis will build on the framework in order to offer a more comprehensive understanding of the role of diasporas – which includes considering the crucial role of the internet and social media in the globalised age. It also explores in detail the application of the political marketplace framework to the specific case of Yemen, considering the unique dynamics of Yemen's marketplace and the implications of this for the ways in which Yemen's diaspora engages with it.

The chapter goes on to set out the research methodology for the thesis, outlining in detail how the research will lead to more thorough understanding of the role of diasporas in the political marketplaces of their homeland – both on a theoretical and an empirical level. It establishes the specific research questions that the thesis will seek to address, outlining in detail the scope, methodology, ethical considerations, and areas for analysis that follow in subsequent chapters. The findings of the research – which consists of a thorough mapping of Yemeni diaspora actors and a series of semi-structured interviews with key individuals – are distributed throughout the remaining chapters (4-7) and used to support deep analysis of the research questions outlined above.

¹ Alex De Waal, *The Real Politics of the Horn of Africa: Money, War and the Business of Power* (Cambridge: Polity Press, 2015).

Chapter 4 presents the initial findings of the research as they pertain to the formation of identity and community in the Yemeni diaspora. It considers the multiple, often competing sources of identity and belonging that Yemenis – both inside and outside of Yemen – grapple with, exploring how Yemenis outside of Yemen understand themselves and each other, and how this shapes the formation of communities. Drawing on the data collected, it explores the ways in which these processes are occurring and evolving in the digital age, as Yemenis in the diaspora are increasingly connected virtually and transnationally through the internet and social media.

Chapter 5 builds on this, exploring processes of mobilisation in the Yemeni diaspora and considering both why and how mobilisation occurs. It focuses in depth on the role communication technologies are playing in reshaping mobilisation processes such as narrative formation, in the creation of new spaces and mechanisms for connection, discourse and cultural production. It also explores how the internet and social media are being used increasingly to support diaspora engagement in activities such as advocacy, human rights, peacebuilding and humanitarian relief, highlighting how complex, dynamic and multi-layered the role of the diaspora in Yemen's conflict and political marketplace has become.

Chapter 6 applies the analysis and conclusions presented in Chapters 4 and 5 specifically to the case of the Yemeni diaspora in the UK, considering this a useful

microcosm of the community and mobilisation dynamics explored throughout this thesis. It begins with a historical overview of Yemeni migration to, and settlement in the UK, highlighting the academic literature that has sought to document and analyse this. It then seeks to answer questions around how Yemeni-British people identity, form community, and mobilise in Yemen's politics and ongoing conflict, with particular emphasis on the ways in which they are using the internet and social media to do so. As well as drawing on the data collected throughout the research, this chapter highlights the stories and experiences of individuals to exemplify the phenomena discussed throughout Chapters 4 and 5 – from a Yemeni-Scouse writer using poetry to connect to her roots, to a Sheffield-based fashion designer drawing on Yemeni cultural heritage and contemporary street style to combat racism and discrimination.

Chapter 7 brings together the findings and analyses of chapters 4-6, providing answers to the three research questions outlined above. It seeks to articulate a new understanding of the role diasporas play in the political marketplaces of their homelands, drawing conclusions around the extent to which they can both perpetuate and prohibit the onset of marketplace dynamics. It also returns to the conceptualisations and frameworks set out in chapter 2 around diaspora and mobilisation, considering the ways in which the internet and social media are reshaping diasporic processes with profound implications for academics, policymakers and practitioners in the humanitarian and development worlds.

The thesis ends with a Conclusion chapter that draws together the theoretical and empirical findings of the research and the subsequent analysis to offer a nuanced and multifaceted understanding of the evolving role of diasporas, particularly in the context of the Yemeni diaspora and its involvement in the political marketplace of Yemen. It concludes that diasporas, through digital engagement, are now more intricately embedded in the networks of patronage and political finance that shape conflicts like Yemen's, influencing both humanitarian efforts and political dynamics. It highlights the ways in which this involvement often blurs the lines between support and patronage, as diaspora actors, intentionally or otherwise, become deeply rooted in these complex systems. At the same time, it highlights the ways in which the internet and social media have transformed the public sphere, where online narratives about the conflict—shaped by diaspora discussions—directly influence policymakers and conflict parties. Importantly, it challenges traditional notions of diaspora detachment, showing how technological advances have blurred distinctions between homeland and diaspora, creating hybrid forms of mobilization that blend online and offline actions. Thus, these conclusions call into question static definitions of diaspora, advocating instead for a more dynamic and contextual understanding that incorporates both territorialized and deterritorialized dimensions of diaspora activity.

While this thesis consists of theoretical analysis and deep empirical research, it also contains a set of human stories. Stories of migration, of displacement, of

'ghurba' (strangeness in Arabic), of longing, of connection, of sorrow – the stories of war. Aside from the academic contributions mentioned above, this thesis is a testament to the strength, resilience and tenacity of the Yemenis whose stories it tells, from which the world can learn a great deal.

Chapter 1: Identity, Conflict and the Yemeni Diaspora

This chapter reviews the existing scholarly literature on Yemen in order to conceptualise the conflict and the role of diaspora actors in Yemen's political marketplace. In this chapter, I critically examine the dominant research into Yemen's history, political economy and society before the 2011 uprising, analysing historical drivers of conflict and the factors and events that sowed the seeds for the complex, internationalised web of violence we are witnessing today. I review different conceptualisations in the literature of the current conflict and deconstruct the drivers of violence and barriers to peace.

The chapter also offers a historical overview of the Yemeni diaspora, reviewing the existing research into migration and diaspora relations. It analyses the dynamics and patterns of Yemeni migration throughout history according to the literature, exploring how migration and life in the diaspora has shaped how Yemenis identify themselves, form communities with one another, engage with their host states, and influence political economy and society in Yemen. Finally, I explore what the Yemeni diaspora looks like today according to the existing scholarship, investigating how the conflict has influenced patterns of migration and, in turn, how Yemeni migrants and their descendants are shaping the dynamics of politics and conflict in the homeland.

I assess the limitations of the existing literature, predominantly in terms of how scholars have conceptualised the current conflict in a way that does not fully

grasp its complex transnational nature, and particularly the role of migration and Yemeni actors outside of the country. For example, limited research has been conducted into the significant Yemeni communities living elsewhere in the Middle East, except through the lens of the impact of economic remittances on the Yemeni economy. Similarly, the existing scholarship offers a limited understanding of the ways that Yemenis in the diaspora engage politically with the homeland, with the exception perhaps of the body of literature focusing on the Hadhrami diaspora. This is such that many scholars have called for further research into the migration of Yemenis and the complex, dynamic web of transnational relations that exist within and between Yemeni communities in the diaspora and the homeland.

Accordingly, there is a need to reconceptualise the current conflict in order to capture these complex dynamics, demonstrating that a further review of the broader literature relating to conflict and diaspora relations is needed. In this chapter, I claim that further research into the role of the Yemeni diaspora is necessary in order to fully understand the transnational dynamics of this conflict. Fundamentally, I conclude that the existing literature fails to conceptualise what it means to be a member of the Yemeni diaspora today, in terms of identity, community and mobilisation in Yemen's ongoing conflict.

Identity Politics and Neopatrimonialism: Historical Roots of the Conflict

A comprehensive body of scholarship exists today focusing on Yemeni history, politics and society. Studying this literature helps to paint a picture of the myriad drivers of violence and instability in Yemen, setting the events of 2011 and beyond firmly into context. For example, examining the competing societal forces and sources of identity in Yemen – including tribal, religious and regional affiliations – helps to explain the fragility of Yemeni national identity and, to some extent, the nation state. Meanwhile, literature focusing on Yemen’s political economy identifies a number of key dynamics (including poor governance, corruption and neo-patrimonial networks of patronage) that sowed the seeds for instability and today act as barriers to peace. Finally, Yemen’s history of militarism and insecurity, particularly during the rule of Ali Abdullah Saleh, from the lack of a state monopoly on the use of the violence to tribal militarism and the presence of Islamist extremists in parts of the country, helps to explain some of the conflict dynamics visible in Yemen today. In what follows, I address these three concerns in turn.

Nation, Tribe, Region, Sect: Understanding Identity Formation and Socio-Political Organisation in Yemen

A recurring theme in the literature on Yemen is the concept of identity and its various sources in Yemeni society. Given that across Yemeni history, territorial unity has tended to be the exception rather than the rule, it is unsurprising that many scholars point to other, parochial sources of identity such as tribalism as

outweighing national identity in terms of importance.² In fact, few aspects of Yemeni society have captured the imaginations of researchers more so than the concept of the tribe.

The academic debates around tribalism have tended to centre on the role tribes have historically played in fostering peace and stability – or conversely violence and instability – in Yemen. Many scholars have pointed to the detrimental effect of tribalism on development. Sarah Phillips, for example, argues that the relationship between the Yemeni state and the tribes is ‘often contradictory, with each at times increasing and at times diminishing the other’s power, but both reinforcing traits in the other that provide considerable obstacles to state-building’.³ Others have pointed to the ways in which tribal legal codes and the vast arsenals of weapons at their disposal have competed with those of the state, thereby reducing the state’s legitimacy and authority.⁴

Other research concludes, however, that tribal structures play a positive role in Yemen, creating social cohesion which in turn substantiates state formation and existence.⁵ The assertion that tribal areas are ‘lawless’ has also been critiqued on

² Stephen W. Day, *Regionalism and Rebellion in Yemen: A Troubled National Union* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 2012), 15 and 22.

³ Victoria Clark, *Yemen: Dancing on the Heads of Snakes* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2010), 190.

⁴ International Crisis Group, *Breaking Point? Yemen’s Southern Question: Middle East Report No.114* (International Crisis Group, 2011), 29, accessed 12 May 2021, <https://www.crisisgroup.org/sites/default/files/114-breaking-point-yemen-s-southern-question.pdf>; Derek Miller, ‘Demand, Stockpiles, and Social Control: Small Arms in Yemen’, *Small Arms Survey* 9 (2003): vii.

⁵ Uzi Rabi, *Tribes and States in a Changing Middle East* (London: Hurst & Co, 2015), 222-223.

the basis that tribes operate according to well-developed systems of rules, rights and obligations.⁶ Many scholars have cited the tribal customs surrounding conflict management, arguing that tribes have played a powerful role in preventing and mediating conflict and countering violent extremism – in many instances more effectively than the state itself.⁷ Despite this, Shelagh Weir contends, Yemeni rulers and their officials have repeatedly portrayed the tribes as intrinsically anarchic and violent in order to justify their subjugation, which has perhaps contributed to the academic fascination with the detrimental effects of tribalism on development.⁸

However, such debates – though helpful in theory – tend to assume that Yemen’s tribes are homogenous and overlook the fluidity and dynamism of tribal identity across the various geographical regions of Yemen. Prominent scholars on Yemen, including Marieke Brandt, Uzi Rabi, Sarah Phillips, Paul Dresch, and Weir, have highlighted these nuances in their research. Rabi argues that, although tribalism is a powerful force in Yemen, it is not a monolithic one and tribal loyalties can shift over time across fixed territorial lines.⁹ Weir echoes this argument, emphasising the variation between tribes in size, forms of identity and modes of

⁶ Nadwa Dawsari, *Foe Not Friend: Yemeni Tribes and Al-Qaeda in the Arabian Peninsula* (Washington: Project on Middle East Democracy, 2018): 3.

⁷ Raiman Al-Hamdani and Gabrielle Stowe, *The Tribal Dimension: The Role of Yemeni Tribes in Conflict Mediation* (DeepRoot Consulting, 2019); Dimitris Soudias and Marieke Transfeld, *Mapping Popular Perceptions: Local Security, Insecurity and Police Work in Yemen*, (Sana’a: Yemen Polling Center, 2018): 19.

⁸ Shelagh Weir, *A Tribal Order: Politics and Law in the Mountains of Yemen* (Austin: University of Texas Press, 2017), 311-312.

⁹ Rabi, *Tribes and States in a Changing Middle East*, 18, 112, and 117-118.

organisation, and critiquing the homogenising generalisations of other scholars that mask this diversity.¹⁰ In her 2017 book, *Tribes and Politics in Yemen*, Brandt convincingly highlights the socio-political diversity of Yemen, arguing that the tribe is just one of many models of social representation.¹¹

Dresch goes one step further, suggesting that most of Yemen's population makes no claim to be tribal in any sense.¹² Phillips agrees, contending that just twenty percent of the population considers their tribe as their primary unit of identity.¹³ Some scholars contend that the role of the tribe as a source of identity and security has decreased in importance in recent years due to the dilution of tribal identification by individualism, as well as intra- and inter-tribal rivalries that prevent tribes from uniting politically.¹⁴ In spite of this, however, Phillips argues that the political significance of the tribes cannot be overlooked; their potential to engage in armed rebellion made them a significant factor in the pre-2011 Yemeni regime's political calculations – particularly during the Saleh era, when there existed an element of mutual reliance between the regime and certain tribes, notably the northern Hashid and Bakil confederations.¹⁵ While both may well be correct, the key conclusion to draw is that tribal identification and the

¹⁰ Weir, *A Tribal Order*, 2.

¹¹ Marieke Brandt, *Tribes and Politics in Yemen: A History of the Houthi Conflict* (London: Hurst, 2017), 18.

¹² Paul Dresch, *A History of Modern Yemen* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2000), 198.

¹³ Sarah Phillips, *Yemen and the Politics of Permanent Crisis* (Oxon: Routledge, 2011), 51.

¹⁴ Rabi, *Tribes and States in a Changing Middle East*, 8; Charles Schmitz, 'Tribes in Yemen: Dominant, but not a single bloc', *Istituto per gli Studi di Politica Internazionale* [online], 19 March 2018, accessed 26 November 2019, <https://www.ispionline.it/it/pubblicazione/tribes-yemen-dominant-not-single-bloc-1992>

¹⁵ Phillips, *Yemen and the Politics of Permanent Crisis*, 51.

political significance of the tribes is dynamic, fluid, and changes across time and geographical region according to political, economic and societal factors.

This brings to the fore another key dynamic which has shaped politics and identity in Yemen throughout history and continues to do so today: regionalism. While regionalism has a range of facets and understandings, this thesis uses the term to refer to an individual's region, governorate or city of origin within Yemen and how this shapes their identity and political outlook, echoing the understanding of regionalism articulated by Louise Fawcett.¹⁶ Yemen's identity blocks, according to Abdulghani Al-Iryani, are geographically and economically defined and have developed their own distinct social, cultural and linguistic features. The following blocks, he argues, have been vehicles for mobilisation and conflict throughout history:

- Hadhramaut;
- The Mashreq – the desert region from the Saudi border to the Arabian Sea, including Al-Jawf, Marib, Shabwa and eastern Abyan governorates;
- The Northern Highlands;
- Middle Yemen – includes a mix of tribes and peasants in Ibb, Taiz, Lahj, Aden, Al-Dhalea and western Abyan; and,

¹⁶ Louise Fawcett, 'Regions and Regionalism' in *Issues in 21st Century World Politics*, eds. Mark Beeson and Nick Bisley, (London : Red Globe Press, 2016), 97.

- The Tihama – the western coastal plain that historically extended deep into current Saudi Arabia.¹⁷

Much of the literature on Yemen highlights the importance of regional differences, with many scholars agreeing that regional identification outweighs other sources of identity in terms of importance.¹⁸ According to Stephen Day, Yemen's population in general lack a good understanding of their national identity. Instead, he argues, regional divisions have informed their political, social and cultural viewpoints.¹⁹ Day attributes the definition and perpetuation of these regional divisions to the political economy and the distribution of resources in Yemen, arguing that the balance vs. imbalance of resource distribution is what strengthens and weakens national vs. regional identities among the population and fuels regional competition.²⁰

The distinctions – historical, political, economic and cultural – between north and south Yemen, which unified in 1990 to form the Republic of Yemen, have been the subject of much research into Yemen's regional politics. Since the troubled unification process and subsequent civil war of 1994, obvious fault lines have continued to exist between the two formerly independent states, shaping politics and driving conflict to this day.

¹⁷ Abdulghani Al-Iryani, 'Yemenis Must Face the Truth About Our War of Identities', *The Sana'a Center for Strategic Studies*, 20 November 2020, accessed 12 May 2021, <https://sanaacenter.org/publications/analysis/11978>.

¹⁸ Clark, *Yemen: Dancing on the Heads of Snakes*, 13; Day, *Regionalism and Rebellion in Yemen*, 43.

¹⁹ Day, *Regionalism and Rebellion in Yemen*, 8.

²⁰ *Ibid.*, 13.

In his extensive research into regional politics in Yemen published in his 2012 book, *Regionalism and Rebellion in Yemen: A Troubled National Union*, Day explains that Yemen's national unity is not a given, natural state to which the country returned after the unification of north and south Yemen in 1990 (northern and southern Yemen were never in fact one united state before this point). Instead, he argues, it is an ongoing social and political project that must be actively managed in order to build the necessary loyalties and commitments to sustain unity and avoid the fragmentation of the state along regional lines.²¹ Though written in 2012, Day's analysis begins to shed light on the regional rivalries and fault lines shaping the current conflict, and particularly the tensions between north and south. Joseph Kostiner echoes Day's assertion, stating that a major failure of the unification process of the 1990s – and a likely reason for the subsequent fragility of national unity and identity – was the failure of both northern and southern governments to initiate any kind of socialisation process to educate their populations as to how to adapt to the reality of a greater Yemen.²²

Further regional-specific research has focused on the so-called exceptionalism of the governorate of Hadhramaut. Much of the literature on Hadhramaut agrees that the region's independent historical trajectory and distinctive form of socio-political organisation have given rise to a strong sense of regional, 'Hadhrami'

²¹ Ibid., 14.

²² Joseph Kostiner, *Yemen: The Tortuous Quest for Unity* (London: Royal Institute of International Affairs, 1996), 19.

identity. According to Thanos Petouris, the degree to which Hadhramis identify as Yemeni is debatable.²³

As well as helping to explain some of the fault lines in the current conflict, the research into regionalism in Yemen is particularly useful for understanding the role of tribes and how this varies across the country, as well as the intersectionality of identity in Yemen. Day articulates this well, stating that tribal identity is also territorial identity and arguing that the characteristics of tribes have developed as a result the history and geography of the regions where they reside.²⁴ In the north, for example, tribal identity and cohesion has traditionally been much stronger and more important to the region's politics. The tribes themselves were aligned in large confederations, whereas in the south, tribes tended to be smaller, more cohesive and never dominated by any particular confederation.²⁵ Meanwhile in the western coastal plains of the Tihama, Wadi Hadhramaut, and the urban centres of Sana'a and Aden, large sections of the population would arguably not describe themselves as tribespeople at all.²⁶ Yet in Al-Mahra to the east, the tribe has remained dominant, representing the primary vehicle for political and social organisation.²⁷

²³ Thanos Petouris, 'Hadhrami 'Exceptionalism': Attempts at an Explanation', in *Hadhramaut and its Diaspora: Yemeni Politics, Identity and Migration*, ed. Noel Brehony (London: I.B. Tauris, 2017), 41 and 45.

²⁴ Day, *Regionalism and Rebellion in Yeme*34.

²⁵ Rabi, *Tribes and States in a Changing Middle East*, 8.

²⁶ Clark, *Yemen: Dancing on the Heads of Snakes*, 118; Dawsari, 'Foe Not Friend', 15-16.

²⁷ Yahya Al-Sewari, *Yemen's Al-Mahra: From Isolation to the Eye of a Geopolitical Storm*, (Sana'a: Sana'a Center for Strategic Studies, 2019).

Tribal identity and influence have also waxed and waned over time according to regional politics. For example, the Yemeni Arab Republic (YAR), which existed before unification in 1990, operated a 'Tribal Affairs' office in every province under the vestiges of the Ministry of the Interior which created links between the tribes and the government and institutionalised tribalism as an organising force. In the south meanwhile, the communist government of the People's Democratic Republic of Yemen (PDRY) attempted to eliminate all vestiges of southern tribalism, substantially weakening tribal influence in communities and on southern politics).²⁸ Both Day and Fred Halliday both offer excellent accounts of this in their respective books, *Regionalism and Rebellion in Yemen: A Troubled National Union* and *Revolution and Foreign Policy: The case of South Yemen 1967-1987*.²⁹ The success of this policy was limited, however, and after unification President Ali Abdullah Saleh attempted to strategically 'retribalize' the south in order to pursue the same divide and rule tactics he was employing in the former YAR).³⁰ These examples demonstrate that it is impossible to separate tribalism and regionalism when talking about Yemeni identity, socio-political organisation, and state-society relations.

Another force within Yemeni society that has been cited often in relation to Yemeni politics and identity is religious sectarianism. Similarly to tribe and geographical region, the role of religion is complex and dynamic – yet these

²⁸ Day, *Regionalism and Rebellion in Yemen*, 97-98.

²⁹ Fred Halliday, *Britain's First Muslims: Portrait of an Arab Community* (London: IB Tauris, 2010).

³⁰ International Crisis Group, *Breaking Point? Yemen's Southern Question*, 5.

complexities are frequently overlooked in the existing literature on Yemen. A simplistic and oft-cited way of describing Yemen's sectarian demographics is that the northwest mountain highlands are traditionally Zaydi – an offshoot of Shi'ism – and the remainder of the country is Shafa'i – a school of Sunni Islam – with the exception of Hadhramaut, where the Sufi school is more pervasive.³¹ However, on closer inspection one finds that the situation is much more nuanced than this. Zaydism, for example, though technically an offshoot of the Shi'a faith, in fact bears more resemblance to Sunnism than to other Shi'a sects, such as the Twelver school that is dominant in countries like Iraq and Iran.³² Yet the Zaydi-Shafa'i divide is often lazily employed to this day as a lens for understanding the current cycles of violence in simplistic attempts to paint the conflict as sectarian, as outlined in further detail later in this chapter.

Like tribalism, religious identity and organisation is intricately tied to regional dynamics. For example, the Houthi movement evolved to become more extreme in its religious ideology as a result of the spread of Salafism, sponsored by Saudi Arabia, in the north-west highlands – a dynamic that has not been replicated elsewhere in the country.³³ Salafism, meanwhile, has also grown in the south as a result of organisations like Al-Qaeda's successful attempts in the Arabian

³¹ Day, *Regionalism and Rebellion in Yemen*, 30.

³² Rabi, *Tribes and States in a Changing Middle East*, 6.

³³ Weir, *A Tribal Order*, 167.

Peninsula (AQAP)'s to integrate into tribal structures in provinces like Abyan and Shabwa.³⁴

The above literature makes it clear that the debate around the salience of Yemeni national identity is highly complex. It can be tempting to see the various sources of identity and socio-political organisation in Yemen – namely nationalism, regionalism, tribalism and religious sectarianism – as being in competition with one another, vying for influence and prevailing over one other in different regions at different times. However, it is more salient to understand Yemeni identity and socio-political organisation as a dynamic process, whereby these forces are engaged in a constant interaction, sometimes competing for influence, sometimes working together to bolster one another, and sometimes hardly present at all. This process is dependent on a number of political, economic and societal factors, notably the competition for resources.

The existing literature tends to focus on one or two of these forces in particular – for example, the role of the tribe or regional dynamics. Lisa Wedeen comes closer to understanding these relationships, positing that national identity should be considered a contingent category as opposed to a substantial thing, in order to understand how it competes with other such categories – in the case of Yemen: tribe, region and sect.³⁵ But while Wedeen's work and other such scholarship

³⁴ Christopher Swift, 'Arc of Convergence: AQAP, Ansar Al-Shari'a and the Struggle for Yemen', *CTC Sentinel* 5, no. 6 (2012): 4.

³⁵ Lisa Wedeen, *Peripheral Visions: Publics, Power and Performance in Yemen* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2008), 4.

mentioned above contributes valuable insights, it is ultimately limited insofar as it fails to fully capture the fluidity and dynamism of the complex process of identity formation and socio-political organisation in Yemen.

Corruption, Patronage and the Politics of Permanent Crisis

Yemen's political economy has been well-documented by academic researchers, whose findings offer vital insights into the dynamics that have driven conflict and instability in Yemen over the last decade. In particular, they clearly demonstrate how the governance of former President Ali Abdullah Saleh and his policies of divide and rule, the co-optation of tribal elites, and the neopatrimonial system he constructed around his inner circle, all helped to lay the foundations for the 2011 uprising and the subsequent civil war.

As was noted in the previous section, the relationship between Yemen's tribes and the state is complex. Nobody knew this better than Ali Abdullah Saleh, who famously described ruling Yemen and controlling the various forces vying for power and resources in the country as 'dancing on the heads of snakes'. During his rule, a delicate balance existed between the Saleh regime and Yemen's most powerful tribes based on the sharing of the economic and political benefits of power.³⁶ This balance was based on the co-optation of tribal elites by Saleh, who strategically empowered and disempowered key figures when he saw fit, to

³⁶ USAID, 'Yemen Corruption Assessment: Final Report', *USAID* (Sana'a: US Agency for International Development/Yemen, 2006): 2.

maintain his personal dominance. Tribal sheikhs would receive payments through an opaque system that compensated them according to their influence.³⁷ This allowed Saleh to leverage the military and arbitration power of the tribes to limit the power of his internal rivals and compensate for the weakness of the central government.³⁸ As mentioned earlier, Saleh also initiated what researchers call the 'retribalization' of the south, in an attempt to extend his political-cultural hegemony and create new divisions that he could exploit to his own advantage.³⁹

However, there were a number of side effects to this policy of co-optation which hindered development in Yemen and paved the way for violence and instability.⁴⁰ Firstly, by economically favouring tribal elites and disproportionately distributing resources, Saleh created vast economic imbalances.⁴¹ This served to alienate many of the empowered sheikhs' constituencies, generating discontent among ordinary tribesmen who did not receive the same benefits.⁴² Moreover, the elites he favoured on the basis of their loyalty were not necessarily those who were seen as legitimate in the eyes of their tribe, which thus distorted functioning tribal hierarchies.⁴³ The results were increased lawlessness, as disaffected tribesmen increasingly relied on their own

³⁷ Phillips, *Yemen and the Politics of Permanent Crisis*, 51.

³⁸ Khaled Fattah, 'Yemen: A Social Intifada in a Republic of Sheikhs', *Middle East Policy Council*, 18 no. 3 (2011): 79-85.

³⁹ Day, *Regionalism and Rebellion in Yemen*, 177.

⁴⁰ Rabi, *Tribes and States in a Changing Middle East*, 137.

⁴¹ Brandt, *Tribes and Politics in Yemen*, 61.

⁴² *Ibid.*, 346.

⁴³ *Ibid.*, 73-74.

means to deal with, and exert pressure on the central government (for example, taking hostages and attacking government facilities).⁴⁴

During the years leading up to unification, some tribal elites and networks became so embedded in state structures in the YAR that distinguishing between tribe and state in itself became problematic, with many scholars referring to this process as the 'tribalization of the state'.⁴⁵ This happened, Khaled Fattah argues, as a by-product of Saleh's ruthless quest for regime survival.⁴⁶ The northern Hashid and Bakil confederations benefited disproportionately, ultimately becoming the dominant political and military authorities in the YAR.⁴⁷

This was a crucial aspect of Saleh's system of patronage, which he built around his inner circle to preserve his power. By 'tribalizing' Yemen's armed and security forces, Saleh was able to extend patronage to, and effectively buy, the support of tribal constituencies he otherwise would not have been able to control. His ability to do this only increased after the discovery of oil, the revenues from which financed the maintenance and expansion of his personal networks of patronage.⁴⁸ The top echelons of the military - dominated by Saleh's family and tribe - were also able to use their positions to expand into, and ultimately

⁴⁴ Rabi, *Tribes and States in a Changing Middle East*, 136-137.

⁴⁵ Day, *Regionalism and Rebellion in Yemen*, 96-97.

⁴⁶ Fattah, 'Yemen: A Social Intifada in a Republic of Sheikhs'.

⁴⁷ *Ibid.*, 100.

⁴⁸ Sana'a Center for Strategic Studies, 'Corruption in Yemen's War Economy', *Sana'a Center Policy Report 9* (2018): 1-14.

dominate, the Yemeni marketplace, with privileged access to import licences, land and business deals.⁴⁹

This process of state capture has been well-documented in academic literature, as has the rampant culture of corruption that saw Saleh's informal elite networks enrich themselves at the expense of ordinary Yemenis, ultimately becoming more influential than formal state institutions.⁵⁰ According to USAID, there were five main often overlapping elite groups profiting from corruption in Yemen: 1) the tribes, 2) the military-security establishment, 3) the business community, 4) technocratic elites and 5) regional elites. Groups 1 and 2 constituted the lion's share, meanwhile groups 4 and 5 were dispensable on an individual level, but necessary to maintain the façade of a functioning state.⁵¹

Saleh's networks of patronage (*maḥsūbiyya* in Arabic) came to characterise his method of ruling, distorting the country's traditional mechanisms of resource distribution and dispute resolution.⁵² Even the electoral system was a mechanism for reinforcing personality-based power politics, with influential sheikhs using it

⁴⁹ Clark, *Yemen: Dancing on the Heads of Snakes*, 122-123; International Crisis Group, 'Yemen's Military-Security Reform: Seeds of a New Conflict?', *Middle East Report*, 139 (2013).

⁵⁰ Sana'a Center for Strategic Studies. *Beyond the Business as Usual Approach: Combating Corruption in Yemen* (Sana'a: Sana'a Center for Strategic Studies, 2018): 2.

⁵¹ USAID, 'Yemen Corruption Assessment', v.

⁵² Christopher Boucek and Marina Ottaway, *Yemen on the Brink* (Washington: Carnegie Endowment for International Peace, 2010), 76.

to secure resources to distribute to their constituencies, bolstering their local authority.⁵³

Phillips argues that Saleh's patronage networks constituted a neopatrimonial system. The term neopatrimonialism is derived from Weber's discussion of the three ideal types of legitimate political authority: legal-rational, charismatic, and traditional. It is used to describe a system wherein informal patrimonial (or traditional) loyalties permeate the organisations associated with a modern state. In the Yemeni case, the President used traditional, informal organisations in conjunction with state organisations – such as institutions, councils and parliament – in order to expand his patron-client networks and thus cement his power.⁵⁴ According to April Longley-Alley, Saleh's neopatrimonial system operated according to a strict set of rules, whereby elites would provide a minimal level of support for both Saleh's authority and the corrupt political economy that supported his regime in return for patronage.⁵⁵

The political elite had no choice but to accept these 'rules of the game' if they wanted to maintain relevance and continue to receive patronage, so individuals who wanted to affect change would have little hope of doing so without buying into the system. The neopatrimonial order was neither static nor fixed, and future incorporation in the system always remained a possibility for those elites who

⁵³ Ginny Hill, *Yemen Endures* (London: Hurst & Co, 2017), 52.

⁵⁴ Phillips, *Yemen and the Politics of Permanent Crisis*, 54-55.

⁵⁵ April Longley-Alley, 'The Rules of the Game: Unpacking Patronage Politics in Yemen', *Middle East Journal*, 64, no. 3 (2010): 399.

refused to partake. Once embedded, however, elites would become implicated and their participation would ultimately perpetuate the very organisation of power they might have wished to alter.⁵⁶

Another method Saleh used to maintain his authority was what Phillips has called 'the politics of permanent crisis', whereby Saleh would manipulate political and security crises, channelling their forces away from the political centre whilst simultaneously creating the perception that such crises were inevitable in Yemen and the country would collapse without him at the helm.⁵⁷ Saleh, Phillips contends, recognised the potential of crises to derive further rents for his inner circle through grants, foreign security aid, and through the low levels of law and order that facilitated smuggling and criminal activity.⁵⁸ He played on an already vulnerable population's fear of crisis and Western governments' concerns around the threat of terrorist groups like AQAP in order to shore up his support base both locally and internationally.⁵⁹ Additionally, Saleh was able to exploit the threat of terrorism from groups like AQAP to extract security and development funding from western donors, which he then funnelled into the patronage system to buy the loyalty of tribal and political leaders.⁶⁰

⁵⁶ Ibid., 394.

⁵⁷ Phillips, *Yemen and the Politics of Permanent Crisis*, 13.

⁵⁸ Ibid., 40.

⁵⁹ Ibid., 131.

⁶⁰ Farea Al-Muslimi, 'Locals running rings around the power brokers', *Chatham House: The World Today* [online], 26 September 2019, accessed 31 October 2019,

During the years leading up to 2011, the seemingly constant crises in Yemen led many scholars and analysts over the years to conclude that Yemen was a failing or failed state.⁶¹ Such arguments, however, failed to fully grasp how the Yemeni state really worked. While Yemen might have appeared to be failing from the outside, particularly to those scholars whose idea of a functioning state was firmly rooted in Maximilian Weber's concept of a legal-rational system, Yemen was arguably not as close to the edge as it may have seemed.⁶² It is widely recognised in the literature that the Weberian notion of a state with a monopoly on violence was not evident in Yemen, and that state institutions were weak and had limited geographical jurisdiction.⁶³ However, Renad Mansour and Peter Salisbury convincingly argue that, on closer inspection, many of the basic functional elements of the state were indeed present in Yemen, if not within an outwardly coherent, centralised system.⁶⁴ Phillips also contends that most Yemenis did not necessarily see the neopatrimonial system as inherently illegitimate, as many Western scholars might assume.⁶⁵

<https://www.chathamhouse.org/publications/the-world-today/2019-10/locals-running-rings-around-power-brokers?fbclid=IwAR011-1KNIQbTRF2ORIlmwsDLB6GUwSmMBfduZQwE8FxrAAQcE127pc5Ss>.

⁶¹ Sarah Phillips and Roger Shanahan, *Al-Qa'ida, Tribes and Instability in Yemen* (Australia: Lowy Institute, 2009), accessed 13 May 2021 <https://policycommons.net/artifacts/1345071/al-qaeda-tribes-and-instability-in-yemen/1957218/>, 3.

⁶² Maximilian Weber, 'Politics as a Vocation', in *The Vocation Lectures*, ed. D. Owen and IB Strong (Indianapolis: Hackett Publishing Company, 2004), 33.

⁶³ Wedeen, *Peripheral Visions*, 1.

⁶⁴ Renad Mansour and Peter Salisbury, *Between Order and Chaos: A New Approach to Stalled State Transformations in Iraq and Yemen* (London: Chatham House, 2019), 4.

⁶⁵ Phillips, *Yemen and the Politics of Permanent Crisis*, 55.

The neopatrimonial system was financed by rents from the energy sector along with international aid, but in the years before 2011, oil production slowed in Yemen and funding from Western governments began to dry up.⁶⁶ As Saleh's ability to bankroll his extensive patronage networks declined, the neopatrimonial system and the informal 'rules of the game' became increasingly unsustainable.⁶⁷ It is therefore more useful to understand the collapse of the regime in 2011 not as a result of the lack of a functioning formal, legal-rational state, but instead as a direct consequence of the decline in the resources that financed the neopatrimonial system.

The Road to War

This chapter has thus far outlined some of the major socio-political and economic systems and fault lines that set the stage for the political instability and ultimately civil war that erupted from 2011 onwards. It has acknowledged the significant body of literature that exists focusing on Yemen's politics, economy and society, particularly during the Saleh era, which can help us understand the perfect storm that was brewing by the time the 2011 uprising began. It has shown where the academic understanding of Yemen's identity politics and political economy has fallen short, and offered alternative frameworks to add nuance to dominant narratives.

⁶⁶ Rabi, *Tribes and States in a Changing Middle East*, 187.

⁶⁷ Sana'a Center for Strategic Studies. 'Corruption in Yemen's War Economy', 19.

It is worth mentioning briefly here some of the other factors that posed a constant, underlying threat to inter-communal peace and stability. These include increasing environmental insecurity and the competition for resources – most notably water – and the excessive amounts of weapons in the possession of Yemenis, and particularly tribesmen.⁶⁸ To this can be added the presence of Islamist extremist groups like AQAP, who had slowly been building their influence and exploiting pockets of instability and community grievances since the early 2000s.⁶⁹

The following section reviews the existing literature focusing on the period from 2011 to the present, examining the ways in which academics, analysts and Yemen watchers have attempted to make sense of the conflict that has ravaged Yemen since 2015, wreaking havoc on the country and creating the world's worst humanitarian crisis.

⁶⁸ Small Arms Survey, 'Under pressure: Social violence over land and water in Yemen', *Small Arms Survey: Yemen Armed Violence Assessment: Issue Brief 2* (2010): 2.

⁶⁹ Swift, 'Arc of Convergence', 4.

Making Sense of the War: A Review of Attempts to Conceptualise the Conflict

This section offers an overview of scholarly contributions since 2011 that have attempted to analyse the various drivers of conflict and barriers to peace in Yemen. It outlines and critiques the common frameworks proffered by academics, analysts and journalists in their attempts to make sense of the conflict, highlighting their limitations in the process. It concludes by arguing that a new framework for understanding Yemen's conflict, which takes into account its dynamism, fluidity and transnational character in a more nuanced way, is urgently needed. Without such a framework, this chapter argues, the dynamics propelling the conflict cannot be fully understood.

Yemen in transition

In January 2011, thousands of Yemeni protestors took to the streets to demand an end to Ali Abdullah Saleh's rule, ousting him from power. Saleh was replaced by Vice President Abd Rabbo Mansour Hadi, who became the interim President, and a process of national dialogue began, which was intended to pave the way for a new constitution and a more representative government that would begin to address the many grievances of the Yemeni people.

However, during the summer of 2014, the Houthis – who had nominally participated in the national dialogue but, behind the scenes, had aligned themselves with Ali Abdullah Saleh in order to build their power base – sent their militias to seize the areas around their home governorate of Sa'adah, advancing

onwards to Sana'a, taking control of government institutions and forcing Hadi to seek safety in Aden. In March 2015, a coalition of states led by Saudi Arabia began a campaign of air strikes against the Houthis with the intention of driving them out of the areas they had seized. Far from achieving its aims, the campaign began a bloody and intractable civil war that has only emboldened the Houthis and drawn in actors and governments from across the region, giving rise to the world's worst humanitarian crisis.

Scholars have pointed to the failure of the national dialogue period as one of the major reasons for the Houthi coup and the subsequent descent into civil war.⁷⁰ After 2011, Salisbury contends, a concerted international effort was made to broker a peace deal that would avoid a major conflict. However, these efforts failed to put an end to the status quo of corruption and patronage, providing Saleh with immunity and keeping the key players in his patronage system holding the reins. In the absence of a functioning state and with the decline in the availability of basic goods and services, local conflicts metastasised. This further weakened any remaining sense of Yemeni national identity and solidified local and ideological identities, laying bare the fault lines that would soon shape the trajectory of the conflict.⁷¹

⁷⁰ Stacey Philbrick Yadav, 'No justice, no peace? Securing a just end to war in Yemen', *Yemen Policy Center* [online], October 2020, accessed 7 December 2020, <https://www.yemenpolicy.org/no-justice-no-peace-securing-a-just-end-to-war-in-yemen/>; Peter Salisbury, *Yemen: Stemming the Rise of a Chaos State* (London: Chatham House, 2016).

⁷¹ *Ibid.*, 3.

Indeed, throughout the course of the conflict, various factions and fault lines have emerged on both sides of the conflict. The Houthis have straddled a delicate balance between sustaining the conflict, expanding their power and recruiting to their ranks on one hand, and maintaining relatively economic and social stability through their limited governance capabilities on the other. In doing so, they have recruited the support of various tribes across northern Yemen, while simultaneously fighting against others in areas like Marib in their battle to increase their territorial control.⁷² At the same time, the Internationally Recognised Government (IRG) has become increasingly fragmented, with political, social and military divisions emerging in the territory nominally under its control. In 2022, attempts were made to bridge these divides and restore the damage done by Hadi's personal lack of legitimacy through the formation of an eight-member Presidential Leadership Council, which sought to represent the array of political, military and regional forces fighting against the Houthis. Divisions remain, however, and lack of trust and common visions for Yemen's future among its members remain a key barrier to its legitimacy and governing potential. The STC in particular has emerged as a major rival to the PLC, despite the fact that its leader, Aidarous Al-Zubaidi, himself is one of the eight members.⁷³

⁷² Schmitz, 'Tribes in Yemen'.

⁷³ Maysaa Shuja Al-Deen, 'The Houthi-Tribal Conflict in Yemen', *Carnegie Endowment for International Peace* [online], 23 April 2019, 3, accessed 1 December 2021, <https://carnegieendowment.org/sada/78969>.

Over the years since 2015, the international community, led by a succession of Special Envoys to the UN, have attempted to broker a peace agreement in Yemen between the Houthis and the IRG. In more recent years, however, the leadership role of the UN in Yemen's peace process has been side lined as the Houthi movement – also referred to by its political name, Ansar Allah – and Saudi Arabia have increasingly engaged bilaterally, with mediation support from Oman. This has occurred against the backdrop of the restoration of ties between Iran and Saudi Arabia, which is widely seen to have eased this process.⁷⁴ In the latter half of 2023, it was widely believed that a peace deal between the two was imminent. However, the October 7th Hamas attack and subsequent Israeli assault and violence in Gaza put an immediate stop to this. Ansar Allah began attacking vessels in the Red Sea, claiming to be standing up for the people of Gaza by attacking Israeli and western economic interests. These actions have only served to embolden the Houthis, granting them unprecedented levels of support and legitimacy in Yemen, across the wider region, and internationally among supporters of the Palestinian cause. They have seized upon the opportunity this has created to extend the conflict, which exempts them from some of the daily realities of governing in Yemen and enabling them to renew their attempts to capture strategic territory in Marib and Shaba governorates (which are home to

⁷⁴ Fatima Abo Alasarar, 'Saudi-Houthi Backchannel Talks Alone Can't Bring Lasting Peace to Yemen', *The Arab Gulf States Institute in Washington* [online] 3 March 2023, accessed 1 August 2024 <https://agsiw.org/saudi-houthi-backchannel-talks-alone-cant-bring-lasting-peace-to-yemen/>.

Yemen's largest oil and gas reserves).⁷⁵ The balance of power between the Houthis and Saudi Arabia has therefore shifted significantly since October 2023, and prospects for peace remain as distant as ever.

Barriers to Peace

Many scholars and analysts over the years since 2015 have attempted to explain the failure to end the fighting and reach a political solution. An oft-cited factor that is widely perceived to be sustaining the conflict is the deeply entrenched war economy. The existing scholarly accounts of the war economy contribute empirical research into the various facets of it such as corruption and smuggling, which is useful for understanding some of the financial networks and mechanisms helping to sustain the conflict. However, on closer inspection, the war economy bears many of the same characteristics as the neo-patrimonial system that sustained Saleh's rule for decades before 2011, and could arguably be considered merely a new iteration of this system as opposed to a novel set of economic circumstances created by the conflict.

Throughout the war, corruption has been systematic in Yemen. In 2017, Transparency International ranked Yemen 175 out of 180 countries for corruption.⁷⁶ Although corruption in the war economy is often presented as contextual, the mechanisms and the beneficiaries of corruption bear a striking

⁷⁵ Gregory Johnsen, *Foreign Actors in Yemen: The History, the Politics and the Future* (Sana'a: Sana'a Center for Strategic Studies, 2021).

⁷⁶ Sana'a Center for Strategic Studies. *Beyond the Business as Usual Approach: Combating Corruption in Yemen* (Sana'a: Sana'a Center for Strategic Studies, 2018): 2-3.

resemblance to the Saleh days: the political elite, military commanders, businessmen and civil servants profiteer from inflated military payoffs, ghost soldiers, and the sale of weapons and natural resources.

In a 2018 report on corruption in Yemen's war economy, Yemeni think tank the Sana'a Center for Strategic Studies convincingly explained that the ongoing conflict had not significantly altered the basic workings of the system of state capture; the north, the Houthis have taken control of imports, distribution, fuel sales, customs and taxation.⁷⁷ According to Marieke Transfeld, since taking control of Sana'a in 2014, the Houthis have simply inserted their own governing system into the pre-existing state, actually increasing the efficiency of the system through financing and political support.

Meanwhile, the Internationally Recognised Government (IRG) has taken control of the country's key energy facilities in Marib and has thus gained the ability to dispense patronage with the revenues they generate. Local Hadhrami and Shabwani Elite Forces have done the same in Hadhramaut and Shabwa, gaining control of key energy infrastructure and increasing their influence by dispensing patronage. Evidence has even emerged to suggest that money and weapons have flowed across the frontlines, leading to allegations of collusion between the Houthis and the IRG.⁷⁸ (So while the patrons and clients may have changed, the

⁷⁷ Ibid.

⁷⁸ Sana'a Center for Strategic Studies, *Beyond the Business as Usual Approach: Combating Corruption in Yemen* (Sana'a: Sana'a Center for Strategic Studies, 2018): 1.

pre-existing mechanisms of corruption and state capture are continuing to function and the old rules of the game still appear to apply.

The Sana'a Center goes on to posit that a new dynamic has emerged in the war economy since 2015 – that is, the extension of patronage networks across international borders as foreign governments have taken on the role of patron, financing particular actors, or proxies, on the ground to act on their behalf.⁷⁹ Aside from the oft-cited Iranian support for the Houthis, Saudi Arabia has trained and financed fighters loyal to the Internationally Recognised Government, and the UAE has trained and financed tens of thousands of Yemenis, the majority of whom have been fighting for the Southern Transitional Council (STC).⁸⁰ Oman, meanwhile, has provided financial and soft power support to certain actors in the eastern Al-Mahra governorate in an attempt to act as a bulwark against Saudi Arabia's increasing influence in the region.⁸¹ This dynamic is part and parcel of the internationalisation of the conflict – one of the major reasons cited for its intractability.

Yet even this dynamic is arguably not so new: Saudi Arabia has historically acted as a patron, strategically dispensing patronage to particular individuals and

⁷⁹ Ibid., 4.

⁸⁰ Bel Trew, 'The war to start all wars: Inside Yemen's troubled south', *The Independent* [online], 24 August 2019, accessed 31 October 2019, <https://www.independent.co.uk/news/world/middle-east/yemen-war-civil-independence-south-mahra-aden-saudi-arabia-iran-a9076546.html>.

⁸¹ Bel Trew, 'Inside east Yemen: the Gulf's new proxy war no one is talking about', *The Independent* [online], 31 August 2019, accessed 31 October 2019, <https://www.independent.co.uk/news/world/middle-east/yemen-conflict-mahra-saudi-arabia-troops-houthi-rebels-proxy-war-iran-a9081371.html>.

tribes in Yemen – notably in the country’s north – in order to maintain its influence in the country.⁸² Oman also has a history of supporting certain tribal actors and funding development in Al-Mahra, largely driven by the governorate’s long-standing historical and cultural links with Oman’s neighbouring Dhofar governorate.⁸³ Thus, while new foreign actors may indeed be taking on the role of patron, the extension of these networks outside Yemen’s borders is certainly not specific to the conflict.

Another barrier to peace posited by scholars and analysts is the deepening of divisions between identity groups as a result of the conflict and the further fragmentation of the country as a result. According to a 2016 Chatham House report, the conflict has profoundly sharpened or calcified pre-existing divisions in Yemen, turning them into serious, complex rifts that any political process will inevitably have to address.⁸⁴ Marieke Transfeld agrees with this assertion, adding that the growing influence of local actors is deteriorating the Yemeni state as it is recognised internationally, furthering political, institutional and social fragmentation: as groups like the STC, the Islah party, the Houthis, and numerous diverse local tribes have gained control of territory, they have become

⁸² Phillips, *Yemen and the Politics of Permanent Crisis*, 76 and 79.

⁸³ Al-Sewari, *Yemen’s Al-Mahra*.

⁸⁴ Salisbury, *Yemen: Stemming the Rise of a Chaos State*, 35.

involved in bottom-up state-building processes that, Transfeld argues, are driven by local identities and only serve to worsen state fragmentation.⁸⁵

While the numerous factors outlined above – along with the limitations associated with the UN process itself, of course – likely do constitute serious barriers to peace, one major factor consistently appears to be missing from the literature: the role of Yemenis overseas in shaping the trajectory of the conflict and the political process. It is common knowledge that the Internationally Recognised Government today largely operates out of Riyadh and that senior Houthis negotiate with mediators and foreign governments from Muscat, where many are based. Yet the extent to which these actors are supporting or impeding moves towards a political process is largely unknown. Nor is it generally acknowledged whether these actors constitute members of the diaspora or not. The very fact that they are located outside Yemen is only ever mentioned in passing in the literature, and the implications of this – including where they fit into the patronage networks sustaining the war economy – has not been researched.

Common Frameworks for Understanding the Conflict

When reviewing the existing literature on Yemen, a number of common frameworks for understanding the conflict appear consistently. Perhaps the most

⁸⁵ Marieke Transfeld, 'Peace and State Fragmentation in Yemen', *Carnegie Endowment for International Peace*, 22 November 2019, accessed 15 July 2021, <https://carnegieendowment.org/sada/2019/11/peace-and-state-fragmentation-in-yemen?lang=en>

simplistic is the narrative that the conflict is a sectarian proxy war. In what Farea Al-Muslimi refers to as 'the layman's assumption', many scholars and analysts have concluded that Yemen is a classic case of outside powers engaging in conflict with each other by backing rival domestic forces.⁸⁶ This is problematic because it assumes that the outside powers are the ones holding the leverage, and that the agendas of local actors are subservient to those of their foreign patrons. According to Al-Muslimi, the reality is much more complicated. He argues that it is in fact the local actors who hold the most leverage, arguing that they are 'running rings around the power brokers'.⁸⁷

The narrative that the Yemen conflict is a sectarian one – especially visible in much of the media coverage surrounding the conflict – is also highly simplistic and misleading in the way it propagates a false duality between the Houthis and the Internationally Recognised Government. By repeatedly highlighting that the Houthis are Shi'a actors sponsored by Iran fighting against a government that represents mostly Sunni Yemenis, such accounts fail to capture the nuances of Yemen's sectarian demographics, which were outlined in the previous section. Such a framework also serves to mischaracterise the conflict as a religious one, minimising the importance of the myriad actors and fault lines driving violence on the ground, which vary wildly in different locations across the country.

⁸⁶ Al-Muslimi, 'Locals running rings around the power brokers'.

⁸⁷ Ibid.

Another common, and similarly simplistic lens for understanding the conflict paints it as a tribal war, highlighting the importance of identity as a key driver of violence and communal divisions. While it is arguably true that the instability created by the conflict has caused Yemenis to turn increasingly to more traditional sources of identity and security in the absence of a functioning state (whether in the legal-rational or neopatrimonial sense), the war itself is not necessarily driven by tribalism. As outlined already, tribalism remains dynamic and fluid, engaging in a constant exchange with other sources of identity and grievance. Thus, painting the conflict as a tribal one overlooks the other drivers of communal violence and division in Yemen.

Furthermore, seeing the Yemen conflict through a tribal lens overlooks the potential of the tribes to support mediation efforts. As established earlier in this chapter, many of the tribes are actively engaged in mediating and resolving local disputes – although, as also noted above, this is not consistently the case across the country and the existence and influence of tribal conflict resolution systems and practices depends on a number of factors. For example, the tribes of Shabwa – most notably the Al-Awlaqi – have played a key role in mediating between AQAP and the government in recent years, while tribal initiatives towards conflict resolution have also resurged in Al-Dhalea governorate.⁸⁸

⁸⁸ Al-Hamdani and Stowe, *The Tribal Dimension*.

This also works the other way around in certain regions. For example, Raiman Al-Hamdani and Gabrielle Stowe point to the role of the tribes around Sana'a as fundamental to the Houthis survival, thus perpetuating the conflict.⁸⁹ This shows that the role of the tribes is much more nuanced than much of the literature cares to acknowledge. In reality, the influence of the tribes varies widely across the country, as does the role they are playing and the positive and/or negative effects on the conflict. Thus, Yemen may well be a complex conflict in which tribes play an influential role, but that role is not necessarily the predominant driver of conflict or barrier to peace.

A final framework that is commonly employed as a means of understanding the conflict emphasises the regional differences between Yemenis, and particularly between the north and the south. Literature referring to the conflict as a regional one highlights the multiple regional identities in Yemen, noting in particular the traditional tendency for southerners to see themselves as distinct from their northern counterparts, who have historically dominated Yemeni politics.⁹⁰ It draws heavily on literary accounts of the troubled unification process of the 1990s, emphasising the desire for secession that exists among many in the south.

The three lenses outlined above echo the main three categories, or fault lines, explored in the previous section referencing how Yemenis identify: tribe, region

⁸⁹ Ibid., 19.

⁹⁰ Salisbury, *Yemen: Stemming the Rise of a Chaos State*, 35.

and religion. Of the three, the regional lens is perhaps the most useful, as it more effectively captures the political, cultural and societal diversity that exists across Yemen. By employing a regional lens, one can also consider how tribalism and religious sectarianism come into play in distinct ways in different parts of the country, allowing for a more nuanced analysis. The opposite is not necessarily true: employing a tribal or sectarian lens tends to assume that the importance of these factors is consistent across the country, which it is not.

Though the regional approach can be useful when employed in a nuanced way, the north-south dichotomy in itself is extremely limited as a framework for understanding the conflict as it overlooks regional differences within those broad categories. For example, not all Yemenis in the south are supportive of the STC and/or in favour of secession and southern independence. Furthermore, the eastern governorates of Hadhramaut and Al-Mahra have, as noted earlier, remained relatively isolated from central authority – both before and after unification in 1990 – and have retained a strong sense of local identity that is distinct from both national and southern identity.

The regional lens also at times overlooks the pragmatism of certain actors in favour of emphasising the role of identity and political culture. For example, in 2015 Aydarous Al-Zubaidi, the President and Commander of the STC, opted to join the Saudi-led military coalition which was supporting the return to power of the Internationally Recognised Government. This was despite being

fundamentally at odds with Hadi's government over the issue of secession. This allowed his forces to score easy early victories in certain cities across the south, thus emboldening the STC, which later came into direct conflict with the central government for authority over the south.⁹¹ Such pragmatic moves as this have occurred on all sides of the conflict and were not necessarily driven by identity politics as much as by political pragmatism.

The main problem with these three lenses is that each assumes that the identity-based fault lines they emphasise are static, thus misunderstanding how all three engage with each other in a dynamic process that takes place across time and geographical space, which is driven by pragmatism and resources as well as identity and ideology.

Perhaps the most useful existing model for understanding the conflict is that put forth by Salisbury in his 2016 paper, *Yemen: Stemming the Rise of a Chaos State*, in which he describes it as 'a big war made up of small wars'.⁹² Contrary to popular understanding, he explains, Yemen's conflict is multifaceted. Rather than being fought between two distinct coalitions, it is instead being fought by an array of actors with deeply divergent interests and agendas.⁹³ Salisbury also argues that Yemen is a country defined by little more than its borders, and that complex regional conflicts are being deepened and prolonged by the interests and actions

⁹¹ Al-Muslimi, 'Locals running rings around the power brokers'.

⁹² Salisbury, *Yemen: Stemming the Rise of a Chaos State*, 40.

⁹³ Ibid.

of external players.⁹⁴ This is a useful starting point, particularly as it alludes to the potential for forces outside of the country's borders to shape events on the ground. However, like many other accounts, Salisbury's discussion of 'external' actors is limited to 'foreign' powers, predominantly governments, thus overlooking the role of Yemenis based outside of Yemen's borders in the diaspora.

But Salisbury is not alone in neglecting to explore this dynamic. Not one of the three dominant lenses outlined here fully captures the international aspects of the conflict. Although the sectarian proxy narrative does attempt to explain the involvement of external actors, it is referring predominantly to foreign governments – notably Saudi Arabia, Iran and the UAE. None of these lenses, therefore, give any consideration to the role of Yemenis outside of Yemen and where they fit into the political economy of the conflict.

Models for Conflict Resolution

Frameworks for how to mediate the conflict and reach a political process are similarly limited. Some researchers have commented on efforts to make the political process more inclusive, particularly the voices of women and youth.⁹⁵ Others have explored the utility of tribal mechanisms for mediation, noting that some conflict management and social re-learning processes are already

⁹⁴ Ibid., 2.

⁹⁵ Marieke Transfeld, 'Yemen policy's forward thinking vision: Combining empirical research with imagined alternatives', *Yemen Policy Center*, 7 December 2020, accessed 12 May 2021, <https://www.yemenpolicy.org/yemen-policys-forward-thinking-vision-for-2021>.

underway at a community level in certain areas. According to Yadav, some communities are already doing some of the work that non-judicial institutions of transitional justice often provide after wars end, creating opportunities to repair the relationships torn apart by conflict and contributing to the process of relearning that leads to social cohesion.⁹⁶

The Sana'a Center noted in an article in 2019 that they had been conducting events outside of the country with representatives of communities from Hadhramaut, including diaspora actors, with the aim of building local capacity for inclusive thinking and strategic dialogue in Hadhramaut. The programme was designed to function as a pilot for building local capacity for peace-building elsewhere in Yemen.⁹⁷ It is interesting that the project took place outside of Yemen – in Jordan, which is home to a substantial community of Yemenis who have migrated during the war – and that it focused on what the diaspora could contribute. However, this aspect was not covered in much detail in the public article documenting the project.

In a similar vein, Ahmed Nagi wrote in 2020 of the potential of the Mahri tribal code of conduct to act as a model for local mediation and reconciliation that could be replicated elsewhere in Yemen.⁹⁸ The Mahri tribal code of conduct, according to Nagi, rests on five key principles: 1) The 'supratribal' nature of Mahri identity,

⁹⁶ Yadav, 'No justice, no peace?'

⁹⁷ Sana'a Center for Strategic Studies. *Local Visions for Peace in Hadhramaut*, 1-2.

⁹⁸ Ahmed Nagi, *Eastern Yemen's Tribal Model for Containing Conflict* (Washington: Carnegie Middle East Center, 2020).

which manifests in Mahri solidarity in the face of outside aggression, irrespective of tribal affiliation; 2) The 'blood is thicker than water' principle, which renders violence among and against Mahris highly taboo; 3) The symbolism of bearing arms, which does not necessarily convey an intent to use them; 4) When conflict occurs between Mahris, achieving reconciliation and compensation is the responsibility of the victor; 5) The importance of intratribal mediation for avoiding violence or limiting its scope.⁹⁹ Nagi argues that this code of conduct is a major reason why Mahra has, thus far, managed to avoid the majority of the violence since the outbreak of the conflict.¹⁰⁰

Possibly the most useful framework that has emerged in the literature on Yemen's conflict is put forth by Mansour and Salisbury. This is because it goes beyond simply suggesting mechanisms for conflict resolution and attempts to conceptualise Yemen's conflict environment as a whole. They argue that state transformation in Yemen relies on a 'multi-layered' system encompassing four key components: the executive, the formal bureaucracy, de facto authorities (by which they are referring to actors such as militias that function as on-the-ground manifestations of statehood that may be invisible to foreign policymakers) and society at large.¹⁰¹ According to them, a gap in legitimacy, capability and power exists between the middle two layers in this model – the formal bureaucracy and the de facto authorities. This gap, they posit, is a critical source of instability and

⁹⁹ Ibid., 4-5.

¹⁰⁰ Ibid., 2.

¹⁰¹ Mansour and Salisbury, 'Between Order and Chaos', 2.

an impediment to reform, and bridging that gap is thus the key to effective conflict resolution. In response, they recommend a 'middle-out' approach that seeks to strengthen the connective tissues between the bureaucracy and the de-facto authorities.¹⁰²

However, even this framework fails to take into account the fluidity, dynamism and transnationalism of these components – particularly bureaucracy, which often manifests itself in Yemen in informal ways and at a societal, rather than 'state' level. Moreover, like the vast majority of scholarship focusing on the conflict, it fails to acknowledge the role – both formal and informal – of the Yemeni diaspora. Yemen's long history of migration has been cited repeatedly in much of the literature focusing on the last fifty years. Its impact on Yemen's political economy and society is referred to frequently, and it is common knowledge that influential Yemenis on all (and no) sides of the conflict are currently residing overseas for a variety of reasons. Yet still, the literature on the conflict barely mentions the diaspora other than in passing. In order to gain a full picture of Yemen's transnational political marketplace and conflict environment – that goes beyond simplistic references to foreign governments – it is necessary to examine the existing literature on the Yemeni diaspora and highlight the current gaps and limitations in the research.

Identity, diaspora and conflict in Yemen

¹⁰² Ibid.

Yemen's history of migration is long and well-documented, going back at least as far as the mid-sixth century when the bursting of the Marib Dam scattered a diaspora of Yemeni tribes all over the world.¹⁰³ Migration continued during the early Islamic era, when Yemenis migrated in large numbers outside of their homeland, helping to populate the newly acquired lands of the rapidly expanding Empire from Egypt to southern Spain.¹⁰⁴ Centuries later, Hadhrami religious scholars and merchants began to establish networks around the Indian Ocean, where they migrated to seek their fortune.¹⁰⁵ From the mid-nineteenth century onwards, many Yemenis from Aden travelled to the UK aboard British ships to work in the booming steel industry in Sheffield, Cardiff and South Shields.¹⁰⁶ And from the 1950s onwards, migration has continued as Yemenis have sought work across the GCC in the growing energy sector.

Equally, the Yemeni diaspora has contributed in no small way to the development of the homeland. This is most obvious through the sheer amount of money sent home from Yemenis abroad in the form of remittances. In the words of the North Yemeni Finance Minister in 1975, 'few nations are as dependent as we are on abroad for our development ... From Chicago to Kuwait,

¹⁰³ Clark, *Yemen: Dancing on the Heads of Snakes*, 6.

¹⁰⁴ Day, *Regionalism and Rebellion in Yemen*, 29.

¹⁰⁵ Clark, *Yemen: Dancing on the Heads of Snakes*, 7.

¹⁰⁶ Al Jazeera World, 'Britain's First Yemenis', YouTube video posted by 'Al Jazeera English', 29 April 2015, accessed 7 December 2020 <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=IFZAVySjxUI>; Baraa Shiban, 'Over the mountains, across the oceans: How Yemenis became the most prominent Arab community in the UK', *The New Arab* [online], 17 December 2021, accessed 17 December 2021 <https://english.alaraby.co.uk/features/yemenis-longest-established-arab-community-uk>.

from Marseilles to Jeddah, they are 2,235,000 and each one sends us, on average, about one dollar a day'.¹⁰⁷ Anecdotal evidence also suggests that the links between Yemenis in Yemen and those overseas are tight, that movement to and from the homeland is frequent, and that individual migrants have played key roles within Yemen on their return. When Victoria Clark met a military psychiatrist and wealthy émigré businessman during her research for her book, *Yemen: Dancing on the Heads of Snakes*, she noted that his Emirati passports had seemed to be no obstacle for his continuing to act as a sheikh of the enormous Yafai tribe by dispensing political advice and influence.¹⁰⁸

While the wealth and economic influence of the diaspora is relatively well-documented in the existing literature on Yemen, what is noticeably less clear is how the complex process of identity formation and socio-political organisation takes place in the diaspora, given these apparently close links to the homeland. It has also been noted that many Yemenis remain outside of Yemen today – some of them the descendants of Yemenis who migrated generations ago and some of whom have migrated or been displaced by the conflict. It is pertinent, therefore, to explore how these Yemenis engage – if at all – with the events of the current conflict that has engulfed their homeland and to analyse the role they are playing from afar. The next section offers an overview of the existing scholarship on the Yemeni diaspora, highlighting areas where further research is necessary to better

¹⁰⁷ Clark, *Yemen: Dancing on the Heads of Snakes*, 105.

¹⁰⁸ *Ibid.*, 236.

understand where the diaspora fit into the political marketplace and conflict environment in Yemen today.

Yemeni Migration Before 2011

The émigrés of Hadhramaut and their descendants have undoubtedly been the subject of the most academic research focusing on the Yemeni diaspora. As documented in the comprehensive 2017 book edited by Noel Brehony, *Hadhramaut and its Diaspora: Yemeni Politics, Identity and Migration*, a very high percentage of the governorate's population has been affected by migration in one way or another, whether they or their ancestors themselves have migrated or have simply benefited somehow from the economic benefits of migration.¹⁰⁹ In her research covering the period 1800-1967, Ulrike Freitag echoes this assertion, estimating that up to 20-30 per cent of Hadhramaut's population lived abroad.¹¹⁰ Dresch offers a similar estimate, contending that up to a quarter of the population – and nearly all males – at one point lived overseas.¹¹¹

The main historical factors cited as reasons for Hadhrami migration are internal warfare and poverty, along with periods of famine.¹¹² International politics have also played a role, with the ebb and flow of migrants being influenced by the colonial politics of the British, the Dutch and others.¹¹³

¹⁰⁹ Noel Brehony and Abdalla Bujra, 'Introduction', in *Hadhramaut and its Diaspora: Yemeni Politics, Identity and Migration*, ed. Noel Brehony (London: I.B. Tauris, 2017).

¹¹⁰ Ulrike Freitag, *Indian Ocean Migrants and State Formation in Hadhramaut* (Leiden: Brill, 2003), 3.

¹¹¹ Dresch, *A History of Modern Yemen*, 15.

¹¹² Noel Brehony and Saadaldeen Taleb, 'Hadhramaut in Yemeni Politics since the 1960s' in *Hadhramaut and its Diaspora: Yemeni Politics, Identity and Migration*, ed. Noel Brehony (London: I.B. Tauris, 2017), 22; Helen Lackner, 'Hadhramaut: Social Structure, Agriculture and Migration' in *Hadhramaut and its Diaspora: Yemeni Politics, Identity and Migration*, ed. Noel Brehony (London: I.B. Tauris, 2017), 67.

¹¹³ Lackner, 80-82.

According to Noel Brehony and Abdalla Bujra, Hadhramis traditionally migrated to three major regions around the Indian Ocean: East Africa, India and Southeast Asia, which were all at the time under the control of colonial powers.¹¹⁴ Despite their shared Hadhrami identity, the demographics of the migrants varied significantly, as did their destinations and the role they played both in the *mahjar* (host state) and in the homeland. Helen Lackner explains that the wealthier *sāda* (religious scholars) from the wadi area tended to travel east to what are today Malaysia, Singapore and Indonesia, where they increased their wealth and status significantly as a result of their involvement in trade and their religious leadership. Meanwhile, tribesmen and lower-status, poorer people tended to migrate westwards to East Africa and Zanzibar, working as labourers, shopkeepers and craftsmen along the coast. Other low-status Hadhramis from the area to the west of Wadi Do'an – including Osama bin Laden's father – travelled to what is now Saudi Arabia, where many built business empires that remain key players in the Saudi market to this day.¹¹⁵

The transnational links built through migration have remained influential until today, and the descendants of first Hadhrami migrants have themselves migrated to second countries home to Yemeni diaspora communities. As recently as the 1970s, contends James Spencer, some young Hadhramis left East Africa and Saudi Arabia for the UAE when opportunities arose for them to join the

¹¹⁴ Noel Brehony and Abdalla Bujra, 'Introduction', in *Hadhramaut and its Diaspora: Yemeni Politics, Identity and Migration*, ed. Noel Brehony, (London: I.B. Tauris, 2017), 8-9.

¹¹⁵ Lackner, 'Hadhramaut: Social Structure, Agriculture and Migration', 80-82.

military and police forces; others travelled the same route to pursue careers in business or technocratic jobs, for example in oil and gas.¹¹⁶ Meanwhile, over the last twenty years, popular connections across the Indian Ocean have been revived in a more religiously oriented form. After the virtual closing of Hadhramaut due to the conflict, Kazuhiro Arai argues, Indonesia has become a new focal point of the Hadhrami diaspora.¹¹⁷ Migration continues today from Hadhramaut, although the destinations have changed: Leif Manger explains that most contemporary migration is to Saudi Arabia and the Gulf rather than the Indian Ocean, and many also migrate towards Western countries such as Australia, Canada, the United States and Europe.¹¹⁸

How Hadhramis in the diaspora have historically identified with the homeland has been the subject of some research, as has the degree to which they have integrated culturally into their host communities. Most scholars agree that Hadhramis in the diaspora continue to feel a strong sense of Hadhrami identity and a degree of nostalgia for their homeland, maintaining strong cultural bonds and even continuing to send boys from the diaspora back to the homeland for their education.¹¹⁹ Yet at the same time, scholars tend to agree that Hadhramis

¹¹⁶ James Spencer, 'Scimitar for Hire: Yemeni Fighters Abroad', in *Hadhramaut and its Diaspora: Yemeni Politics, Identity and Migration*, ed. Noel Brehony (London: I.B. Tauris, 2018), 153-154.

¹¹⁷ Kazuhiro Arai, 'Revival' of the Hadhrami Diaspora? Networking through Religious Figures in Indonesia', in *Hadhramaut and its Diaspora: Yemeni Politics, Identity and Migration*, ed. Noel Brehony (London: I.B. Tauris, 2017), 114.

¹¹⁸ Leif Manger, 'Rediscovering Hadhramaut: Paradigms of Research', in *Hadhramaut and its Diaspora: Yemeni Politics, Identity and Migration*, ed. Noel Brehony (London: I.B. Tauris, 2017), 211.

¹¹⁹ Nico J G Kaptein, 'The Atlas of Sayyid Uthman ibn Abd Allah ibn Yahya of Batavia', in *Hadhramaut and its Diaspora: Yemeni Politics, Identity and Migration*, ed. Noel Brehony (London:

also became deeply involved in their host communities, building links with other groups through trade. Phillipe Pétriat contends that Hadhramis were engaged in a kind of dual process, whereby they maintained a distinct sense of belonging to the Hadhrami community on the one hand, while also become deeply involved with local politics and the economy in the host state on the other.¹²⁰ This has not occurred to the same degree since the 1950s, however, as the majority of migration since this period has been to the Arab region, where governments have deliberately made the process of integration more difficult for migrants.¹²¹

Many Hadhramis historically occupied positions of wealth and status in their host nations, particularly the *sāda*, whose superior education propelled them into senior positions in Southeast Asia during the colonial period.¹²² Many of their descendants can be found today serving in parts of the civil service in Southeast Asia. For example, the Foreign Minister of Indonesia for many years was Ali al-Attas, who was descended from an old Hadhrami family.¹²³ Other Hadhramis

I.B. Tauris, 2017), 95-96; Petouris, Hadhrami 'Exceptionalism', 60; Iain Walker, 'Citizenship and Belong among the Hadhramis of Kenya', in *Hadhramaut and its Diaspora: Yemeni Politics, Identity and Migration*, ed. Noel Brehony (London: I.B. Tauris, 2017), 172-173.

¹²⁰ Phillipe Pétriat, 'Diaspora of Network? The Hadhrami Diaspora Reconsidered through the Lens of Trade', in *Hadhramaut and its Diaspora: Yemeni Politics, Identity and Migration*, ed. Noel Brehony (London: I.B. Tauris, 2017).

¹²¹ Abdalla Bujra, 'Conclusion: Research Issues Concerning Hadhramaut', in *Hadhramaut and its Diaspora: Yemeni Politics, Identity and Migration*, ed. Noel Brehony (London: I.B. Tauris, 2017), 229.

¹²² Brehony and Bujra, 'Introduction', 12-13.

¹²³ Dresch, *A History of Modern Yemen*, 15.

distinguished themselves as entrepreneurs, community leaders, religious specialists and influential political activists.¹²⁴

This history of migration goes some way towards explaining what has been referred to by scholars as 'Hadhrami exceptionalism', or the distinct political, social and cultural dynamics that are unique to the governorate. Freitag argues, for example, that in the past Hadhramaut was arguably more closely connected with East Africa, India and Southeast Asia than it was with most other parts of present day Yemen.¹²⁵ Bujra agrees that the influence of the diaspora on the homeland was substantial, extensively affecting political, economic and cultural development, along with the very mind-set and character of the Hadhrami people, with visible effects apparent in the local language, social behaviour and even physical features.¹²⁶

It is well-documented that migrants have historically invested significant resources in developing the homeland, spending on mosques, tombs and other buildings and sending remittances, crucial to the ongoing viability of the Hadhrami economy.¹²⁷ It is the diaspora, Brehony and Bujra argue, who are taking the most interest in the political future of their homeland and are among the most ardent advocates of self-governance and independence from the rest of

¹²⁴ Spencer, 'Scimitar for Hire: Yemeni Fighters Abroad', 146.

¹²⁵ Freitag, *Indian Ocean Migrants and State Formation in Hadhramaut*, 2-3.

¹²⁶ Bujra, 'Conclusion: Research Issues Concerning Hadhramaut', 226.

¹²⁷ Brehony and Bujra, 'Introduction', 8; Brehony and Taleb, 'Hadhramaut in Yemeni Politics since the 1960s', 34-35; Manger, 'Rediscovering Hadhramaut: Paradigms of Research', 210; Walker, 'Citizenship and Belong among the Hadhramis of Kenya', 175-176.

Yemen – a sentiment that is not necessarily shared, at least to the same degree, with Hadhramis at home.¹²⁸ This follows a pattern of political engagement in the homeland among diaspora Hadhramis. In the nineteenth century, for example, Hadhrami soldiers in Hyderabad came to play significant political roles back in the homeland, most notably in the political consolidation of Hadhramaut during the nineteenth century, through the emergence of the two dominant Sultanates – the Qu'ayti and Kathiri.¹²⁹

Another demographic of Yemeni migrants that have been the subject of much research are those who travelled to the Gulf states from the 1950s onwards as labour migrants. However, the majority of scholarly attention paid to this group has focused on the economic impact of remittances, and less on the communities themselves, their experience in the host state and their political influence within Yemen.

With the discovery of oil and the spectacular rise of oil prices during the second half of the twentieth century, labour became a major export for Yemen. Particularly during the years before oil was produced commercially in Yemen itself, hundreds of thousands of Yemenis migrating to the Gulf states – predominantly Saudi Arabia – in search of employment, driven by poverty and a lack of opportunity in the homeland.¹³⁰ Most labour migrants came from the

¹²⁸ Brehony and Bujra, 'Introduction', 8.

¹²⁹ Manger, 'Rediscovering Hadhramaut: Paradigms of Research', 210.

¹³⁰ JS Birks, CA Sinclair, and JA Socknat, 'Aspects of Labour Migration from North Yemen', *Middle Eastern Studies*, 17, no. 1 (1981): 49; Halliday, *Britain's First Muslims*, 4; Gwenn Okruhlik

YAR, but many southerners – particularly members of the ‘bourgeoisie’ who found themselves unwelcome in the new, Communist PDRY – also left to take advantage of the oil boom, finding employment in technocratic and administrative fields.¹³¹

The impacts of migration were felt by almost every household in the YAR, as remittances steadily grew and became an integral part of the local economy. In 1975, an estimated 18 per cent of Yemen’s 1.4 million strong workforce were working outside of the country.¹³² By 1986, Gwenn Okruhlik and Patrick Conge put the number of Yemeni migrants in Saudi Arabia alone at 1.2 million.¹³³ The economic impact was enormous: according to Dresch, remittances amounted to roughly \$430 million US dollars in 1987.¹³⁴ Remittances stimulated consumer demand in the local economy, constituting a huge proportion of GNP in both the YAR and the PDRY and putting money directly into the hands of the population.¹³⁵

The socioeconomic, ideological and cultural impacts of labour migrants on their home communities have also been documented in a limited way by academics – although usually as a side note to the impact of remittances on the economy as

and Patrick Conge, ‘National Autonomy, Labour Migration and Political Crisis: Yemen and Saudi Arabia’, *Middle East Journal*, 51 no. 4 (1997): 554-565.

¹³¹ Spencer, ‘Scimitar for Hire: Yemeni Fighters Abroad’, 153.

¹³² Birks, Sinclair, and Socknat, ‘Aspects of Labour Migration from North Yemen’, 54.

¹³³ Okruhlik and Conge, ‘National Autonomy, Labour Migration and Political Crisis’, 556.

¹³⁴ Dresch, *A History of Modern Yemen*, 164.

¹³⁵ Okruhlik and Conge, ‘National Autonomy, Labour Migration and Political Crisis’, 556-557.

opposed to being the subject of research themselves. The mass labour migration of Yemeni males pushed more women into the workforce in Yemen, particularly in the agricultural sector. Migration also influenced the tastes, consumption habits, ideas and attitudes of the migrants, which had a knock-on effect on their families and communities when they brought their newfound experiences and habits back home.¹³⁶ Some migrants in Saudi Arabia were influenced by the Wahhabi school of Islam during their time in the Kingdom, which they then imported back to Yemen when they returned on holiday or at the end of their contracts.¹³⁷

But the transnational links forged by the migration of Yemeni workers were suddenly broken in 1990 when President Saleh refused to support Saudi Arabia and the Gulf states in their confrontation with Saddam Hussein following Iraq's invasion of Kuwait. The Saudi Kingdom expelled a million Yemeni migrants in one fell swoop to punish Saleh, crippling the economy and leading to a shift in the balance of power from the population to the government as remittances drastically fell.¹³⁸ However, a significant number of Yemenis remain in the Gulf states today. For example, there is a substantial diaspora from the Yafai tribe in Abu Dhabi and Dubai, and many Adenis still reside in the GCC.¹³⁹ There are also a number of Socotri families living in the UAE, where they have been granted

¹³⁶ Birks, Sinclair, and Socknat, 'Aspects of Labour Migration from North Yemen', 56-59.

¹³⁷ Day, *Regionalism and Rebellion in Yemen*, 101.

¹³⁸ Okruhilik and Conge, 'National Autonomy, Labour Migration and Political Crisis', 560.

¹³⁹ Clark, *Yemen: Dancing on the Heads of Snakes*, 240 and 256.

visas as a result of Abu Dhabi's attempts to expand its influence on the strategically located island.¹⁴⁰

The migration of the Hadhrami diaspora and the labour migration of Yemenis to the GCC states are the two demographics that have been most widely researched and documented in academic literature on the Yemeni diaspora. However, there are a number of other diaspora communities that have received less scholarly attention, including the Mahris who have migrated across the border to Oman and Saudi Arabia, the Yemeni Jews who migrated en masse to Israel throughout the late eighteenth and the first half of the twentieth century, Yemeni communities in the West, many of whom have lived there for generations, and the Yemenis who migrated for jihad to Afghanistan – many of whom later returned home and had a significant impact on political and security dynamics in the homeland.

Before the outbreak of civil war and the associated concern over cross-border smuggling activities, academics and researchers paid limited attention to the movement of Yemenis across the borders with Saudi Arabia and Oman. Migration has predominantly been from Al-Mahra, which shares borders with both countries along with historical, cultural, tribal and informal economic ties

¹⁴⁰ Quentin Miller, 'After Reopening to International Travel, Socotra Faces COVID-19's Rising Tide Unprepared', *The Yemen Review March-April 2021* (Sana'a: Sana'a Center for Strategic Studies, 2021).

with neighbouring communities.¹⁴¹ According to Yahya Al-Sewari, Mahris maintain deep ties to the neighbouring Gulf States, and most families have relatives who have emigrated for work or acquired a second citizenship.¹⁴² The highest number of Mahris living outside the governorate are in Oman, largely due to the shared customs, traditions and language between Mahris and the people of the southern Omani governorate of Dhofar. Oman affords freedom of travel and employment rights to Mahris living in the Sultanate, and the government has granted many residents citizenship.¹⁴³ Nagi goes as far as to say that the social cohesion within the border regions of Mahra and Dhofar are such that the region represents 'one ecosystem'.¹⁴⁴

There has also been a significant amount of migration from Mahra to the regions of Saudi Arabia bordering the governorate, largely due to the fact that the border between the two countries has not historically been well demarcated.¹⁴⁵ Similar migration has occurred elsewhere along the Saudi border in both directions, including in the north-west of Yemen, where long and complex connections exist between the tribes on either side. Tellingly, many Yemenis argue that the

¹⁴¹ Eleonora Ardemagni, 'Emiratis, Omanis, Saudis: the rising competition for Yemen's Al Mahra', *LSE Middle East Centre* [online], 28 December 2017, accessed 6 December 2020, <https://blogs.lse.ac.uk/mec/2017/12/28/emiratis-omanis-saudis-the-rising-competition-for-yemens-al-mahra/>.

¹⁴² Al-Sewari, *Yemen's Al-Mahra*.

¹⁴³ Ibid.

¹⁴⁴ Nagi, *Eastern Yemen's Tribal Model for Containing Conflict*.

¹⁴⁵ Boucek and Ottaway, *Yemen on the Brink*.

southern Saudi provinces of 'Asir and Jazan are in fact Yemeni and were stolen by the Saudis during the Saudi-Yemeni war of 1934.¹⁴⁶

Similarly limited attention has been paid to the migration of Yemeni Jews to what was then Ottoman-, and later British-controlled Palestine during the nineteenth and twentieth centuries, despite the fact that they constituted one of the larger demographic groups of immigrants in Israel at the time.¹⁴⁷ In his study of Jewish migration from 1881 to 1950, Ariel Ari explains the various reasons for the migration of Yemenis to Palestine, which included political and economic instability in the homeland and the emergence of the Zionist movement, which actively channelled migration from across the world.¹⁴⁸ Aviva Halamish adds that, during the 1930s in particular, Yemenis were considered the most reliable agricultural workers and were also favoured by the Jewish Agency for their large nuclear families. They were therefore given preference for resettlement over Jews from other countries.¹⁴⁹

A final demographic that has been given little scholarly attention in their own right is the cadre of Yemenis who migrated to Afghanistan to support the jihad against the Soviets. According to James Spencer, some were motivated by Islamism, while others were driven by the prospect of revenge against the

¹⁴⁶ Rabi, *Tribes and States in a Changing Middle East*, 141.

¹⁴⁷ Aviva Halamish, 'A New Look at Immigration of Jews from Yemen to Mandatory Palestine', *Israel Studies*, 11, no. 1 (2006): 62.

¹⁴⁸ Ariel Ari, *Jewish-Muslim Relations and Migration from Yemen to Palestine in the Late Nineteenth and Twentieth Centuries*, (Brill: Leiden, 2014), 8-9.

¹⁴⁹ Halamish, 'A New Look at Immigration of Jews from Yemen to Mandatory Palestine', 6-7.

Communists, having been forced out of southern Yemen by successive communist governments.¹⁵⁰ Many of the so-called 'Afghan Arabs' were welcomed back to Yemen by the government after the war was over, where they were utilised by Saleh to defeat the secessionist movement during the 1994 civil war in the south.¹⁵¹ Some migrated again after 9/11, this time to Iraq, where they made up as much as 17 per cent of foreign fighters, according to a 2005 report.¹⁵²

It is also worth mentioning that a significant number of Yemenis migrated to the Horn of Africa (predominantly Ethiopia) and also to Europe and North America during the years before 2011.¹⁵³ However, very little research has been undertaken to understand the drivers of migration, the position they occupy in their host states, and the influence they have exerted – and perhaps continue to exert – on events back in Yemen. Further research is therefore needed to gain a clearer picture of the Yemeni diaspora today, in order to track diaspora networks and links to the homeland.

Diaspora in Conflict: Migration from Yemen Since 2011

The role of Yemenis who have fled or resettled overseas has received scant attention from scholars and practitioners since the Yemeni uprising of 2011 and

¹⁵⁰ Spencer, 'Scimitar for Hire: Yemeni Fighters Abroad', 155-157.

¹⁵¹ Samuel Lindo, Michael Schoder, and Tyler Jones. 'Al Qaeda in the Arabian Peninsula'. *Center for Strategic & International Studies* 3 (2011): 3.

¹⁵² Ibid.

¹⁵³ Johnsen, *Foreign Actors in Yemen*, 31.

subsequent civil war.¹⁵⁴ Yet, according to an article in the *Socotra Post*, the number of expatriates was estimated at seven million in 2020, made up of Yemenis spread across fifty different countries.¹⁵⁵ This section will explore the limited empirical research that has been conducted into diaspora communities since 2011, highlighting the gaps in the literature and drawing conclusions about where additional research can focus.

Unsurprisingly, much of the migration that has taken place since the outbreak of the civil war has taken the form of flows of refugees – although the vast majority of displaced Yemenis remain within the country’s borders. Yemenis who have sought safety abroad have done so predominantly in the Arab world, most notably in Egypt, Oman, Saudi Arabia, Sudan, Djibouti and Jordan.¹⁵⁶ Others have fled to Ethiopia, where many have family connections and where the government has granted *prima facie* refugee status to Yemeni arrivals.¹⁵⁷

A 2020 study by Qobool Al-Absi explored the situation faced by Yemenis in Egypt who fled Yemen due to the conflict, estimating that there were at the time

¹⁵⁴ Noha Aboueldahab, ‘How Western policymakers can engage the new Arab diasporas’, *The Brookings Institution* [online], 16 July 2021, accessed 19 July 2021 <https://www.brookings.edu/blog/order-from-chaos/2021/07/16/how-western-policymakers-can-engage-the-new-arab-diasporas/>.

¹⁵⁵ Socotra Post, ‘الدكتور العديل : ثمانية مليار دولار تحويلات المغتربين اليمنيين السنوية’, *Socotra Post* [online], 11 February 2011, accessed 11 May 2021, <https://socotrapost.com/economic/1967>.

¹⁵⁶ Qobool Al-Absi, *The Struggle Far from Home: Yemeni Refugees in Cairo* (Sana’a: Sana’a Center for Strategic Studies, 2020), 5; Khaled Sala, *One of 2.65 Million Stories: A Yemeni Journey of Displacement* (Sana’a: Sana’a Center for Strategic Studies, 2020), 3.

¹⁵⁷ Indlieb Farazi Saber, ‘Inside Ethiopia’s historic and thriving Yemeni community’, *Middle East Eye*, 23 June 2022, accessed 1 August 2024, <https://www.middleeasteye.net/discover/ethiopia-yemeni-community-inside-historic-thriving>.

of publication between 500,000-700,000 Yemenis living in Egypt – a huge increase from just 70,000 before the war.¹⁵⁸ Al-Absi notes that there has been a significant number of Yemenis living in Egypt since the 1960s, when Egypt intervened in Yemen in favour of the Republican-led military coup that overthrew the Imamate in the civil war, leading to the formation of the YAR.¹⁵⁹ According to the study, most Yemenis who have entered Egypt since the outbreak of the current war in 2015 have done so on medical visas and then remained, with only a small number actually registering as asylum seekers and the rest remaining informally.¹⁶⁰

The study explains that these Yemenis come from across the country, from different social classes and cultural backgrounds, and that most reside in the Giza district of Cairo.¹⁶¹ Al-Absi also states that Yemeni refugees – many of whom were relatively affluent home owners in Yemen – face economic hardship in Egypt, living in overcrowded, poor neighbourhoods and struggling to find employment.¹⁶² She argues that the strong community, familial and tribal social safety nets that existed in the homeland either become obsolete or shift in the host state, creating additional struggles for refugees.¹⁶³

Many Yemenis have sought refuge in Amman, where there were around 14,700 registered refugees in 2020 – although, according to Khaled Sala, the actual

¹⁵⁸ Al-Absi, *The Struggle Far from Home*, 5-6.

¹⁵⁹ Ibid.

¹⁶⁰ Ibid.

¹⁶¹ Ibid., 7.

¹⁶² Ibid., 9.

¹⁶³ Ibid..

number is likely much higher as not all Yemenis register their asylum.¹⁶⁴ Turkey has also become an important destination for migration, welcoming tens of thousands of Yemenis seeking refuge from violence and Houthi oppression, including influential businessmen and supporters of the Islah party.¹⁶⁵

Yemenis in Saudi Arabia today, meanwhile, continue to be seen by academics and researchers primarily through the lens of remittances. According to Gregory Johnsen, there were two million Yemenis working in Saudi Arabia in 2020, sending remittances home to their families in Yemen.¹⁶⁶ Annual remittances were confirmed by the Deputy Minister of Expatriates to equal around \$8 billion US dollars in 2020, however the accuracy of this figure is questionable as the majority of remittances pass through private money exchange companies directly to the recipients, making it difficult to quantify their actual value.¹⁶⁷ These remittances not only support individual families, but also represent the primary source of foreign currency in the local market since large-scale exports have largely been stopped due to the conflict.¹⁶⁸

According to Ali Al-Dailami, Yemenis in Saudi Arabia have faced increased financial pressure in recent years due to the Covid-19 pandemic and efforts

¹⁶⁴ Sala, *One of 2.65 Million Stories*, 8.

¹⁶⁵ Al-Deen, 'The Houthi-Tribal Conflict in Yemen', 6-7.

¹⁶⁶ Johnsen, *Foreign Actors in Yemen*, 11.

¹⁶⁷ Socotra Post. 'ثمانية مليار دولار تحويلات المغتربين اليمنيين السنوية' / Dr Al-Adeel: \$8 billion is the total of annual remittances from Yemeni expatriates'.

¹⁶⁸ Ali Al-Dailami, 'Yemenis in Saudi Arabia: Less Money to Send Home, More Pressure to Leave', *Sana'a Center for Strategic Studies* [online], 3 September 2020, accessed 11 May 2011 <https://sanaacenter.org/publications/analysis/11448>.

towards Saudization (the nationalisation of the workforce as part of national development plans) which are squeezing them out of jobs. Al-Dailami's research suggests that deportation remains a constant threat, and speaking openly about the war and the struggles they face is difficult due to the political sensitivity of the topics. Evidence also indicates that a large number of Yemenis have returned to Hadhramaut recently as a result of Saudization policies, which has the potential to put additional pressure on public services and threaten social cohesion.¹⁶⁹

One hugely important demographic of the Yemeni diaspora that has been almost entirely overlooked in the literature on the conflict since 2011 is the global Yemeni business community – which is heavily implicated in corruption in Yemen and the war economy sustaining the conflict. According to Johnsen, many of the ill-gotten profits from the conflict have gone directly into real estate in Cairo, Istanbul and a number of other destinations.¹⁷⁰ Fuel imports are particularly lucrative, and the most important player in this industry is undoubtedly Ahmed Al-Eissi, a Yemeni businessman based in Cairo who is the Head of the Alessi Group and also the deputy head of Yemen's Presidential Office. Al-Eissi has made no secret of his financial backing of the Internationally Recognised Government, and specifically President Hadi, whom he has rescued financially

¹⁶⁹ Ibid.

¹⁷⁰ Johnsen, 'Foreign Actors in Yemen', 19.

more than once. He has also lent money directly to the government to fund public services.¹⁷¹

A fascinating interview conducted with Al-Eissi by the Sana'a Center for Strategic Studies in 2021 alluded to the extent of the power exerted by this wealthy individual over events in Yemen. The article documenting the interview refers to his apartment as 'the fixed center of the Yemeni universe', where 'former prime ministers, tribal sheikhs, businessmen, members of parliament and military officers all patiently wait for their audience.'¹⁷² The article goes on to say: 'Unofficially, Al-Eissi may be the most powerful Yemeni alive. Certainly, he's one of the richest'.¹⁷³ Yet individuals like Al-Eissi are barely mentioned in the academic articles and policy reports attempting to conceptualise the conflict, the war economy and the interference of external actors – an obvious oversight that should be rectified by additional research into the position diaspora actors occupy within the networks of patronage feeding the conflict.

Similarly, limited research has been conducted into how Yemenis in the diaspora have been politically mobilised during the current conflict, and the existing research arguably raises more questions than it answers. It is well known that a number of Yemeni political actors are currently residing outside of Yemen:

¹⁷¹ Sana'a Center for Strategic Studies, 'Businessmen are not prohibited from engaging in politics – A Q&A with Ahmad al-Essi', *Sana'a Center for Strategic Studies*, 16 March 2021, accessed 6 May 2021. <https://sanaacenter.org/publications/analysis/13434>.

¹⁷²Ibid.

¹⁷³ Ibid.

Saleh's son Ahmed Ali – once the heir apparent and still a hugely influential figure in Yemeni politics, despite being sanctioned by the UN – is based in the UAE and is believed to be receiving support for his rehabilitation into the Yemeni political scene from the Emirati government.¹⁷⁴ Senior representatives of the Houthis, meanwhile, including their chief negotiator, Mohammed Abdulsalam, are known to be based out of Muscat, which the Houthis have made the centre of their diplomatic efforts.¹⁷⁵ Many of Islah's leaders are also currently based outside of Yemen, primarily in Riyadh, Doha and Istanbul. According to Johnsen, these locations have been highly significant in shaping events on the ground in Yemen, as different branches of the party have emerged mirroring the respective host states.¹⁷⁶

Yet surprisingly little academic research has been conducted attempting to understand how the location of these actors outside of Yemen and their position within diaspora networks affects their interaction with the homeland and their influence over events on the ground. For example, research is lacking into the opportunity structures shaping mobilisation patterns in the diaspora, as well as the ways in which diasporas are utilised by external actors (such as foreign

¹⁷⁴ Schmitz, 'Tribes in Yemen'.

¹⁷⁵ The Arab Weekly, 'Oman brings into the open its mediation on Yemen', *The Arab Weekly* [online], 31 March 2021, accessed 6 May 2021, <https://thearabweekly.com/oman-brings-open-its-mediation-yemen>.

¹⁷⁶ Johnsen, 'Foreign Actors in Yemen', 21.

governments with interests in Yemen's war) to push their own agendas, and the extent to which diasporas retain their own autonomy in such scenarios.

Two policy reports have been published on mobilisation dynamics among the Yemeni diaspora since 2011, one of which focuses on the 'professional' diaspora, and the other of which is focused on the diasporas located in the UK, Egypt and Turkey.¹⁷⁷ The first, entitled *Reclaiming Yemen: The role of the Yemeni professional diaspora*, was written by Noha Aboueldahab. It is not altogether clear exactly what is meant by 'professional'; Aboueldahab herself acknowledges the diversity of backgrounds of the subjects of her study, explaining that the group consisted of civil society leaders, activists, scholars, artists, students, former politicians, journalists, and one filmmaker.¹⁷⁸ It could therefore be assumed that the term 'professional' is used to refer to Yemenis of a higher socio-economic status, although this is not at all clear. The views expressed by the Yemeni subjects interviewed for Aboueldahab's paper appear to demonstrate an independent attitude towards the conflict, with little evidence that her subjects were more supportive of either side. It should be acknowledged that the results of the study might have differed significantly had Aboueldahab performed the same research into Yemeni migrants of different backgrounds and status, for example those working in low-paid, unskilled jobs or living as refugees in host countries.

¹⁷⁷ Noha Aboueldahab, 'Reclaiming Yemen: The Role of the Yemeni Professional Diaspora', *Brookings Center Doha* 26 (2019); Al-Deen, 'The Houthis-Tribal Conflict in Yemen'.

¹⁷⁸ Aboueldahab, 'How Western policymakers can engage the new Arab diasporas', 4.

Moreover, although its subjects appear to be based in a variety of locations including the Middle East, Europe and the USA, Aboueldahab could go further in analysing the various ways in which geographical location and host-state politics affects how people engage with the homeland and the current conflict. Without a contextual and theoretically grounded base of research into the networks that exist within and between diaspora communities in these countries and how they relate and interact with the homeland, it is difficult to draw concrete conclusions about the implications of their political mobilisation for events on the ground in Yemen.

In her research, Aboueldahab acknowledges the heterogeneity of the Yemeni 'professional' diaspora, but argues that, despite their differing views of the conflict, they share common frustrations – most notably the failure of the international community to genuinely engage them in the ongoing attempt at a peace process.¹⁷⁹ Her subjects claim that the current conflict has served to divide and polarise the wider diaspora into two camps – pro-Houthi versus pro-Hadi government/coalition – while an organised group projecting a unified, independent voice has failed to emerge.¹⁸⁰ This, she explains, is due to a number of barriers preventing the mobilisation of 'independent' Yemenis, including: surveillance, threats, withholding of funding for unbiased cultural and other awareness-raising projects, and counterterrorism measures that prevent effective

¹⁷⁹ Ibid., 1.

¹⁸⁰ Ibid., 12.

humanitarian mobilisation.¹⁸¹ While acknowledging these barriers is clearly important, Aboueldahab's research is limited in that it fails to distinguish between the various contexts and circumstances of her subjects which might cause them to be affected by such barriers in different ways, and how this affects their autonomy and agency in their interactions with their homeland.

The second article, entitled *The Long Shadow of War: Mobilization Dynamics of the Yemeni Diaspora Since 2011*, was written by Maysaa Shuja Al-Deen in 2021 for the Arab Reform Initiative. The report offers a brief overview of Yemen's history of immigration and Emigration, followed by a synopsis of Yemeni migration and mobilisation efforts in the UK, Egypt and Turkey. In the UK case, Al-Deen highlights the importance of the southern connection, and the ways in which the STC have sought to capitalise on the significant communities of Yemenis originating from the south to rally support for its cause, with limited success. She also touches on the ways in which the ongoing conflict has polarised communities of Yemenis in the UK.¹⁸² She goes on to offer a briefer analysis of the diasporas in Egypt and Turkey. In the case of Egypt, she argues that diaspora mobilisation has been relatively insignificant, while in Turkey it has been limited to informally organised associations for students and residents.¹⁸³

¹⁸¹ Ibid., 8-9.

¹⁸² Al-Deen, 'The Houthi-Tribal Conflict in Yemen', 2-5.

¹⁸³ Ibid., 5-7.

Additional research is necessary into the contrasting circumstances of diaspora actors, possibly incorporating a comparative angle and a wider variety of subjects, with a view to understanding why and how different actors and communities have been mobilised in different ways, if at all, in the context of the current conflict. For example, research should be carried out into how Yemeni diaspora communities perceive themselves in terms of the various loyalties and allegiances discussed in the previous section (tribe, nation, region, religion). As discussed, such loyalties and allegiances are fluid, dynamic and are determined by a number of different factors. The factors shaping identity among the diaspora will also likely be different to the factors shaping identity among Yemenis at 'home' - region of origin, host state politics, period of migration, reasons for migration, generation, and a number of other factors will likely play a part.

Further theoretical analysis of the wider diaspora studies literature, along with empirical research into Yemeni diaspora communities is therefore required in order to understand diaspora networks and the role they are playing in the wider context of the Yemeni politics and conflict.

Conclusion

This chapter has provided a critical analysis of the existing academic literature and research on Yemen as it relates to the current conflict and the diaspora. It began by examining aspects of Yemeni history, politics and society leading up to 2011 which scholars have argued helped to lay the foundations for the conflict. It

explored the multiple sources of identity in Yemen that have been labelled in much of the literature as barriers to the formation of national identity.

It concluded that each of the sources of identity frequently cited in the literature - national, tribal, religious and regional - have been influential to varying degrees in different regions and at different times throughout history, as a result of distinct sets of circumstances. It was therefore argued that identity formation and socio-political organisation in Yemen should be understood as a dynamic process rather than a static competition between these forces. Further research and conceptualisation is needed to fully understand this process and how it has contributed to the current conflict. The chapter also analysed the system of neopatrimonialism that existed in Yemen under Saleh, adding nuance to the common argument that pre-2011 Yemen was a failing state.

The chapter also highlighted some of the dominant frameworks for understanding the war in Yemen. It took a critical look at the narratives emphasising the tribal, sectarian and regional elements of the conflict, arguing that such narratives are simplistic and incomplete as they failed to grasp the complex processes of identity formation and socio-political organisation that are key to both driving and transforming conflict. It also critically analysed the existing literature on the war economy, arguing that the economic systems and processes sustaining the conflict are arguably a mere extension of the

neopatrimonial system that existed before 2011, albeit with new some new actors having taken on the roles of patron and client.

Furthermore, it examined the arguments made by many in the academic and policy community that the role of external powers is a key factor in sustaining the conflict. It argued that this argument is incomplete, as it fails to take into account the role of Yemenis overseas, focusing disproportionately on the role of foreign governments. It concluded that a new framework is needed to conceptualise the conflict which captures the dynamic and transnational processes that are sustaining violence and acting as barriers to peace.

Finally, this chapter summarised the existing literature on the Yemeni diaspora, providing an historical overview of migration from Yemen from the sixth century to the present. It argued that there are significant gaps in this body of literature, particularly relating to the experience of Yemenis residing in Middle Eastern and western countries, and the ways in which the diaspora are engaging and mobilising today in response to the conflict.

In light of the above, it is pertinent that additional research is conducted into the political marketplace in Yemen today and the role of the diaspora within that complex ecosystem. An examination of some of the theoretical literature in the conflict analysis and peacebuilding space, as well as scholarship focusing on the role of diasporas in conflict, is first needed in order to begin to construct such a framework. The subsequent chapter will present this literature review, laying the

groundwork for the establishment of a new theoretical framework that will be used to conduct a thorough examination of the role of the diaspora in Yemen's political marketplace throughout the remainder of this thesis.

Chapter 2: Diaspora, Mobilisation and the Twenty-First Century

Conflict Environment

This chapter reviews the growing body of scholarship in the field of diaspora studies, with a particular focus on the ways diasporas mobilise during periods of conflict in their homeland. First, it considers the various ways in which scholars have attempted to define the term diaspora, outlining the key concepts and debates that have emerged in the literature. Second, it summarises the various attempts to conceptualise why and how diasporas mobilise during crises and conflicts in the homeland, critically analysing the existing research that has attempted to determine whether they play a positive or negative role. Third, it considers the ways in which globalisation and developments in technology – particularly the explosive growth of the internet and social media – have shaped the dynamics of diaspora relations and mobilisation, and the implications of this for conflict and conflict transformation. Finally, the chapter explores how the changing nature of conflict inevitably affects diasporas and diaspora mobilisation (and vice versa), considering the scholarly attempts – or lack thereof – to conceptualise the position diasporas occupy in the fragmented, internationalised conflict environment of the twenty-first century.

Defining Diaspora

The word diaspora is derived from the Greek verb *speirein* (σπείρειν), which means 'to sow seed . . . beget offspring . . . scatter like seed . . . to spread abroad'.¹⁸⁴

Use of the term became prominent during the twentieth century as it was applied to Jewish, Greek, Armenian and African communities.¹⁸⁵ Since the initial coining of the word, however, the number of ethnic groups declaring themselves, or being described by others as diasporas has grown exponentially. This has led the academic field of diaspora studies to flourish, particularly alongside the development of research on globalisation.¹⁸⁶

Today, migration plays a crucial role in the economic and political life of many countries which have significant portions of their population abroad and rely on them heavily as a source of foreign exchange. This is especially the case in the Middle East and Africa.¹⁸⁷ In recent years, 'diaspora' has become the go-to term for such communities of dispersion – which would previously have been known by other names such as exile groups, overseas communities, ethnic and racial minorities. This is the case to the extent that the media have come to use the term

¹⁸⁴ Martin Slama and Johann Heiss, 'Comparing Arab Diasporas: Post-9/11 Historical Perspectives on Hadhrami and Syro-Lebanese Communities in Southeast Asia and the Americas', *Comparative Studies of South Asia, Africa and the Middle East* 31, no. 2 (2011): 234.

¹⁸⁵ Bahar Baser and Ashok Swain, 'Stateless Diaspora Groups and their Repertoires of Nationalist Activism in Host Countries', *Journal of International Relations*, 8, no. 1 (2010): 38.

¹⁸⁶ Bassma Kodmani, 'The Syrian Diaspora, Old and New', *Arab Reform Initiative*, 5 December 2019, 7, accessed 6 May 2021, <https://www.arab-reform.net/publication/the-syrian-diaspora-old-and-new/>.

¹⁸⁷ Fiona Adamson, 'Crossing Borders: International Migration and National Security', *International Security*, 31, no. 1 (2006): 170.

routinely as a catch-all substitute for any notion of expansion and scattering away from a centre.¹⁸⁸

Many scholars have attempted to articulate a working definition of diaspora, although there has been much disagreement over how the term should be used to the extent that many academics in the field seem to have developed their own, unique definitions. Some scholars advocate for a broader understanding of the term that allows for flexibility in its application, while others argue that the term must be more specific in order to be meaningful.

Scholars in the former camp use definitions of diaspora that can be as simple as 'that segment of a people living outside the homeland' (ibid., p15). Hazel Smith and Paul Stares offer marginally more specification in their definition, which describes diasporas as social groups that settle and establish themselves in another country and are heterogenous.¹⁸⁹ Kachig Tölöyan – widely recognized as one of the fathers of the field of diaspora studies – loosely mixes the term with transnationalism, stating that diaspora communities are 'the exemplary communities of the transnational moment'.¹⁹⁰ While these scholars effectively capture the centrality of concepts such as migration and transnationalism to the study of diasporas, they leave much to interpretation and have been criticised for

¹⁸⁸ Khachig Tölöyan, 'Rethinking Diaspora(s): Stateless Power in the Transnational Moment', *Diaspora*, 5, no.1 (1996): 10.

¹⁸⁹ Hazel Smith, 'Diasporas in International Conflict', in *Diasporas in Conflict: Peace-Makers or Peace-Wreckers*, eds. Hazel Smith and Paul Stares (Tokyo and New York: United Nations University Press, 2010), 5.

¹⁹⁰ Tölöyan, 'Rethinking Diaspora(s)', 4.

‘concept-stretching’, which signifies the way in which the broadness and vagueness of the definition renders it meaningless.¹⁹¹

Other scholars define diaspora more specifically, emphasising the connections between diasporas and the ‘homeland’ and the sense of community that develops as a result. Gabriel Sheffer, for example, defines diaspora as ‘ethnic minority groups of migrant origins residing and acting in host countries but maintaining strong sentimental and material links with their countries of origin – their homelands’.¹⁹² Benedict Anderson famously elaborated on these links, introducing the concept of the ‘imagined community’.¹⁹³ According to Anderson, the ‘nation’ should be defined as an ‘imagined political community’, which is imagined as both inherently limited and sovereign.¹⁹⁴ The concept became hugely influential in the field, and was adopted and incorporated by various other scholars, such as Steven Vertovec, in their attempts to define diaspora.¹⁹⁵ Tölöyan builds on this notion in his writing on diasporas, arguing that it is this collective identity and the commitment to maintaining connections with the homeland that differentiates diasporas from ethnic communities.¹⁹⁶

¹⁹¹ Baser and Swain, ‘Stateless Diaspora Groups and their Repertoires of Nationalist Activism in Host Countries’, 39.

¹⁹² Gabriel Sheffer, *Diaspora Politics. At Home Abroad* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2003), 153.

¹⁹³ Benedict Anderson, *Imagined Communities* (Verso: London, 2006), 6.

¹⁹⁴ *Ibid.*, 25.

¹⁹⁵ Alexandra Délano Alonso and Harris Mylonas, ‘The Microfoundations of Diaspora Politics: Unpacking the State and Disaggregating the Diaspora’, *Journal of Ethnic and Migration Studies*, 45, no. 4 (2007): 8; Steven Vertovec, *Transnationalism* (London: Routledge, 2009).

¹⁹⁶ Tölöyan, ‘Rethinking Diaspora(s)’, 16-17.

Others are more specific still about the nature of diaspora networks and how they relate to and engage with their homeland, focusing in greater details on the structure of networks and relations, along with the sense of attachment to a centre. Safran, for example, defines diasporas as 'expatriate minority communities (1) that are dispersed from an original centre to at least two peripheral places; (2) that maintain a memory, vision, or myth about their original homeland; (3) that believe they are not and perhaps cannot be fully accepted by their host country; (4) that see the ancestral home as a place of eventual return, when the time is right; (5) that are committed to the maintenance or restoration of this homeland; and (6) of which the group's consciousness and solidarity are importantly defined by this continuing relation with the homeland'.¹⁹⁷ This school of thought gained particular prominence during the late nineteenth century in the context of the Jewish diaspora and the Zionist movement.

Sari Hanafi, meanwhile, defines diaspora as 'a set of relationships between the homeland, which functions as a centre of gravity, and a periphery of nodes - communities, groups and individuals - who relate to the territory of origin as a centre of gravity, but live in different parts of the world'.¹⁹⁸

¹⁹⁷ William Safran, 'Diasporas in Modern Societies: Myths of Homeland and Return', *Diaspora*, 1 no.1 (1991), 87.

¹⁹⁸ Sari Hanafi, 'Rethinking the Palestinians abroad as a diaspora', *HAGAR International Social Science Review*, 4, no.1-2 (2003): 174.

Most of these definitions echo the essentialist/constructivist debate that is mirrored across the field of political science – most notably with regard to nationalism. Most of the prominent academics in the field, at the very least, acknowledge this debate. Many engage with it on a deeper level, attempting to locate themselves on the positivist/constructivist spectrum and to draw their own conclusions about the extent to which diasporas are pre-political natural entities or socially constructed.¹⁹⁹

The positivist school of thought views diasporas emerging as a natural, automatic result of the boundary-crossing processes of migration, exile and dispersal. From this perspective, diaspora is a monolithic body or group that is related to people in the place of origin by affinity ties, kin and common descent.²⁰⁰

The constructivist approach, on the other hand, views diasporas as being socially constructed through processes such as discourse, elite manipulation and processes of political mobilisation.²⁰¹

Some scholars take this one step further, applying the term ‘diaspora’ to these processes themselves, as opposed to a group, community or set of relations.

¹⁹⁹ Fiona Adamson, ‘Constructing the diaspora: Diaspora identity politics and transnational social movements’ in *Politics from Afar: Transnational Diasporas and Networks*, eds. T Lyons and P Mandeville, (New York: Columbia University Press, 2012), 27.

²⁰⁰ Baser and Swain, ‘Stateless Diaspora Groups and their Repertoires of Nationalist Activism in Host Countries’, 39.

²⁰¹ Adamson, ‘Constructing the diaspora’, 27; Charles King and Neil J Melvin, ‘Diaspora Politics: Ethnic Linkages’, *Foreign Policy, and Security in Eurasia - International Security*, 24, no. 3 (1999-2000): 109; Sharon Madriaga Quinsa, ‘Diaspora activism in a non-traditional country of destination: the case of Filipinos in the Netherlands’, *Ethnic and Racial Studies*, 39, no. 6 (2016): 1016; Latha Varadarajan, *The Domestic Abroad: Diasporas in International Relations* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2010), 9.

Brubaker, for example, understands diaspora as a 'category of practice, project claim and stance, rather than as a bounded group'.²⁰² Similarly, Robert Glover claims that earlier definitions that 'lump diasporas into broader articulations of transnationalism' or that 'interpret them monolithically as a force that undermines the coherence of national borders, territorial sovereignty, and traditional notions of the modern 'nation-state''.²⁰³ Latha Varadarajan thus understands diaspora as part of political projects that produce links between emigrant communities and their homeland. According to this definition, it is the physical and inherently political interactions among members of a community and with their homeland that connotes diaspora, not simply their belonging to an emigrant community or an abstract sense of attachment.²⁰⁴

Such process-focused definitions are useful insofar as they capture the dynamism and fluidity of diasporas and diaspora relations. However, the concept of identity and the idea of the homeland as a focal point of such processes arguably remain important in order to distinguish between 'diasporic' processes and the processes that take place between communities across national borders more generally.

While each of the definitions outlined above alludes to important concepts and themes within the field of diaspora studies, the very process of defining diaspora

²⁰² Maria Koinova, 'Diasporas and secessionist conflicts: the mobilization of the Armenian, Albanian and Chechen diasporas', *Ethnic and Racial Studies*, 34, no. 2 (2011): 336.

²⁰³ Robert Glover, 'Constructing the "Domestic Abroad": Re-examining the Role of Diasporas in International Relations', *Diaspora*, 16 no.1/2 (2007): 274.

²⁰⁴ Varadarajan, *The Domestic Abroad*, 9.

as a static concept is arguably problematic. James Clifford states that we should be wary while constructing a working definition of diaspora, because it alludes to an ideal-type, to the effect that heterogeneous groups could be identified as more or less diasporic.²⁰⁵ In order to gain a better understanding of diasporas, it is therefore pertinent to explore in greater detail some of the dominant concepts and themes that have emerged in the diaspora studies literature over the course of the rapid development of the field.²⁰⁶

One of the major drivers of the development of the field of diaspora studies has been the explosive growth in the study of globalisation and transnationalism. The concepts of transnationalism, the nation-state, and locality are therefore central to much of the existing literature on diaspora. In fact, Tölöyan argued in 1996 in his influential introduction to the first volume of the journal, *Diaspora*, that the new meanings of diaspora that were emerging in the literature were themselves coupled with a larger project of rearticulating the nation-state.²⁰⁷

Scholars have emphasised the ways in which networks of communities understood as diasporas are transnational in nature, crossing geographical borders and identifying and interacting with multiple 'states' at once.²⁰⁸ Some

²⁰⁵ James Clifford, 'Diasporas', *Cultural Anthropology*, 9, no. 3 (1994): 308.

²⁰⁶ Ibid.

²⁰⁷ Tölöyan, 'Rethinking Diaspora(s)', 4.

²⁰⁸ Fiona Adamson, 'Mobilizing for the transformation of home: Politicized identities and transnational practices' in *New approaches to migration: Transnational communities and the transformation of home*, eds. Khalid Koser and Nadjé Sadig Al-Ali, (London: Routledge, 2002), 159 and 166.

have attempted to make sense of this by adhering to a triadic model of relationships 'between (a) globally dispersed yet collectively self-identified ethnic groups; (b) the territorial states and contexts where such groups reside, and (3) the homeland states and contexts where they or their forebears came from'.²⁰⁹

More recently, however, research has emerged into how diasporas are becoming 'deterritorialized', as interactions increasingly take place across a multitude of spaces – some tangible and others intangible – and as the term is increasingly used to assert non-national imagined communities such as the 'Muslim Diaspora' or the 'Queer Diaspora'.²¹⁰ To further unpack the concept of deterritorialisation in the context of diaspora, Jolle Demmers explores how diaspora communities experience a delocalisation of conflict dynamics, where the traditional ties to a specific geographic location become less central to their political, social, and cultural engagements. According to Demmers, deterritorialisation does not imply the complete loss of territorial connections, but rather a shift in how these connections are reimagined and reconstructed across multiple sites, both physical and virtual. In this context, diasporas can be seen as simultaneously rooted in localities while also transcending them, as their identity and political

²⁰⁹ Jolle Demmers, 'Diaspora and Conflict: Locality, Long-distance Nationalism, and Delocalisation of Conflict Dynamics', *The Public*, 9 no. 1 (2002): 89.

²¹⁰ Adamson, 'Constructing the diaspora', 27; Koinova, 1258.

activities become less anchored to any singular place, allowing them to influence homeland conflicts from distant, yet highly connected, locations.²¹¹

The idea of diasporas as inherently deterritorialized has emerged alongside debates around nationalism, which is also arguably becoming less rooted to a particular physical space.²¹² Not all scholars adhere strictly to this notion, however, and the use of the term ‘multi-sited embeddedness’ is growing in prominence as an alternative way of describing how diasporas identify and engage with multiple different localities at once.²¹³ Donya Alinejad agrees that the idea of locality is complex, arguing that, by simultaneously challenging spatial proximity to bounded territories as a prerequisite for home and belonging, diaspora both challenges and reinforces territorial borders.²¹⁴

Building on the work of Demmers, Dana Moss and Francesco Ragazzi further contribute to the literature on diaspora mobilization and deterritorialisation by offering more critical perspectives on how these dynamics unfold in practice. Moss (2016) introduces the concept of transnational repression, referring to ‘the border-crossing practices used by authoritarian regimes and non-state actors to

²¹¹ Jolle Demmers, ‘Diaspora and Conflict: Locality, Long-distance Nationalism, and Delocalisation of Conflict Dynamics’, *The Public*, 9 no. 1 (2002): 95-6.

²¹² Amanda Roth, ‘The Role of Diasporas in Conflict’, *Journal of International Affairs*, 68 no. 2 (2015): 292.

²¹³ Koinova, ‘Diaspora Mobilisation for Conflict’, 1262.

²¹⁴ Donya Alinejad, ‘Mapping homelands through virtual spaces: transnational embodiment and Iranian diaspora bloggers’, *Global Networks*, 11 no.1 (2011): 44.

control, coerce and punish exiles and diaspora members abroad'.²¹⁵ This concept directly challenges the ideal of a "deterritorialized" diaspora by showing how repressive regimes extend their control to diaspora communities, particularly through surveillance and intimidation. Moss argues that, rather than being entirely free from territorial constraints, diasporas often remain tethered to the politics of their homeland through the threat of repression, which shapes their mobilization strategies and political engagement.²¹⁶ This nuance is crucial, as it highlights the intersection of deterritorialisation and the reality of state control over diasporic politics, adding complexity to the idea of a fully "deterritorialized" diaspora.

Francesco Ragazzi's work on diaspora mobilization critiques the notion of diasporas as static, deterritorialized communities by emphasizing their dynamic, processual nature. He argues that diasporas are shaped by shifting networks and competing identity narratives, constructed through both external political forces and internal struggles for legitimate representation. Ragazzi highlights that diaspora mobilization is not simply cosmopolitan but often involves political battles over victimhood and identity, which can facilitate cross-diasporic collaboration on issues like class, gender, and race. This perspective is crucial for understanding Yemeni diaspora mobilization, where identity and political

²¹⁵ Moss, *Transnational Repression in the Age of Globalisation*, 19.

²¹⁶ *Ibid.*, 20.

engagement are continuously redefined in response to both homeland conflict and host-country politics.²¹⁷

The concepts presented above allude to another central theme in the study of diasporas: the concept of identity and of belonging to a homeland. Many scholars have argued that it is not the act of migration itself or one's locality outside of one's place of origin that characterises a diaspora, but instead it is identifying with, or feeling a sense of attachment to that homeland – which may be real or imagined, and may or may not be a country.²¹⁸ Some scholars have highlighted the desire to return to that homeland as a key characterisation of members of a diaspora, while others have argued that many diasporans actually develop a stronger sense of national or ethnic identity than those still living in the place of origin.²¹⁹ Others have focused on the sense of belonging in the host state that may

²¹⁷ Ragazzi, 'Diaspora: The Politics of its Meanings', 109-110.

²¹⁸ Adamson, 'Constructing the diaspora', 27; Alinejad, 'Mapping homelands through virtual spaces', 46; Aharon Barth and Yossi Shain, 'Diasporas and International Relations Theory', *International Organization*, 57 no. 3 (2003): 452; Jennifer Brinkerhoff, 'Diasporas and conflict societies: Conflict entrepreneurs, competing interests or contributors to stability and development?', *Conflict, Security & Development*, 11 (2011): 116; Huma Haider, 'Conflict Sensitivity: Topic Guide', *Governance and Social Development Resource Centre: University of Birmingham* (Birmingham: University of Birmingham, 2014): 3; Ashok Swain and Nhi Phan, 'Diasporas' Role in Peacebuilding: The Case of the Vietnamese-Swedish Migrant Group', in *The Security-Development Nexus: Peace, Conflict and Development*, eds. Rameses Amer; Ashok Swain, and Joakim Öjendal (London: Anthem Press, 2012), 161-163.

²¹⁹ Glover, 'Constructing the "Domestic Abroad"', 278; Brinkerhoff, 'Diasporas and conflict societies', 116.

or may not develop and what effect this has on diasporas' identity and their engagement with the homeland.²²⁰

Yet the ways in which diasporas identify and engage with their place of origin is nuanced and should not be considered as static. According to Huma Haider, diaspora identities are not confined to the nation-state and are 'inherently hybrid in character'.²²¹ They can experience a sense of 'in-betweenness' as a result of their various 'roots and routes', which inevitably influences how they identify with each other, the host state, and their place of origin.²²² Fiona Adamson takes this one step further, arguing that members of transnational communities are able to reframe and rearticulate their political identities on an ongoing basis.²²³

A major factor influencing diaspora identity and belonging is the host state – and particularly the degree of freedom to engage in cultural and political practices outside of those sanctioned in the place of origin.²²⁴ Oula Kadhum's research into the Iraqi diaspora in the UK reinforces these notions, as she demonstrates that the Iraqi diaspora's sense of belonging encompasses 'both formal and informal

²²⁰ Yaniv Voller, 'Advantages and Challenges to Diaspora Transnational Civil Society Activism in the Homeland: Examples from Iraqi Kurdistan, Somaliland and South Sudan', *LSE Conflict Research Programme* (London: London School of Economics, 2020), 27.

²²¹ Haider, 'Conflict Sensitivity: Topic Guide', 3.

²²² Oula Kadhum, 'Diaspora Mobilisation and Belonging in the UK: The Case of the Iraqi Diaspora in the Aftermath of the 2003 Intervention' *Workshop Proceedings: Sense of Belonging in a Diverse Britain* (London: Dialogue Society, 2014): 110.

²²³ Adamson, 'Mobilizing for the transformation of home', 160.

²²⁴ *Ibid.*, 162.

aspects of belonging that evolve and develop in line with ever changing translocal positionalities in the domestic and the international'.²²⁵

Such concepts of identity and belonging are usually tied to the concept of nationalism and the nation-state, which represents another key, recurring theme in the existing literature on diaspora. As outlined earlier, many scholars conceive of diaspora communities as being interlocked in a triadic relationship with their place of origin and host state.²²⁶ This set of relationships has been the subject of much research, as scholars have sought to understand and conceptualise the effects of these interactions.

Some scholars have focused on the ways in which diasporas can pose a challenge to the legitimacy and sovereignty of the nation-state, examining how the emergence of transnational organisational structures such as diaspora organisations can create identities and political loyalties that challenge conventional notions of citizenship.²²⁷ According to Sheffer, this can create the potential for 'dual authority', which can lead to fragmented loyalties and can create tensions and conflicts between diasporas and their host societies and governments.²²⁸

²²⁵ Kadhum, *Diaspora Mobilisation and Belonging in the UK*, 122-123.

²²⁶ Adamson, 'Mobilizing for the transformation of home', 158.

²²⁷ Fiona Adamson, 'Crossing Borders: International Migration and National Security', *International Security*, 31 no. 1 (2006): 183; Barth and Shain, 'Diasporas and International Relations Theory', 450.

²²⁸ Gabriel Sheffer, *Diaspora Politics: At Home Abroad* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2003), 81.

Similarly, a growing body of academic work has explored the ways in which states are increasingly attempting to contain the potential challenge diasporas might pose and even leverage them to reinforce their own authority and further their strategic agendas. Diaspora-sending countries (or homelands) in particular have increasingly tried to harness the political, economic and diplomatic power of diasporas for their own benefit.²²⁹ According to the literature, there are various ways states do this, including sponsoring cultural initiatives, lobbying and public relations activities in host states, involving their diasporas in diplomatic and political activities, and leveraging their economic policies to encourage diaspora investment.²³⁰ Through each of these mechanisms, states are treating their diasporas as a constituency – referred to by Varadarajan as ‘the Domestic Abroad’ – institutionalising their relationships with their diasporas while at the same time acknowledging them as part of a larger, ‘global’ nation.²³¹

While the existing research has effectively demonstrated trends in the ways that states engage with their diasporas, such trends do not apply in every case. One particularly unique example of this is the case of stateless diasporas. Some academic research has been conducted to understand the dynamics of the relationships between diasporas, their place of origin and their host state in cases where the diaspora has no ‘state’ of its own. A clear example of this is the Kurdish

²²⁹ Adamson, ‘Mobilizing for the transformation of home’, 157; Adamson, ‘Crossing Borders’, 189.

²³⁰ Glover, ‘Constructing the “Domestic Abroad”’, 279-280; King and Melvin, ‘Diaspora Politics: Ethnic Linkages’, 111-112 and 114.

²³¹ Varadarajan, *The Domestic Abroad*, 5.

diaspora, who can be linked to multiple states and territories in the Middle East but do not originate from a common, officially recognised Kurdish homeland.²³²

Maria Koinova attempts to conceptualise how stateless diasporas experience nationalism in the absence of a nation-state, distinguishing between civic nationalism – associated with common citizenship – and ethnic nationalism – which is particularistic in nature and emphasises common blood as a basis for communal belonging.²³³ Understanding the dynamics of stateless diasporas is of particular relevance in the case of Yemen, where a major party to the conflict (but not a party to the UN-backed political process), the Southern Transitional Council (STC), is actively lobbying outside of Yemen to build support for its separatist political project, in direct competition with the Yemeni ‘state’.²³⁴ This echoes Varadarajan’s explanation above of how states leverage diasporas, treating them as constituencies, but highlights the limitations of this framework insofar as it fails to capture the ways in which non-state actors can also engage in this practice.

The question of stateless diasporas vs. diasporas that are tied to a nation-state highlights an essential issue acknowledged by most scholars in the field: the heterogeneity of diasporas. Most of the literature acknowledges that there can be

²³² Maria Koinova, ‘Diaspora Mobilisation for Conflict and Post-Conflict Reconstruction’, *Journal of Ethnic and Migration Studies*, 44 no. 8 (2018), 1254-1255.

²³³ Ibid.

²³⁴ Bryant Harris, ‘Yemen’s southern separatists take case to Congress’, *Al-Monitor* [online], 2018, accessed 18 July 2021 <https://www.al-monitor.com/originals/2018/01/yemen-congress-hadi-aden-uae-separatists-stc.html>.

significant differentiation between and within diaspora groups and communities, in terms of how they identify, their individual interests, and how they behave vis-à-vis the host land and place of origin.²³⁵ These differences exist as a result of a plethora of factors including region of origin, time of emigration, place of residence, socio-economic status, generation, skills, class, gender, occupation and religion.²³⁶ The potential for differentiation within and between diasporas is therefore enormous.

This is such that the 'stateless diaspora' label is just one of a multitude of ways in which diasporas have been categorised into subsets by academics in their attempts to better understand and conceptualise them. Another common categorisation of diasporas is voluntary vs. involuntary, referring to the circumstances of their emigration from the homeland. The term 'voluntary migration' refers to those who have left their homes of their own accord to pursue economic opportunities, for personal enrichment, or to reunite with their families overseas.²³⁷ 'Involuntary migration', on the other hand, refers in particular to refugees and displaced people, or any forced migration that could stem from causes such as human trafficking, ethnic cleansing and deportation.²³⁸ Some scholars have sub-divided these further, differentiating between economic vs.

²³⁵ Barth and Shain, 'Diasporas and International Relations Theory', 463; Demmers, 'Diaspora and Conflict', 86; Mary Kaldor, 'Cosmopolitanism versus Nationalism: the New Divide?' In *Europe's New Nationalism: States and Minorities in Conflict*, eds. Richard Caplan and John Feffer (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1996).

²³⁶ Barth and Shain, 'Diasporas and International Relations Theory', 463; Smith and Stares, *Diasporas in Conflict*, 5.

²³⁷ Adamson, 2006, 171.

²³⁸ Ibid.

political migrants and near vs. far diasporas, even creating additional subsets such as 'far-removed', 'conflict-generated', 'victim', 'labour', 'imperial', 'trading' and 'cultural'. The purpose of such categorisation is to understand how the circumstances of migration have come to impact diaspora identity, relations and mobilisation.²³⁹

On the other hand, some scholars argue that not every category mentioned above necessarily constitutes membership of a diaspora in the first place. For example, Anat Ben-David distinguishes between members of a diaspora and refugees where they are present in the same host state. She argues that the term 'diaspora' connotes permanent settlement in the host state, while 'refugeeness' entails a temporary condition and is often a direct result of states' efforts to keep that status temporary.²⁴⁰

The categorisation of diasporas in the literature is useful to a degree, as it begins to unpack the heterogeneity within and between diaspora communities and highlights the myriad circumstances of migration that inevitably affect how individuals and communities identify and engage with one another and their place of origin. However, it is problematic as an analytical tool to the extent that

²³⁹ Adamson, 'Crossing Borders', 172; Adamson, 'Constructing the diaspora', 28; Robin Cohen and Nicholas Van Hear, 'Diasporas and conflict: distance, contiguity and spheres of engagements', *Oxford Development Studies*, 45 no.2 (2017): 174; Terrence Lyons, 'Diasporas and homeland conflict' in *Territoriality and Conflict in an Era of Globalization*, eds. M Kahler and B Walter (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2006), 127; Yossi Shain, 'The Role of Diasporas in Conflict Perpetuation and Resolution', *SAIS Review*, 22 no.2 (2022): 117.

²⁴⁰ Anat Ben-David, 'The Palestinian diaspora on the Web: Between de-territorialization and re-territorialization', *Social Science Information*, 51 no. 4 (2012): 459.

it connotes a dualistic, or zero-sum relationship between subsets and categories. It is therefore ultimately simplistic, as it fails to capture how various categories and subsets can be layered together - often differently at different times and in different contexts. While it can be useful to theorise based on the multitude of circumstances that can apply to individual members of a diaspora, it would be more useful to consider how these circumstances and labels interact with one another.

Defining diaspora is highly problematic due to the vast number of individuals and communities that today consider themselves 'diasporas', and also due to the heterogeneity within and between them. While the use of the term 'diaspora' is arguably overused, a broader definition can be justified on the basis that the very act of considering oneself a member of a diaspora is widely considered to be 'diasporic', in that it connotes a sense of connection with a homeland or an imagined community. However, it is unsurprising that scholars have attempted to introduce various specifications and categorisations in order to increase the analytical effectiveness of the term.

This thesis does not argue explicitly against either approach, but it does argue that a greater level of nuance is needed in the literature. It recognises that theories and frameworks that offer definitive explanations of diaspora mobilisation are, in many cases, inherently flawed in the way they reduce diasporas into monolithic bodies, stripping them from their all-important contexts. Approaches

to understanding diaspora should recognise and not take for granted the pervasive effects of globalisation and transnationalism on everyday economic, political, social and cultural processes. At the same time, they must take into account variations in identity, interests and behaviours of so-called 'diaspora' communities around the world.

Diasporas, this thesis argues, are fluid, dynamic, and constantly evolving, and diasporic processes are a product of specific sets of multi-layered contextual factors. This thesis accepts the essentialist baseline of physical or geographical migration or dispersion as an essential component of diasporas, however, it does not accept this as a complete definition. Instead, it understands the various constructivist approaches to understanding diaspora as existing on top of this essentialist baseline, understanding that there are a wide array of 'diasporic' processes and elements that may or may not be present in a diaspora. The four key constructivist markers of diasporas that are referred to repeatedly throughout this thesis are:

1. *Identity*: Identification with the homeland and expressions of this identity in daily life, echoing Sheffer.
2. *Community*: Experiencing a sense of community (whether physical or imagined) with others originating from that homeland, echoing Anderson.
3. *Mobilisation*: Active or passive engagement with, or mobilisation in the affairs of the homeland, echoing Varadarajan.

4. *Transnationalism*: Participation in transnational relationships or activities, echoing Tölöyan.

Fundamentally, this thesis refuses to accept one static definition of diaspora, instead assuming that the various diasporic elements and processes mentioned above can manifest in different ways across diverse contexts, from diaspora to diaspora and even within diasporas.

Homeland Conflict and Diaspora Mobilisation

As the field of diaspora studies has grown, the role diasporas play in conflict and conflict resolution has become one of the major interests of research in the field, particularly over the years since 9/11. The attacks on the World Trade Center and the subsequent 'War on Terror' drew significant scholarly and policy attention to 'home-grown terrorists' and the role of immigrant communities in fostering terrorism and supporting conflict and insurgency in their homelands.²⁴¹

The growing body of academic literature produced during the years since has highlighted the key role that diasporas and transnational communities play 'in contemporary political and social transformations, from the escalation, management and settlement of conflict, to the formation of transnational nations and multicultural societies'.²⁴²

²⁴¹ Baser and Swain, 'Stateless Diaspora Groups and their Repertoires of Nationalist Activism in Host Countries', 37.

²⁴² Rainer Bauböck and Thomas Faist, eds., *Diaspora and Transnationalism: Concept, Theories and Methods*, (Amsterdam: Amsterdam University Press, 2010); Terrence Lyons and Peter

Diaspora involvement in homeland conflict is referred to in the literature as 'diaspora mobilisation', and it is defined by Koinova as designating 'individual and collective actions of identity-based social entrepreneurs who organise and encourage migrants to behave in a concerted way to make homeland-oriented claims, bring about a political objective, or contribute to a cause'.²⁴³ The study of diaspora mobilisation has been split into two key stages: the process of mobilisation and the *impact* of mobilisation on the course of a conflict.²⁴⁴ A nuanced understanding of both of these stages is hugely important for researchers, policymakers and development professionals working in the conflict management and resolution space. The literature demonstrates clearly that diasporas should not be treated as unitary or homogenous actors when it comes to conflict in the homeland, as their motivations for mobilising, mechanisms of mobilisation, and the consequences of their actions differ widely according to unique sets of circumstances and contextual factors.

Another phenomenon in the diaspora studies literature should be considered here insofar as it influences the motivations and means by which diasporas engage with and mobilise in homeland conflict: the concept of conflict transportation, which echoes and builds upon earlier discussions around the

Mandaville, eds., *Politics from Afar: Transnational Networks and Diasporas*, (New York: Columbia University Press, 2012); Quinsaas, 'Diaspora activism in a non-traditional country of destination', 1014; Smith and Stares, *Diasporas in Conflict*, 3.

²⁴³ Maria Koinova, 'Sustained vs. Episodic Mobilization among Conflict-generated Diasporas', *International Political Science Review*, 37 no. 4 (2016): 501.

²⁴⁴ Fiona Adamson, 'Mechanisms of Diaspora Mobilization and the Transnationalization of Civil War' in *Transnational Dynamics of Civil War*, ed. J Checkel (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2013), 67.

deterritorialisation of diasporas. The concept of conflict transportation refers to the process by which conflicts originating in a homeland are carried over and reconfigured within diaspora communities in host countries. This phenomenon challenges the traditional bilateral framework through which diaspora politics tends to be discussed, which often focuses solely on the relationship between the homeland and the host country. Instead, conflict transportation emphasizes the internal dynamics within the diaspora itself and the hybridized settings that emerge from the intersection of multiple identities and experiences.²⁴⁵

Scholars like Élise Féron and Bahar Baser have further developed the concept of conflict transportation. Their research explores how conflicts are not merely imported into diaspora settings but are actively reinterpreted and recontextualised, leading to what they term "conflict autonomisation." This process involves conflicts taking on new forms and dynamics within diaspora communities, influenced by factors such as generational change, host country policies, and the evolving identities of diaspora members.²⁴⁶ Such dynamics inevitably influence how diasporas engage with, and mobilise in homeland conflicts - as the research conducted for this thesis explores.

The Mobilisation Process

²⁴⁵ Baser and Féron, 'Diasporas and Transportation of Homeland Conflicts: Inter-group Dynamics and Host-Country Responses', 377.

²⁴⁶ *Ibid.*, 377.

Academic literature on the process of mobilisation largely focuses on why and how diasporas mobilise. The uniquely disproportionate role played by diasporas is widely understood to be a product of the fact that diaspora populations are both internal and external, in that they exist 'outside of the state... but inside the people'.²⁴⁷ In other words, diasporas are able to involve themselves in violent conflicts in their homelands without paying the direct consequences of conflict as they do not physically live in the societies experiencing political violence.²⁴⁸ However, while this may be true, there are in fact many reasons why diaspora actors and communities may – or may not – mobilise in homeland conflict. Scholars have attempted to conceptualise the complex motivations and opportunity structures driving diaspora mobilisation in homeland politics, conflict and crisis in a variety of ways.

Much of the literature on diaspora mobilisation tends to focus on two key motivating factors: identity and self-interest. As outlined in the previous section, diasporic processes influence identity in complex ways. This is particularly the case if a diaspora experiences marginalisation or a lack of assimilation in their host state, or when they witness the suffering of a community they identify with at 'home'. It is therefore unsurprising that much of the literature cites a desire to

²⁴⁷ Adamson, 'Mechanisms of Diaspora Mobilization and the Transnationalization of Civil War', 63.

²⁴⁸ *Ibid.*, 65.

express one's identity as a key reason for diasporas to mobilise in the affairs of their homeland.²⁴⁹

Other scholars focus in greater detail on the role of self-interest. Jennifer Brinkerhoff, for example, argues that diasporas might mobilise in order to maintain or acquire economic, social, political, moral, informational and/or physical resources.²⁵⁰ They might also intervene to protect their quality of life in the host country or as a result of social pressure from their family or community.²⁵¹ On the other hand, she argues, diasporas are less likely to mobilise in the affairs of the homeland if mobilisation would come at a cost to their status and security in their adopted country.²⁵²

However, these two factors are complex and nuanced and must not be taken at face value. Both identity and self-interest must be deconstructed and viewed in the context of the causal mechanisms and opportunity structures that facilitate individual and collective action. Some scholarly attempts to do this are visible in the literature on diaspora mobilisation in homeland politics and conflict.

Aharon Barth and Yossi Shain, for example, argue that there are four main motivating factors for diaspora mobilisation in homeland politics: 1) Diasporas

²⁴⁹ Baser and Swain, 'Stateless Diaspora Groups and their Repertoires of Nationalist Activism in Host Countries', 38; Brinkerhoff, 'Diasporas and conflict societies', 124; Demmers, , 'Diaspora and Conflict', 88.

²⁵⁰ Brinkerhoff, 'Diaspora and Conflict', 124-125.

²⁵¹ Ibid.

²⁵² Jennifer Brinkerhoff, 'Digital diasporas and conflict prevention: the case of Somalinet.com', *Review of International Studies*, 32 no. 1 (2006): 28-29.

might view homeland policy as impacting the entire kin community, both inside and outside of the homeland (and therefore including themselves); 2) Diasporas have their own, unique stake in how the homeland's foreign policy affects the homeland's future; 3) Diasporas might view the homeland's foreign policy as affecting the interests of a particular community (for example, a tribe, region or religious minority) in a material or an existential way; 4) Diasporas might view the homeland's foreign policy as affecting the narrow bureaucratic interests of their own diasporic organisations and networks.²⁵³

Barth and Shain's framework is useful for understanding some of the reasons why diaspora actors or communities might feel motivated to engage with and influence homeland affairs, but it does not quite capture the causal mechanisms that make this happen.

Adamson, meanwhile, highlights five causal mechanisms and processes that can overlap, reinforce, or create feedback loops with one another in order to drive diaspora mobilisation, particularly in situations of conflict. These are: 1) Transnational brokerage - whereby 'brokers' or powerful actors can link together disparate networks to facilitate diaspora mobilisation; 2) Strategic framing - whereby actors and entrepreneurs frame issues in particular ways to legitimate and motivate collective action; 3) Ethnic or sectarian outbidding - whereby elites, entrepreneurs or political parties politicise ethnic (or other group) differences,

²⁵³ Barth and Shain, 'Diasporas and International Relations Theory', 455.

polarising communities and fuelling mobilisation. This, she argues, is particularly the case where diasporas are mobilised in support of extremism; 4) Resource mobilisation – whereby capital, financial and human resources are channelled to support political or conflict-related activities in the homeland; and, 5) Lobbying and persuasion – this involves networking and collaboration by groups and organisations in the homeland and other countries where diasporas are present, in order to promote the mobilisation of a particular diaspora community.²⁵⁴

Collectively, Barth, Shain and Adamson's frameworks are much more useful than they are individually for understanding the motivating and causal factors driving the mobilisation process. However, there is one key area that these frameworks do not fully address: the opportunity structures and contextual factors that make mobilisation possible and/or likely for particular diaspora communities or individuals and not others.

According to the literature, there are a number of contextual factors that influence the capacity and desire of diasporas to engage in homeland politics and conflict.²⁵⁵ These factors are political, economic, social, cultural and historical in nature, and they include: differences in wealth, resources, social capital and class influence; how long diaspora actors have been in their country of residence; the

²⁵⁴ Adamson, 'Mechanisms of Diaspora Mobilization', 68.

²⁵⁵ Cohen and Van Hear, 'Diasporas and conflict', 174.

immigration and naturalisation policies of the host state; the degree of structural integration in the host land; the level of political freedom in the host state; generational dynamics; statelessness or refugee status; transnational influences emanating from the homeland, the international system and the geopolitical and normative context; power relations within and between diaspora communities, and with the home and host state.²⁵⁶

These contextual factors will differ significantly between and even within diaspora communities, and it is therefore extremely complicated to measure the impact of any one individual variable without taking into account the context as a whole.

Some scholars, such as Koinova, have attempted to combat these difficulties by applying transnational social movement theory to the field of diaspora studies, in order to understand more fully why diasporas mobilise.²⁵⁷ For example, scholars have cited the political process theory in the social movement literature, which argues that the likelihood of actors mobilising depends on both external and internal factors.²⁵⁸ These include collective identity, ideology, financial

²⁵⁶ Barth and Shain, 'Diasporas and International Relations Theory', 465; Baser and Swain, 'Stateless Diaspora Groups and their Repertoires of Nationalist Activism in Host Countries', 38; Brinkerhoff, 'Digital diasporas and conflict prevention', 29; Brinkerhoff, 'Diasporas and conflict societies', 119; Cohen and Van Hear, 'Diasporas and conflict', 171; Haider, 'Conflict Sensitivity: Topic Guide', 13; Kadhum, 'Diaspora Mobilisation and Belonging in the UK', 105; Koinova, 'Sustained vs. Episodic Mobilization among Conflict-generated Diasporas', 502; Quinsaas, 'Diaspora activism in a non-traditional country of destination', 1015; Smith and Stares, *Diasporas in Conflict: Peace-Makers or Peace-Wreckers*, 5, 9, and 10; Robin Cohen, 'New Roles for Diasporas in International Relations', *Diaspora: A Journal of Transnational Studies*, 14 no. 1 (2005): 180.

²⁵⁷ Koinova, 'Diasporas and secessionist conflicts', 334.

²⁵⁸ Doug McAdam, John D. McCarthy, and N Mayer Zald, eds., *Comparative*

resources, leadership, organisational structure, political opportunity structures and discursive opportunities – echoing the many factors outlined above in the diaspora literature.²⁵⁹ These scholars make a compelling case that, in light of the emphasis on context, social movement theory is helpful for understanding why diasporas mobilise.

The second key stage in the process of diaspora mobilisation, which has also been the subject of a growing body of academic research, is how diasporas mobilise in homeland politics and, particularly, in contexts of conflict and conflict management, resolution and post-conflict-recovery. According to Brinkerhoff, the most notable and commonly recognised diaspora interventions in the homeland are economic remittances, philanthropy, human capital and political activities, which include advocacy and participation in peace processes.²⁶⁰ These courses of action can be pursued either spontaneously or deliberately, can occur across multiple spheres of activity including the household or extended family, the wider ‘known community’, and the ‘imagined community’ (which can include members of other groups, for example, such as ethnic or religious), and they are increasingly taking place in cyberspace.²⁶¹

Perspectives on Social Movements: Political Opportunities, Mobilizing Structures, and Cultural Framings (New York: Cambridge University Press, 1996); Sidney Tarrow, *Power in Movement: Social Movement and Contentious Politics* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 2011).

²⁵⁹ Ruud Koopmans, Paul Statham, Marco Giugni, and Florence Passy, *Contested Citizenship: Immigration and Cultural Diversity in Europe* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2005); Quinsaat, ‘Diaspora activism in a non-traditional country of destination’, 1016.

²⁶⁰ Brinkerhoff, ‘Diasporas and conflict societies’, 119.

²⁶¹ Amine Al-Sharif, 2020, ‘Diasporas: A Global and Vibrant Force for Arab Democratization’, *Arab Reform Initiative*, 11 August 2020, 4, accessed 1 December 2021, <https://www.arab->

By far the most cited of these in the literature is economic remittances. Since the early 2000s, a significant body of scholarship has recognised the economic wealth of diasporas, particularly in comparison with their compatriots in the homeland, arguing that they represent a major force in shaping homeland conflict and development.²⁶² Much of this research focuses on the potentially negative and destabilising effects of remittances, when they are channelled to armed groups and warring parties.²⁶³ This will be discussed in greater detail below in the context of the effects of diaspora mobilisation.

What is important to note here is just how widespread and large-scale the transfer of remittances from diaspora communities is. In 2020, according to data from the World Bank, low- and middle-income countries received an inflow of over \$539 billion US dollars in remittances.²⁶⁴ It is likely that this figure does not even represent the total flow of remittances, as much of the money transferred from diaspora communities to countries in crisis or experiencing conflict, including Yemen, takes place outside of the formal banking system.²⁶⁵ The

reform.net/publication/diasporas-a-global-and-vibrant-force-for-arab-democratization; Cohen and Van Hear, 'Diasporas and conflict', 172-173.

²⁶² Adamson, 'Globalisation, transnational political mobilisation, and networks of violence', 35; Barth and Shain, 'Diasporas and International Relations Theory', 449; Amanda Roth, 'The Role of Diasporas in Conflict', *Journal of International Affairs*, 68 no. 2 (2015): 294.

²⁶³ Peter Staniland, *Between a Rock and a Hard Place: Insurgent Fratricide, Ethnic Defection, and the Rise of Pro-State Paramilitaries*, *Journal of Conflict Resolution*, 56 no. 2 (2012): 16.

²⁶⁴ World Bank, 'Migration and Remittances Data' [online] 2021, accessed 19 July 2021 <https://www.worldbank.org/en/topic/migrationremittancesdiasporaissues/brief/migration-remittances-data>

²⁶⁵ Al-Dailami, 'Yemenis in Saudi Arabia: Less Money to Send Home, More Pressure to Leave'.

transfer of funds from the diaspora can take place at multiple levels, from the individual to the entrepreneurial to the highly organised and overtly political.²⁶⁶

Considered less important by scholars are the contributions of diasporas in the areas of philanthropy – which is closely tied to economic remittances – and human capital. On a philanthropic level, diasporas have been heavily involved in humanitarian interventions and crisis response efforts, mobilising resources and networks, along with inspiring strategies and agendas.²⁶⁷ For example, in 2013 it was estimated that diaspora support accounted for close to 80 per cent of the needs of forcibly displaced Syrian civilians.²⁶⁸

Meanwhile, according to Brinkerhoff, diaspora populations are one of the most fruitful sources of human capital for reconstruction and development. Diaspora actors have been known to repatriate to the homeland in order to support post-conflict reconstruction efforts, at times taking up positions in government and staffing development programmes.²⁶⁹ One of the most obvious examples of this is Iraq, where the governments formed since the 2003 invasion and subsequent civil war have consisted largely of returning diaspora Iraqis who had lived in countries such as the UK, the US, Syria, and Iran during the rule of Saddam Hussein.²⁷⁰

²⁶⁶ Al-Sharif, 'Diasporas: A Global and Vibrant Force for Arab Democratization', 3.

²⁶⁷ Shabaka, *Diaspora Engagement in Times of Crisis: EUDiF case study* (Brussels: ICMPD, 2021).

²⁶⁸ Kodmani, 'The Syrian Diaspora, Old and New', 4.

²⁶⁹ Brinkerhoff, 'Diasporas and conflict societies', 129.

²⁷⁰ Kadhum, *Diaspora Mobilisation and Belonging in the UK*, 1.

Another widely recognised area of contribution, which has received considerable scholarly attention, is the political activities of diaspora actors and communities, including lobbying and attempts to shape policy and exert attitudinal influence. Diaspora communities have attempted to provide alternative sources of information regarding the political situation in their homeland and have engaged in framing strategies in attempts to shape the foreign policy of the host state.²⁷¹ A prime example of this is the Syrian Observatory for Human Rights, which was founded by members of the Syrian diaspora in the UK with the aim of documenting human rights abuses in Syria.²⁷²

Moreover, diasporas have been known to engage in collective action, organising interest groups, acts of civil disobedience and protests.²⁷³ They have also engaged in diplomatic lobbying and awareness raising through creative and cultural activities.²⁷⁴ This can take place at every stage of a conflict, from the prevention stage to the post-conflict reconstruction stage.²⁷⁵

One area that is beginning to receive increased academic attention is the role diasporas play in post-conflict reconstruction and transitional justice, although the existing literature is primarily empirically driven and focuses on scattered

²⁷¹ Adamson, 'Mobilizing for the transformation of home', 164.

²⁷² Olivia Lang, 'Profile: Syrian Observatory for Human Rights'. *BBC News*, 28 December 2011, accessed 2 August 2024, <https://www.bbc.co.uk/news/world-middle-east-15896636>.

²⁷³ Barth and Shain, 'Diasporas and International Relations Theory', 453.

²⁷⁴ Haider, 'Conflict Sensitivity: Topic Guide', 12; Adamson, 'Mobilizing for the transformation of home', 164.

²⁷⁵ Roth, 'The Role of Diasporas in Conflict', 297.

cases.²⁷⁶ According to Haider, the most comprehensive effort to date to include diasporas in a transitional justice process is the Liberian Truth and Reconciliation Commission.²⁷⁷

There are various ways diasporas can contribute to transitional justice, such as pushing for justice through universal jurisdiction and mobilising to initiate transitional justice processes and further ongoing processes.²⁷⁸ Lawyers for Justice in Libya, for example, is another UK-based organisation set up by Elham Saudi, a Libyan lawyer based in London. The organisation works with a network of lawyers, activists and grassroots communities to support justice and human rights in Libya through advocacy and outreach, accountability, transitional justice initiatives and capacity building.²⁷⁹ According to Camilla Orjuela, the field of transitional justice itself has come to represent an opportunity structure – political, legal and discursive – shaping diaspora mobilisation.²⁸⁰

²⁷⁶ Koinova, 'Diaspora Mobilisation for Conflict and Post-Conflict Reconstruction', 1253; Roth, 'The Role of Diasporas in Conflict', 298.

²⁷⁷ Haider, *Conflict Sensitivity: Topic Guide*, 7-8.

²⁷⁸ *Ibid.*

²⁷⁹ Lawyers for Justice in Libya, 'Our Mission', 2024, accessed 2 August 2024, <https://www.libyanjustice.org/en/about>.

²⁸⁰ Koinova, 'Diaspora Mobilisation for Conflict and Post-Conflict Reconstruction', 1261; Camilla Orjuela, 'Mobilizing Diasporas for Justice. Opportunity Structures and the Presenting of a Violent Past', *Journal of Ethnic and Migration Studies* 44 no. 8 (2018): 1357-1373.

The Impacts of Mobilisation

The literature on the impact of diaspora mobilisation is dominated by debates around the extent to which diasporas play a helpful or harmful role in homeland conflict. However, this section will show that the impacts of diaspora mobilisation are complex and nuanced, and diasporas can play positive and negative roles in different contexts at different times and simultaneously.

In the past, scholarship on diaspora mobilisation has tended to focus overwhelmingly on the negative impacts of diaspora mobilisation on conflict in the homeland. According to a World Bank report from 2000, cited frequently in the literature, countries that had recently experienced internal conflict with large diasporas in the United States had a 36 per cent chance of conflict recurring, compared with just 6 per cent in countries with small diasporas. The report states that, 'diasporas appear to make life for those left behind more dangerous in post-conflict situations'.²⁸¹

According to numerous scholars, diasporas may engage in the following potentially destabilising or harmful activities: providing material and political support to the conflicting parties; facilitating the purchase of arms and the funding of terrorism (intentionally or not) through remittances; challenging the

²⁸¹ Adamson, 'Mobilizing for the transformation of home', 165; Paul Collier, *Economic Causes of Civil Conflict and their Implications for Policy* (World Bank: Washington, 2000): 6.

legitimacy of state institutions and thereby contributing to state insecurity; and, reproducing attitudes of conflict within the diaspora.²⁸²

Scholars have also argued that diaspora communities are increasingly marked by a politics of 'long-distance nationalism'. This can lead them to attach much more importance to abstract and symbolic issues such as identity and independence over the practical issues that matter to people on the ground in the homeland who are living with the direct consequences of conflict-related violence and instability.²⁸³ They have also been described as being 'frozen in time', reflecting visions of a homeland that is specific to a particular moment in history and which may no longer maintain relevance for the people who live there.²⁸⁴ This, coupled with the fact that they tend to have disproportionate levels of influence due to disparities in economic wealth and their location in often wealthy and politically influential host states, can have various negative consequences. It can have a polarising effect within and between diaspora communities, and it can also lead them and their host governments to pursue policies that are not necessarily relevant or helpful to the populations most affected by the conflict.²⁸⁵

²⁸² African Diaspora Policy Centre, 'Diaspora as partners in conflict resolution and peace-building', (The Hague: Diaspeace Project, 2010): 6; Barth and Shain, 'Diasporas and International Relations Theory', 450; Brinkerhoff, 'Diasporas and conflict societies', 296; Roth, 'The Role of Diasporas in Conflict', 296.

²⁸³ Adamson, 'Mobilizing for the transformation of home', 165; Lyons, 'Diasporas and homeland conflict', 128; Roth, 'The Role of Diasporas in Conflict', 293.

²⁸⁴ Koinova, 'Diaspora Mobilisation for Conflict and Post-Conflict Reconstruction', 1259.

²⁸⁵ Brinkerhoff, 'Diasporas and conflict societies', 127; Roth, 'The Role of Diasporas in Conflict', 289.

However, in recent years increased attention has been paid to the potential positive influences diasporas can have on homeland conflict and processes of conflict management and resolution, which has led to a more nuanced understanding of the effects of diaspora mobilisation. For example, Brinkerhoff challenged the traditional assumption that remittances have a negative impact on homeland conflict, instead arguing that they can contribute significantly to peacebuilding, reconstruction and post-conflict development. She also states that, by sustaining livelihoods during conflict, they can represent an important foundation upon which peace and development can be expanded.²⁸⁶ Similarly, Schiller has argued that long-distance nationalism does not always connote negative activities, but can also refer to actions such as voting, demonstrating, lobbying and cultural contributions, which can be channelled positively towards conflict management and resolution.²⁸⁷

In fact, over the course of the last ten years, a significant body of literature has emerged advocating for the peace-making potential of diasporas. The literature demonstrates how diasporas can advocate for peace, promote dialogue, participate in political processes, support the work of mediators, promote and take part in transitional justice processes and support local non-governmental

²⁸⁶ Brinkerhoff, 'Diasporas and conflict societies', 126.

²⁸⁷ Baser and Swain, 'Stateless Diaspora Groups and their Repertoires of Nationalist Activism in Host Countries', 410.

organisations and civil society organisations.²⁸⁸ Diasporas are arguably uniquely placed to play this role given the local knowledge, access and networks they possess and, in some cases, the liberal, human-rights based values they promote.²⁸⁹ Moreover, according to Jonathan Powell, former Chief Negotiator for Northern Ireland under former UK Prime Minister Tony Blair, diasporas can sometimes act as the ‘front door’ to armed groups, playing a key role in bringing conflict parties to the negotiating table.²⁹⁰

However, even with regard to these seemingly positive contributions, it is necessary to maintain a level of nuance, as they can have unintended consequences. For example, the direct participation of diaspora actors in peace processes can, at times, lead to disastrous outcomes if they are ‘out of touch’ – whether in terms of how they are perceived locally, or in terms of the policies and priorities they pursue.²⁹¹ Similarly, in the field of philanthropy, diaspora contributions can have unintended consequences, particularly in fragile contexts where local sensitivities can make identifying needs and implementing programmes extremely complicated. For example, diaspora philanthropy can be selective and exclusionary in its application, and can therefore exacerbate local conflicts.²⁹² In post-conflict reconstruction also, diaspora participation can cause

²⁸⁸ Brinkerhoff, ‘Digital diasporas and conflict prevention’, 25; Haider, ‘Conflict Sensitivity: Topic Guide’, 12; African Diaspora Policy Centre, ‘Diaspora as partners in conflict resolution and peace-building’, 6-7.

²⁸⁹ Roth, ‘The Role of Diasporas in Conflict’, 296-297.

²⁹⁰ Brinkerhoff, ‘Digital diasporas and conflict prevention’, 32; Jonathan Powell, *Talking to Terrorists* (London: Penguin Random House, 2014), 54.

²⁹¹ Brinkerhoff, ‘Digital diasporas and conflict prevention’, 132.

²⁹² *Ibid.*, 128-129.

more problems than it solves. For example, where diasporans repatriate to take a role in post-conflict state-building, they can struggle to earn legitimacy in the eyes of those who remained in the homeland, and in more extreme cases, their presence alone can reignite local tensions.²⁹³

In light of the above, it is possible to conclude that diaspora contributions can play both a positive and negative role in homeland conflict cycles, depending on the circumstances and contextual factors both within the diaspora itself and in the homeland. In her 2011 journal article, 'Diasporas and conflict societies: Conflict entrepreneurs, competing interests or contributors to stability and development?' Jennifer Brinkerhoff offers a matrix in which she maps possible diaspora contributions to peace and conflict, listing the potential positive and negative effects, which she argues will vary according to context.²⁹⁴ Figure 1 below is an example that refers specifically to the potential positive and negative impacts of economic remittances:

²⁹³ Ibid., 130.

²⁹⁴ Ibid, 120.

Table I. Map of potential diaspora contributions to peace and conflict¹

Contribution	Potential Positive	Potential Negative
Economic Remittances	<p>Significant proportion of GDP, especially during conflict; may out pace ODA (e.g., Liberia 2007; Kosovo 1998–1999).</p> <p>Sustain livelihoods during conflict and providing a foundation for future economic development (e.g., Somalia).</p> <p>May support DDR by supporting alternative income generation (e.g., Liberia).</p> <p>Create financial transfer systems for the above, as well as for other external actors from the international community (e.g., Afghanistan, Liberia, Somalia).</p> <p>May be transformed from subsistence to investment as the conflict subsides (e.g., Liberia).</p> <p>Often a sustained source of support for the long-haul of reconstruction and development, when donor commitments wane (e.g., Somalia).</p>	<p>Informal transfer systems can be used to support continuing conflict (e.g., Kosovo).</p> <p>Charitable contributions using informal systems may inadvertently support illicit trade, contributing to continued violence (e.g., Afghanistan).</p> <p>Informal systems may profit or be created by conflict entrepreneurs (e.g., Tamil rebels (LTTE) in Sri Lanka).</p> <p>For combatants, they can be more reliable and less controlling of tactics and objectives than state-supported insurgencies (e.g., LTTE, Kurdish guerillas in Turkey and the Palestinian Liberation Organisation).</p> <p>May explicitly call for and support factional violence (e.g., Somalia).</p> <p>Proportional advantage of influencing the homeland owing to relatively greater access to wealth and opportunity (e.g., Ethiopia, former Yugoslavia).</p> <p>Diasporans are not subject to the consequences of their financial contributions (e.g., former Yugoslavia, Sri Lanka).</p> <p>Insurgency groups may target diasporans for manipulation and extortion (e.g., Tamils in Canada, Kurds in Germany).</p> <p>Allows fungibility of resources that can be applied to promote or participate in conflict.</p>

Figure 1: Map of potential diaspora contributions to peace and conflict, specifically, economic remittances.²⁹⁵

This is an incredibly useful analytical tool for understanding diaspora mobilisation, as it conceptualises a multitude of different outcomes whilst acknowledging the fact that every conflict, and indeed every diaspora, is contextually different. It helps us to appreciate in what situations, and why, certain diaspora contributions have positive outcomes and others have negative ones. It also helps us to analyse the ways that influence and agency affect the extent to which diaspora interventions are effective in achieving their goals. By emphasising just how many possible courses of action and subsequent outcomes exist, Brinkerhoff offers a poignant reminder of the heterogeneity, dynamism and

²⁹⁵ Ibid.

fluidity of diasporas, not to mention how they are uniquely affected by their individual contexts.

Limitations of the Diaspora Studies Literature

The field of diaspora studies has developed rapidly over the course of the last thirty years as a result of the expansion of research into globalisation, migration and transnationalism. While this has led to an abundance of literature on the subject, the speed at which it has developed has been largely driven by western policy and interests, particularly since 9/11 and the 'War on Terror'. A result of this has been the overtly western – and largely American – lens through which much of the research into diasporas has been conducted. Many of the case-specific studies mentioned so far in this chapter refer specifically to diaspora communities in the United States as the subjects of the research. For example, Yossi Shain's influential research on the role of diasporas in conflict perpetuation and resolution focuses exclusively on Jewish and Armenian diasporas in the U.S.²⁹⁶

In some cases, the fact that the diasporas mentioned are based in the West is not explicitly stated at all, but merely mentioned in passing, giving the reader the impression that the writer is referring to diasporas globally when, in fact, they are not. For example, in Brinkerhoff's 2006 research into digital Somali diasporas, she mentions in passing that diaspora members 'may also rely on their American

²⁹⁶ Shain, 'The Role of Diasporas in Conflict Perpetuation and Resolution'.

identity', without having specified in her introduction that the research focused exclusively on Somali communities in America.²⁹⁷ This demonstrates an assumption on the part of the writer that the only diasporas of consequence in this case are those that reside in the United States, and renders any conclusions drawn about diasporas in general at best problematic, and at worst void.

This poses obvious limitations for the way we understand diaspora, and further research is clearly needed into diasporas that exist outside of the U.S., and indeed outside of the 'West' more broadly. Once again, it also highlights the importance of context in the study of global diasporas.

Another issue presented by the academic theory outlined here is the clear focus on nation-states. For example, scholars have focused repeatedly on how and why 'states' engage their diasporas and how diasporas in turn identify and engage with their host 'states' and home 'states'.²⁹⁸ Some have argued that diasporas should be conceptualised as non-state actors, once again reinforcing the idea that diasporas should be seen through the lens of the nation-state.²⁹⁹ This is perhaps not surprising given how (in the words of Tölöyan, the 'father of Diaspora Studies' himself) 'the traditional disciplines of the social sciences and humanities emerged when the university flourished with the support of the nation-state,

²⁹⁷ Brinkerhoff, 'Digital diasporas and conflict prevention', 29.

²⁹⁸ Délano Alonso and Harris, 'The Microfoundations of Diaspora Politics', 4, 8 and 10.

²⁹⁹ Baser and Swain, 'Stateless Diaspora Groups and their Repertoires of Nationalist Activism in Host Countries', 59.

therefore they both investigate and valorize the culture and history of that nation-state'.³⁰⁰

This is problematic on a number of levels. Firstly, the focus on how diasporas experience 'national identity' is complex when it refers to fragmented, neo-patrimonial 'states' like Yemen, where a legal-rational state in the Weberian sense is not necessarily present and where multiple sources of identity exist alongside, and in constant interaction with, national identity. Secondly, it largely ignores the complex interaction between diasporas and non-state actors in the homeland, such as tribes, de facto governing bodies, and parties to armed conflict, like the Houthis and the STC in Yemen. Thirdly, many of the interactions and processes that take place within and between diasporas and with the homeland do so on a transnational level, crossing what we understand as 'state' borders, thus limiting the utility of research that is approached through a state-centric lens.³⁰¹ This is increasingly the case as the online space continues to challenge state sovereignty and geographical borders, and diasporas are becoming increasingly deterritorialised. Further research is therefore needed in order to conceptualise the position that diasporas occupy in a world where the domestic is arguably becoming insubordinate to the global and the transnational.

³⁰⁰ Tölöyan, 'Rethinking Diaspora(s)', 8.

³⁰¹ Adamson, 'Mechanisms of Diaspora Mobilization' 67.

Finally, it is worth noting that a significant amount of the most influential and oft-cited work in the field of diaspora studies was produced in the early 2000s, and even the scholarship that has emerged over the last ten years tends to adhere to similar frameworks and understandings of diaspora and mobilisation. However, the last ten to fifteen years have seen an unprecedented wave of migration – largely from the Middle East and North Africa and predominantly driven by violent conflict and political instability – which, coupled with changes in conflict dynamics and the explosion of smartphone use and social media, has enormous implications for the way we understand diaspora in the twenty first century. It is therefore unclear whether these frameworks and concepts continue to apply to global diasporas in their current form. The following sections will explore the implications of these global changes for the way we understand diasporas and the role they play in homeland conflict.

Globalisation, Technology and Diaspora relations

In today's globalised world, millions of people live outside of their ancestral homeland and/or their country of birth. Globalisation and developments in technology – particularly in the areas of communication and transportation – have led to the so-called 'diasporization' of ethnic groups and migrant communities, providing opportunities for the creation of viable linkages between migrant communities around the world and their homelands.³⁰² This has

³⁰² Adamson, 'Mobilizing for the transformation of home', 158; Koinova, 'Diasporas and secessionist conflicts', 334; Tölöyan, 'Rethinking Diaspora(s)', 3.

occurred to the extent that, today, nearly every country and even every ethnic, religious and cultural community has a diaspora to speak of somewhere in the world.³⁰³ This process has been actively encouraged by governments and entrepreneurs seeking to capitalise on the opportunity diasporas represent in the context of a global capitalist economy, in the form of remittances, as points of access to foreign markets, as sources of foreign direct investment in the domestic economy, and as a potential vanguard of national interests abroad.³⁰⁴

Possibly the most obvious and influential aspect of globalisation as it relates to diasporas is the explosive growth in new technologies. Advances in communications, transport and finance have had a huge impact on the ability of diasporas to maintain links with their homeland and one another, allowing them to play a political and societal role both in their host countries and back 'home'.³⁰⁵ This has had a significant impact on the ways in which diasporas identify and has played a key role in the formation of transnational identities and imagined communities.³⁰⁶ Furthermore, developments in communication technologies

³⁰³ Baser and Swain, 'Stateless Diaspora Groups and their Repertoires of Nationalist Activism in Host Countries', 37.

³⁰⁴ Glover, 'Constructing the "Domestic Abroad"', 179.

³⁰⁵ Linda Basch, Nina Glick Schiller, Cristina Szanton-Blanc, *Nations unbound: Transnational projects, postcolonial predicaments, and deterritorialized nationstates* (New York: Gordon and Breach, 1994); Nina Glick Schiller, Linda Basch, and Cristina Szanton-Blanc, *Toward a transnational perspective on migration* (New York: New York Academy of Sciences, 1992); Haider, 'Conflict Sensitivity: Topic Guide'; Alejandro Portes, 'Global villagers: the rise of transnational communities', *American Prospect*, 25 (1996).

³⁰⁶ Adamson, 'Crossing Borders', 183.

have led to an increase in diasporic media platforms and cultural production, which in turn can influence identity and politics in the homeland.³⁰⁷

The explosion of the internet and social media in particular has transformed the ways in which diasporas identify, interact, and mobilise, with profound and complex implications across multiple spheres. The internet has provided forums for the exchange of ideas, debate, and the mobilisation of opinion, which has led to the creation of strong social bonds between diaspora communities. Scholars have coined the term 'cybercommunities' to describe the horizontally structured voluntary communities that have emerged as a result. These communities offer opportunities for identity negotiation, issue framing, and the spread of, and experimentation with, liberal values such as democracy and human rights.³⁰⁸

The internet and social media have also provided new ways for diaspora communities to virtually experience the homeland while residing elsewhere, arguably shrinking distances and giving rise to the concept of 'virtual return' as a surrogate for actual return.³⁰⁹ This has led scholars to argue that the internet is leading to an increased sense of disembodiment and deterritorialisation within diaspora communities, leading to questions around the meaning of 'home'.³¹⁰

³⁰⁷ Haider, 'Conflict Sensitivity: Topic Guide', 11; Gina Lei Miller and Emily Hencken Ritter, 'Emigrants and the onset of civil war', *Journal of Peace Research*, 51 no. 1 (2014): 51; Idil Osman, *Media, Diaspora and the Somali Conflict* (England: Palgrave Macmillan, 2017), 3.

³⁰⁸ Brinkerhoff, 'Digital diasporas and conflict prevention', 32 and 35-36.

³⁰⁹ Alinejad, 'Mapping homelands through virtual spaces', 45; Christopher Helland, 'Diaspora on the Electronic Frontier: Developing Virtual Connections with Sacred Homelands', *Journal of Computer-Mediated Communication* 12 (2012): 974.

³¹⁰ Alinejad, 'Mapping homelands through virtual spaces', 45.

Others disagree, arguing that, rather than serving as a substitute for physical travel, virtually experiencing the homeland actually increases the desire for physical travel and reinforces the importance of existing physically in the homeland.³¹¹ This, some scholars suggest, has encouraged diaspora communities to meet physically and maintain physical networks as well as virtual ones, engaging in both online and offline relations and politics.³¹² Alinejad captures the importance of both the physical and the virtual for how diasporas experience 'home' in her research into second generation Iranians in the United States, describing home as being both 'connected/mobile and emplaced/embodied'.³¹³

However, echoing ongoing discussions about the impacts of the internet on society more broadly, and notably the emerging literature on transnational repression, diasporas can also experience - and perpetrate - repression in new ways because of technological developments. This can significantly influence how they are willing and able to mobilise in the affairs of their homeland.

Dana Moss's research on transnational repression provides a critical lens through which to examine the ways in which authoritarian regimes extend their control beyond national borders, targeting those who may be critical of the regime -

³¹¹ Alinejad, 'Mapping homelands through virtual spaces', 44; John Urry, *Mobilities* (Cambridge: Polity Press, 2007), 169.

³¹² Ben-David, 'The Palestinian diaspora on the Web', 463; Sari Hanafi, 'Reshaping geography: Palestinian community networks in Europe and the new media', *Journal of Ethnic and Migration Studies*, 31 (2005): 597; Koinova, 'Diaspora Mobilisation for Conflict and Post-Conflict Reconstruction', 1253.

³¹³ Alinejad, 'Mapping homelands through virtual spaces', 95.

including diasporas. Moss, in her study of transnational repression, highlights how regimes utilize various mechanisms such as surveillance, harassment, and intimidation to limit the activism of their diaspora populations, suppress political mobilization, and control narratives from abroad³¹⁴. This study helps to fill an important gap in the literature by drawing attention to the complex interplay between diaspora communities and the home state's repressive tactics. The findings of this thesis contribute to this growing body of knowledge by exploring how the Yemeni diaspora experiences and responds to such repression, particularly in relation to the use of digital platforms. However, as the research demonstrates, further studies are required to fully understand how transnational repression is both perpetrated by and targeted at members of diaspora communities, and how this affects their political agency, solidarity, and engagement in homeland conflicts. For example, much of the existing literature on transnational repression has focused primarily on repression perpetrated by states and non-state actors within the borders of the country, often neglecting the unique dynamics at play within diaspora communities, and particularly the ways in which diasporas can themselves **perpetrate** transnational repression.

Diasporas might also experience increased polarisation and fragmentation online – particularly in relation to divisive issues such as conflict, crisis and political and social justice in the host country and the homeland.³¹⁵ It is therefore possible that

³¹⁴ Moss, 'Transnational Repression, Diaspora Mobilization, and the Case of The Arab Spring', 493.

³¹⁵ *Ibid.*, 60.

online communities of diaspora actors may form along the lines of values, issues and grievances, as opposed to simply a common ethnic – or other group – background. In this context, diasporas may align and form links with other diasporas, or even non-diaspora communities based on values, worldviews or political and social justice issues.³¹⁶

An example of this is the #SaveSheikhJarrah social media campaign which went viral on social media in May 2021, primarily led by the Palestinian diaspora in the United States and Europe. This garnered significant online support among the Black Lives Matter movement in those same countries, and links were established online between influential Black Lives Matter activists and their Palestinian counterparts.³¹⁷ The Palestinian diaspora – or at least some politically mobilised elements of it – have hereby come to identify and engage with a broader global social justice movement.

Another outcome of the increased connectedness of diasporas, argues Adamson, is that the identities formed within imagined communities – often in cyberspace – can act as a barrier to assimilation and integration in the host state.³¹⁸ Koinova echoes this, arguing that the partial deterritorialisation of diasporas has meant

³¹⁶ Ben-David, 'The Palestinian diaspora on the Web', 471.

³¹⁷ Erum Salam, 'Black Lives Matter protesters make Palestinian struggle their own', *Guardian* [online], 16 June 2021, accessed 20 July 2021 <https://www.theguardian.com/world/2021/jun/16/black-lives-matter-palestinian-struggle-us-left>.

³¹⁸ Adamson, *Mobilizing for the transformation of home*, 157.

that the fit between national cultures and territorial spaces becomes more tenuous as virtual identity communities transcend their geographical locale.³¹⁹

The rise of the internet and social media has also had significant effects on the ways diasporas experience and engage with homeland conflict. Although they remain physically removed from the direct suffering experienced by those at home, the online content they can now consume means they are experiencing the conflict virtually, thus increasing their emotional and psychological involvement.³²⁰ Diasporas can also participate in conflict from a distance in ways they never could before, including engaging in so-called 'cyberadvocacy' in response to homeland conflict, which can in turn have real, physical world consequences.³²¹

The effects of this can be both positive and negative. On the one hand, it can encourage empathetic engagement during times of humanitarian need and for development and reconstruction purposes. Diasporic media and cultural production have helped facilitate dialogue, influenced discourse and conflict narratives, inspired collective action and supported post-conflict healing and reconciliatory processes, for example in the case of Sri Lanka.³²² Online

³¹⁹ Koinova, *Diaspora Mobilisation for Conflict and Post-Conflict Reconstruction*, 1257.

³²⁰ Roth, 'The Role of Diasporas in Conflict', 293.

³²¹ Brinkerhoff, 'Diasporas and conflict societies', 116; Demmers, 'Diaspora and Conflict', 88.

³²² Rudhramoorthy Cheran, 'Diaspora Circulation and Transnationalism as Agents for Change in the Post Conflict Zones of Sri Lanka', *Berghof Foundation for Conflict Studies* (2003); Huma Haider, 'Transnational Transitional Justice and Reconciliation: The Participation of Conflict-generated Diasporas in Addressing the Legacies of Mass Violence', *Journal of Refugee Studies*, 27 no. 2 (2014): 224.

communication tools have also become essential for facilitating instant communication with conflict-affected communities, transmitting updates from the ground and enabling the work of humanitarian organisations and NGOs in response to conflict and crisis.³²³

On the other hand, however, cyberadvocacy and diasporic media – including social media and instant communication tools like WhatsApp – can be used to reproduce the dynamics of the conflict and amplify them on a global level, for example in the case of the conflict in Somalia as researched by Idil Osman for his 2017 book, *Media, Diaspora and the Somali Conflict*. This can lead to the silencing or misrecognition of marginalised groups and reproduce the ‘us-vs-them’ dynamics of the conflict within and between diaspora communities. The sometimes disproportionate influence of diasporic media can also reinforce these attitudes in the homeland, particularly in contexts where the local media environment is fragmented and/or underdeveloped.³²⁴ Political entrepreneurs in particular stand to benefit from the opportunities technology creates for the formation of social and political movements and the mobilisation of transnational communities.³²⁵ According to Brinkerhoff, digital diasporas can be ‘captured’ or even designed by political entrepreneurs with the intention of fomenting conflict.³²⁶

³²³ Shabaka, *Diaspora Engagement in Times of Crisis: EUDiF case study* (Brussels: ICMPD, 2021), 6.

³²⁴ Osman, *Media, Diaspora and the Somali Conflict*, 4.

³²⁵ Adamson, ‘Globalisation, transnational political mobilisation, and networks of violence’, 39.

³²⁶ Brinkerhoff, ‘Digital diasporas and conflict prevention’, 47.

The above clearly demonstrates that globalisation and developments in technology have had a substantial impact on the opportunity structures for diaspora mobilisation at every stage in a homeland conflict. However, in order to fully understand the roles diasporas play – both online and offline – and their consequences on the ground, it is necessary to understand the unique and novel dynamics of conflicts today, which have become increasingly fragmented, identity driven and internationalised. The following section explores some of the dominant frameworks for analysing modern conflict in order to better understand the role diasporas play in the twenty-first century conflict environment.

Diasporas and the Political Marketplace

As established earlier in this chapter, the roles of external and transnational actors, and particularly diasporas, are attracting increased attention in the research on conflict and civil war.³²⁷ The literature on globalisation and diaspora recognises that developments and patterns of migration are inextricably linked to patterns of political and economic inequalities, and therefore, conflict.³²⁸ However, the existing literature has thus far failed to conceptualise the relationship between conflict and diaspora in a way that captures the process by which they consistently shape one another. It has instead treated the concept of diasporas as separate, using terminology such as ‘constituencies’, ‘interest groups’, ‘non-state actors’ and ‘the third level’ in its attempts to explain diaspora’s role in homeland conflict.³²⁹

In order to understand the relationship between conflict and diaspora on a deeper level, we must first look at the ways in which the dynamics of both conflict and diasporas have evolved throughout history, and particularly in the era of globalisation. We must consider conflict and diaspora not as two independent variables that evolve separately and, occasionally, influence and interact with one another. Instead, we should view conflict and diaspora as two

³²⁷ Adamson, ‘Mechanisms of Diaspora Mobilization and the Transnationalization of Civil War’, 63; Demmers, ‘Diaspora and Conflict’, 95.

³²⁸ Adamson, ‘Mobilizing for the transformation of home’, 155.

³²⁹ Barth and Shain, ‘Diasporas and International Relations Theory’, 137; Roth, ‘The Role of Diasporas in Conflict’, 289; Shain, ‘The Role of Diasporas in Conflict Perpetuation and Resolution’, 137.

elements of the same process, as two strands of a double helix, evolving and transforming together.

The evolving nature of conflict in the twentieth and twenty-first centuries is well documented in the literature in the field of conflict studies. Influential scholars such as Azar, Peter Wallensteen and Mary Kaldor explain that the intra-state wars that have become commonplace in the twenty-first century differ significantly to the European wars that characterised the first half of the twentieth century.³³⁰

New wars - a term used to refer to the nature of warfare in the immediate aftermath of the Cold War - are characterised in terms of political goals and ideologies, and identity politics, tribalism and communalism have replaced universal principles such as democracy, fascism and socialism. External support no longer comes exclusively from superpowers and ex-colonial powers, but instead from diasporas, foreign mercenaries, criminal mafias, regional powers and political/security entrepreneurs. Warfare is no longer formal and organised with clearly demarcated front lines, but is fragmented, dispersed, and fought by paramilitaries and criminal groups with light weapons, as opposed to state militaries armed with heavy weaponry. War economies are no longer sustained by taxation and state budgets, but by outside emergency assistance and informal

³³⁰ Mary Kaldor, 'Introduction' in *New Wars: Restructuring the Global Military Sector*, ed. Mary Kaldor (London: Pinter, 1997), 17-19.

economies.³³¹ Violence has become indiscriminate and terror commonplace, causing people to turn increasingly to identity groups for physical security and psychological safety.³³²

These new patterns of conflict have led to a rapid rise in displacement and refugees, and have created new push factors leading people to migrate in search of peace and security.³³³ This is one of the major factors that has led to the emergence of new diasporas, outlined elsewhere in the chapter, which has in turn influenced conflict dynamics. It is impossible to separate developments in conflict and developments in diaspora, as both have influenced each other in a cyclical, 'chicken and egg' scenario to the extent where they are inextricably linked to one another. For example, in the Middle East, the 'War on Terror' and the so-called Arab Spring gave rise to waves of migration that have led to the formation of what scholars refer to as 'new Arab diasporas'. In the West, these diasporas are recognised as being diverse and distinct from earlier generations of Middle Eastern diasporas in the sense that they retain stronger links to the homeland than more established diasporas and they are often intellectuals, civil

³³¹ Demmers, 'Diaspora and Conflict', 87; Mary Kaldor, 'Introduction', 17-19; Hugh Miall, Oliver Ramsbotham, and Tom Woodhouse, *Contemporary Conflict Resolution* (Cambridge: Polity Press, 1998), 69; Peter Wallensteen and Margareta Sollenberg, 'Armed Conflicts, Conflict Termination and Peace Agreements 1989-96', *Journal of Peace Research*, 34 no. 3 (1997): 339-358.

³³² Daniel Bar-Tal, Eran Halperin, and Joseph De Rivera, 'Collective Emotions in Conflict Situations: Societal Implications', *Journal of Social Issues* 63 no. 2 (2007); Laurel Fletcher and Harvey Weinstein, 'Violence and Social Repair: Rethinking the Contribution of Justice to Reconciliation', *Human Rights Quarterly*, 24 no.3 (2002): 573-639; Haider, 'Conflict Sensitivity: Topic Guide', 5; Jodi Halpern and Harvey Weinstein, 'Empathy and Rehumanization After Mass Violence', in *My Neighbor, My Enemy: Justice and Community in the Aftermath of Mass Atrocity*, eds. E Stover and H Weinstein (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2004).

³³³ Demmers, 'Diaspora and Conflict', 85; Roth, 'The Role of Diasporas in Conflict', 289.

society professionals, politicians and human rights practitioners (which is often the reason for their exile). These new diasporas, Aboueldahab argues, are exerting significant efforts to influence policies affecting their home states. They are therefore in turn contributing to the very conflict and peacebuilding efforts which reinforce the fragmented, transnational dynamics of the conflicts in their homelands.³³⁴

This highlights the need for a new understanding of modern, internationalised conflicts that draws on both diaspora studies and conflict studies literature, and encapsulates diasporas and their role as a key, integrated element of homeland conflict, as opposed to merely an external variable or interest group.

A key concept that has gained academic traction in recent years in the conflict studies field is that of 'conflict transformation', first coined by John Paul Lederach. Lederach defines conflict transformation as "to envision and respond to the ebb and flow of social conflict as life-giving opportunities for creating constructive change processes that reduce violence, increase justice in direct interaction and social structures, and respond to real-life problems in human relationships".³³⁵ This approach moves beyond traditional conflict resolution by focusing on the underlying structures, relationships, and cultural norms that perpetuate conflict, aiming for long-term societal change rather than merely

³³⁴ Aboueldahab, 'How Western policymakers can engage the new Arab diasporas'; Kodmani, 'The Syrian Diaspora, Old and New', 3.

³³⁵ Lederach, 'Defining Conflict Transformation' 26-27.

addressing immediate issues. In the context of diaspora communities, conflict transformation offers a valuable framework for understanding and addressing the complexities of the – often transnational – networks and relationships that underlie conflicts.

One framework for conflict analysis that could be adapted to conceptualise the role of diasporas in homeland conflict and conflict transformation is Alex De Waal's Political Marketplace Theory. According to De Waal, the 'political marketplace' is a 'contemporary system of governance in which politics is conducted as the exchange of political services or loyalty for payment or license'.³³⁶ The political marketplace exists either as an ever-present feature of political systems, or as the political system itself in an 'advanced and militarized political marketplace, characterized by pervasive rent-seeking and monetized patronage, with violence routinely used as a tool for extracting rent. It is integrated into regional and global circuits of political influence'.³³⁷ The framework was originally applied by De Waal to the Horn of Africa, however it could equally be applied to the case of Yemen given the similarities in the fragility and neo-patrimonial nature of the Yemeni 'state', yet its simultaneous integration in the international system.

³³⁶ De Waal, *The Real Politics of the Horn of Africa*, 16.

³³⁷ Ibid.

De Waal explains that the political marketplace is occupied by political entrepreneurs and business managers seeking to increase their revenue and limit costs. 'They try to develop customer loyalty through branding,' De Waal writes, 'typically by using identity labels, or by demonstrating their own long-term commitment by closing exit options, for example, by committing conspicuous atrocities'.³³⁸ The transactional nature of the political marketplace is explained by De Waal as follows:

The political marketplace is a materialist, instrumental framework that provides little space for ideals and norms. Its values are monetary. It is hierarchical and elitist: politics is the business of a relatively small number of individuals, almost all men, who have money and guns. The logic of political markets reduces people to commodities and interpersonal relations to bargaining over material reward, and it evens out local societal and cultural factors in favour of the common currencies of the dollar and the Kalashnikov. It relegates public debate to background noise: what matters is the business transacted among political elites, usually in secret. The information that counts is the political-market data: 'who, whom and how much'. I argue that transformations in information and communication have made the political marketplace more efficient and inclusive, but at the expense of the public sphere and public goods – including state-building.³³⁹

³³⁸ Ibid., 21.

³³⁹ Ibid., 196.

De Waal pays scant attention to diasporas in his articulation of the political marketplace, treating them as separate actors as opposed to an integrated part of the system and thereby echoing the approach of many of the scholars of diaspora mobilisation in conflict. However, he does argue that 'the integration of conflicts is not captured by metaphors such as 'spillover' or 'contagion'. It is better analysed through the lens of a transnationally integrated political marketplace.'³⁴⁰ This suggests that a more integrated approach to diasporas might be more appropriate.

In fact, although De Waal barely mentions diasporas, the Political Marketplace Theory could provide us with the language to understand their role. For example, based on the diaspora studies literature, we know that diasporas can occupy the roles of patrons, clients, business managers and political entrepreneurs at different times and in different contexts, arguably to the same extent as actors within the homeland can. They can also occupy the less transactional roles of members of the 'public sphere' when they advocate for state-building and development in the homeland, although their influence in this sense is limited, according to De Waal, insofar as they are not participating in the transactional politics of the marketplace.

For example, in the Yemeni case, Yemeni diaspora activists engaged in lobbying efforts and cultural production might advocate for peace and development in

³⁴⁰ Ibid., 168.

Yemen from cities like London and New York, but their efforts appear futile compared with the transactional activities of other diaspora actors, such as powerful Egypt-based businessman Ahmed Al-Eissi, who has bankrolled both President Hadi individually and the central government at different times. In this case, the diaspora activists in Europe and the United States might be considered to be acting in their role as occupants of the public sphere, while Al-Eissi is occupying the role of patron.

This thesis therefore argues that it is impossible to separate diaspora actors from the political marketplaces of their homelands, at least when those homelands are fragmented, failed or failing states, or countries embroiled in conflict. The transnational nature of the political marketplace means that diaspora actors are able to play as influential a role as those within the homeland, depending on their specific circumstances, opportunity structures and the extent to which they engage in transactional politics.

This framework can help us to better conceptualise the role, and the potentially positive and negative impacts of diaspora mobilisation, in terms of the extent to which they contribute to the perpetuation of the political marketplace vs pushing back against the dynamics that sustain it. By viewing diaspora through this lens, we can not only better understand their roles and influence in homeland conflict, but we might also begin to think about the ways in which diasporas could push

back against political marketplace dynamics in a way that promotes development and peace.

De Waal argues that attempts at peacebuilding through mediation and political negotiations are complicated in advanced political marketplaces, stating that ‘a peace agreement in the political marketplace is as good as the political conditions under which it was signed: as soon as those conditions change, it will be renegotiated.’³⁴¹ This suggests that a different approach is needed in order to reach peace in fragmented, neo-patrimonial contexts such as the Yemeni case – an approach that first halts the advance of the political marketplace. De Waal states that this might be achieved in two ways: 1) taking the money out of international politics – or stopping the patronage system sustaining conflict in its tracks, and 2) acknowledging and rewarding civility and morality amid the turbulence of the political marketplace.³⁴²

This thesis therefore focuses its efforts on examining how diasporas – who are uniquely positioned within the political marketplace of the homeland, yet geographically located elsewhere – might contribute to these two processes, serving to reduce the incentives for violence in Yemen and/or empowering those who are fighting for civility and morality within Yemen’s marketplace. The next chapter explores this in greater detail, outlining a theoretical framework that

³⁴¹ Ibid., 183.

³⁴² Ibid.

brings together the conflict and diaspora literatures using De Waal's political marketplace as a starting point.

Conclusions

This chapter has provided an overview of the diaspora studies literature, considering how the growth of research into globalisation and transnationalism has shaped the way diasporas are understood by the academic and policymaking community. It has outlined some of the dominant definitions of diaspora, highlighting key concepts and debates in the literature including the essentialist/constructivist debate and the arguable need to categorise diaspora in order to better understand their role. It has critically analysed the literature on diaspora mobilisation in homeland conflict, examining notions of why and how diasporas mobilise and emphasising the importance of context in shaping the roles diasporas can play. Finally, it has explored the ways in which globalisation and the evolution of conflict dynamics are inextricably linked to the shifting dynamics of global diasporas.

It concludes by arguing that diasporas are an integral part of the political marketplaces that exist in their homelands, and that they could be key to halting the advance of the transactional political systems that keep countries like Yemen fragmented, polarised and crippled by violence. This has laid the groundwork for the development of a novel theoretical framework, for examining the role of diasporas in the political marketplaces of their homeland. This framework will

be developed in the subsequent chapter, which will also set out the research methodology for this thesis.

Chapter 3: Theoretical Framework and Methodology

This chapter explores De Waal's political marketplace theory in greater detail in order to develop a framework for theorising the roles diasporas play in political marketplaces such as that of Yemen. Although De Waal's extensive writing on the political marketplace barely mentions diasporas at all, this chapter argues that diasporas can in fact be crucial to the functioning of political marketplaces, and that they can play a number of different roles within such contexts. It hereby provides a new framework for understanding the roles diasporas play in a twenty-first century, fragmented and internationalised conflicted global order. In order to do so, it also explains why the Yemeni context is a prime example of an advanced political marketplace in action and will conduct a critical analysis of its key dynamics. The chapter then proceeds to outline the research methods that are used to test this, clearly demonstrating how the thesis contributes to existing theoretical and empirical knowledge.

Theoretical Framework

As outlined in the previous chapter, De Waal's political marketplace framework emerged in response to fundamental changes in the nature of conflict, as a means of understanding violence and politics in countries where traditional, patrimonial forms of rule are prevalent over formal institutional authority. The concept, derived from De Waal's work with political elites and conflict resolution processes in the Horn of Africa, refers to 'a system of governance where

monetised transactional politics have become systematic. Politics is run on the basis of personal transactions in which political loyalties and services are sold to the highest bidder in a competitive manner. In these contexts, the role of 'institutions' or the 'rule of law' is secondary'.³⁴³

The framework provides a new way of understanding and analysing how power operates within such systems described by other scholars as patrimonial, neo-patrimonial, and kleptocratic.³⁴⁴ However it fails to fully conceptualise the roles diasporas play within them. In fact, the only reference De Waal makes to diasporas is where he explains the following phenomenon:

In a system financed by political funds from domestic sources (which here include foreign wage earners who provide remittances), political business managers obtain their political finance by bargaining with business leaders.³⁴⁵

This implies that De Waal understands the diaspora as 'domestic', overlooking the entire body of literature that explores the very unique and distinct role diasporas can play in homeland politics and conflict due to their situation outside

³⁴³ Aditya Sarkar, 'Change and Theory in Violent Political Markets', *LSE Conflict Research Programme* [online] 12 May 2020, accessed 1 December 2021,

<https://blogs.lse.ac.uk/crp/2020/05/12/change-and-theory-in-violent-political-markets/>.

³⁴⁴ London School of Economics, 'Drivers of Conflict: The Political Marketplace. Investigating public authority through the logic of the political marketplace', *London School of Economics* [online] accessed 1 December 2021 <https://www.lse.ac.uk/ideas/projects/conflict-research-programme/political-marketplace>.

³⁴⁵ Alex De Waal, '#PublicAuthority: The Political Marketplace: Analyzing Political Entrepreneurs and Political Bargaining with a Business Lens', *Africa at LSE* [online], 1 February 2018, accessed 1 December 2021, <https://blogs.lse.ac.uk/africaatlse/2018/02/01/publicauthority-the-political-marketplace-analyzing-political-entrepreneurs-and-political-bargaining-with-a-business-lens/>

of the 'domestic'. The following paragraphs highlight key premises of De Waal's political marketplace framework, arguing that the position of diasporas in such systems is in fact more complex and warrants further research. I agree with De Waal to the extent that he acknowledges that diasporas can play the same roles as locals in homeland conflict, but I also argue that this is not necessarily always the case. Crucially, it argues that the various factors and dynamics shaping diaspora engagement that were outlined in the previous chapter – such as demographics, host state politics and so on – are fundamental in determining the role diaspora actors are able and willing to play within the political marketplace of the homeland. In turn, the hypothesis to be tested by this thesis is that the activity and mobilisation of diasporas in the political marketplace have the power to shape the internal dynamics of the marketplace, and therefore the patterns of violence and conflict created by those marketplace dynamics.

Horizontal Communities and Identity-Based Politics

De Waal refers frequently to the identity-based nature of politics and loyalties which shape patronage networks within political marketplaces, drawing on the conflict research literature that establishes that communities and identities today are horizontal, global and transnational as a result of the processes of globalisation.³⁴⁶ Such statements implicitly suggest that these transnational communities encompass diaspora actors, but this is not explored fully. It raises

³⁴⁶ Kaldor, 'Identity Politics and the Political Marketplace'.

questions about the role of diaspora communities in processes of identity and narrative formation, along with identity-based conflict in the homeland. As the diaspora studies literature has established, that role is significant. On that basis, this thesis explores the ways in which diasporas are actively engaged in the processes of identity and narrative formation that are key to shaping political marketplace dynamics, via the proliferating methods of communication that have arisen as a result of globalisation.

The Price of Loyalty

According to De Waal, the price of loyalty refers to 'the prevailing market rate for ensuring the allegiance or cooperation of other politicians for a period of time or a particular activity', as determined by market factors such as leverage of the buyers and sellers, access to information, capability to coerce, and the barriers to entry of new political entrepreneurs.³⁴⁷ The concept is derived from the idea that political marketplaces function according to business principles of supply and demand, and that individuals within a political marketplace such as rulers, elites and warlords occupy the positions of CEOs, political business managers, patrons and clients according to an entrepreneurial logic.

The same patterns of authority, bargaining and rentierism are reproduced at all levels – local, provincial, national and inter-state.³⁴⁸ It is not difficult to imagine,

³⁴⁷ De Waal, *The Real Politics of the Horn of Africa*, 25.

³⁴⁸ Ibid.

therefore, that such patterns of authority and bargaining over politics, money and violence might also occur at the level of the diaspora, since De Waal has already established that they are transnational in nature. One can assume based on this logic that individuals in the diaspora are engaged in these processes, although De Waal stops short of explaining how. This thesis posits that individuals in the diaspora are just as capable of occupying the roles of CEO, political business manager and so on. For example, diaspora actors and organisations have already been shown to finance particular political elites and factions, as well as shaping the political dynamics of the homeland in other ways such as lobbying and humanitarian aid – which De Waal argues is a key source of finance in the political marketplace.³⁴⁹

Rentierism and Integration into Regional and Global Systems

This is tied to another key principle of political marketplaces, which is the shift from economies of taxation to economies of rentierism – which are based on a variety of sources from natural resource rents to foreign aid and security budgets.³⁵⁰ The rent-based systems of patronage that characterise political marketplaces are transnational in nature and integrate the political marketplace into the international system.³⁵¹ Integration into regional and international

³⁴⁹ Aditya Sarkar, Alex de Waal, Sarah Detzner, and Ben Spatz, 'A Theory of Change for Violent Political Marketplaces', *Conflict Research Programme Memo* 19 February 2020 (London: LSE, 2020), 46.

³⁵⁰ Mary Kaldor, 'Identity Politics and the Political Marketplace', *LSE Conflict Research Programme* [online] 29 November 2018, accessed 1 December 2021, <https://blogs.lse.ac.uk/crp/2018/11/29/identity-politics-and-the-political-marketplace/>.

³⁵¹ De Waal, *The Real Politics of the Horn of Africa* 28-29.

systems is one of the key factors that defines a political marketplace, according to De Waal. It is therefore somewhat puzzling that De Waal does not elaborate further on how diasporas are engaged in this process, as one would assume they would play a key role in these processes of integration given their ability to straddle both the domestic and the foreign through their situation outside of the homeland – highlighting a clear need for further research.

Violence and Turbulence

Another concept central to De Waal's framework is the idea that political marketplaces are inherently turbulent systems, wherein politics changes day-to-day, but the overall political structure remains recognisable over time.³⁵² According to his logic, political marketplaces are more prone to violence because, as the price of loyalty increases, so too do the incentives towards violence for political clients seeking money and power.³⁵³ However, although different elites might be empowered at different times, the same basic systems of patronage remain visible throughout. The role diasporas play in homeland conflict and violence has been explored in the diaspora studies literature, yet De Waal again overlooks this. In considering diasporas as integral to the political marketplace, this thesis will consider the ways in which they are engaged in the processes of supply and demand that shape trajectories of violence in the homeland.

³⁵² De Waal, '#PublicAuthority'.

³⁵³ Ibid.

The Role of the Public Sphere

De Waal makes a point of distinguishing between political circuitry, through which political business is transacted, and the public sphere, in which public debate is conducted. Echoing much of the scholarship in the diaspora studies field, this thesis posits that diasporas can in fact be crucially engaged in both – although the degree and nature of engagement will vary. At the level of political circuitry, diasporas are active in a number of ways. For example, they can act as patrons and financiers, as well as shaping market conditions through activities such as lobbying host governments, which can affect the flow of rent in the form of aid budgets. In the public sphere, meanwhile, diasporas are also engaged at the level of narrative formation and shaping debates around homeland conflict. While De Waal distinguishes between the two, this thesis hypothesises that diaspora actors can be involved at both – or neither – level at different times, and sometimes simultaneously, according to a variety of factors, interests and opportunity structures.

Unravelling the Political Marketplace

According to De Waal, there are two kinds of measures which can halt the onset of a political marketplace:

1. Taking the money out of international politics – or at least reducing it and making it more transparent. International policy reforms could make politics less conducive for rent-

seekers and better structured to provide public goods. These reforms should begin at the top: regulating political finance.

2. Pursuing an agenda of human morality: acknowledging civility and integrity amid the turbulence of the political marketplace, and recognizing and rewarding people who show those qualities.³⁵⁴

Building on the research into diaspora mobilisation in conflict resolution and transitional justice, it is logical to assume that diasporas can also play a role in efforts to halt a political marketplace in their homeland, with the right conditions, incentives and opportunity structures. For example, diasporas could lobby host governments to push for policy reform aimed at reducing financial incentives for political CEOs and business managers. Diasporas can also use their position in the host state and their often-heightened influence over narratives and debates to further the cause of civility, helping international research and policy communities to pinpoint those within a political marketplace who adhere to norms and standards of peace, human rights and development, and those who do not. As previously established, diasporas are more easily accessible to researchers and policymakers than civilians within the homeland, and can often provide key information and access to help them push back against political marketplace dynamics.

³⁵⁴ De Waal, *The Real Politics of the Horn of Africa*, 217-218.

These are but a few examples of how diasporas might be positively mobilised to halt the onset of a political marketplace and promote peace and development. Further research in this area could be crucial to helping policymakers and conflict resolution practitioners engage diasporas in peace and transitional justice processes within advanced political marketplaces.

A New Understanding of Diasporas in the Political Marketplace

Based on the above assertions, this thesis adopts the following theoretical framework as a foundation upon which to base its research: diaspora actors, groups and networks can occupy the same roles in a political marketplace as those physically located within the homeland. For example, they might function as patrons, political CEOs, or they could be actively engaged at the level of the public sphere. However, that is not to say that they necessarily will occupy any role. As the previous chapter established, there are a number of factors, interests and opportunity structures affecting why and how diasporas mobilise in homeland politics and conflict. Diasporas can both perpetuate and push back against political marketplace dynamics, sometimes simultaneously. Understanding the ways in which this happens can help policymakers to instrumentalise diasporas in a more positive and effective way to promote peace and development. Thus, just as political marketplace dynamics can shape conflict, migration and therefore diaspora relations and experiences, diasporas too can influence the trajectories of the political marketplace in their homelands.

Yemen's Political Marketplace

This thesis uses the framework identified above to explore the role of diasporas in Yemen's political marketplace, considering the ways in which the recent developments in technology and conflict are changing the ways that diasporas mobilise in homeland politics and conflict. In order to do so, it is first necessary to critically analyse the political marketplace framework insofar as it relates to the Yemeni case. De Waal himself has cited Yemen as a perfect example of an advanced political marketplace. This term refers to a context where the political marketplace operates as the central component of politics, as opposed to a general feature of political life. Such contexts occur when political markets which previously thrived behind the façade of an institutionalised state are thrown into crisis, mutating into an advanced political marketplace instead of transitioning to democracy.³⁵⁵ While the circumstances in Yemen since 2011 suggest that this is clearly the case, neither De Waal nor other scholars have attempted to analyse this further to explore the unique dynamics of Yemen's political marketplace.

De Waal's framework has been applied to a number of other case studies in Northeast Africa, however, many of which have similar characteristics and dynamics to Yemen. In the case of Somalia, for example, scholars have applied the political marketplace theory to understand how the marketisation of war is

³⁵⁵ De Waal, *The Real Politics of the Horn of Africa*, 18.

driving instability and violence in the capital, Mogadishu.³⁵⁶ Similarly, researchers have employed the term ‘political marketplace’ to conceptualise state capture by competing militias in Iraq.³⁵⁷ Sudan, meanwhile, is one of the most frequently cited political marketplaces by De Waal himself, who employs the framework to theorise mercenarised paramilitarism, crony capitalism, and the political and economic incentives for peace in the Sudanese case. There are many similarities in the Yemeni case.

In 2011, long-time patrimonial ruler Ali Abdullah Saleh was ousted from power in Yemen, creating a vacuum that was filled by competing political elites and militias vying for power and influence over the future of the country. The doomed National Dialogue process that followed descended into chaos and, in 2015, all out civil war ensued. This fits De Waal’s description of an advanced political marketplace perfectly, as does the chaos and violence that has characterised politics and conflict in Yemen over the years since. According to De Waal, ‘a political market based on rents—such as oil revenues or foreign assistance—can turn into a centralised, highly-regulated political system, when those funds are plentiful. Or it can seize up if those funds dry up’.³⁵⁸ This perfectly encapsulates what occurred in Yemen when Saleh’s oil and aid rents – his sources

³⁵⁶ Mohamed Haji Ingiriis, ‘Profiting from the failed state of Somalia: the violent political marketplace and insecurity in contemporary Mogadishu’, *Journal of Contemporary African Studies*, 38 no. 3 (2020): 438.

³⁵⁷ Mac Skelton and Zmkan Ali Saleem, *Iraq’s political marketplace at the subnational level: the struggle for power in three provinces*. Conflict Research Programme (London: LSE, 2020), 24.

³⁵⁸ Alex De Waal, ‘Introduction to the Political Marketplace for Policymakers’, *The Justice and Security Research Programme Policy Brief 1* (2016): 4.

of political finance – began to dry up and his ability to control the marketplace began to dwindle, eventually leading to the protest movement and his removal in 2011.

According to De Waal, advanced political marketplaces are highly militarised, and violence is escalatory and is used as an essential bargaining and communicative tool. This was the case in Yemen even during Saleh’s rule, when tribal and political elites seeking personal benefit fomented rebellions and attacks in – usually successful, but arguably controlled – attempts to extort political and economic benefits from the regime. In the years since, this practice has proliferated, and control over violence in Yemen has migrated even further from the political centre to the periphery as rival factions have increasingly been armed by their foreign sponsors giving rise to fierce competition and escalation.

Competitive patrimonialism has simultaneously increased, as regional and international powers have intervened, arming and funding local actors to pursue their own foreign policy agendas.³⁵⁹ This echoes De Waal’s description of how transitions from authoritarian rule can lead to a deregulated and violent political marketplace, as ‘the regulated clientelism within an ordered patrimonial system becomes an unregulated auction of loyalties in a collapsing state’.³⁶⁰

³⁵⁹ De Waal, *The Real Politics of the Horn of Africa*, 175-176.

³⁶⁰ De Waal, ‘Introduction to the Political Marketplace for Policymakers’, 4.

This section will consider the four key dynamics outlined by De Waal that shape the nature of a political marketplace, in order to critically examine the unique dynamics of the Yemeni case. These four dynamics are: 1) the extent to which political life is regulated by formal and institutional rules and procedures as opposed to inter-personal transactions and relationships; 2) The extent to which political finance comes from externally derived rents as opposed to domestic sources; 3) The extent to which control over the means of organising violence is distributed among members of the political elite, rather than being concentrated in the hands of the ruler; 4) The terms on which the country's political marketplace is regionally and internationally integrated.³⁶¹

(1) The extent to which political life is regulated by formal and institutional rules and procedures as opposed to inter-personal transactions and relationships

Political marketplaces arguably represent the antithesis of sustainable state-building, although that does not necessarily mean that state institutions are absent or obsolete. Politics is transactional, and institutions can play varying roles in those transactions. In Yemen under Ali Abdullah Saleh, as outlined in Chapter 1, institutions such as the military, parliament and government ministries were not obsolete, but functioned as either a facade for illicit trade and corruption, or as vehicles for corruption themselves. The institutions did not regulate political life, although they were important to the functioning of the

³⁶¹ De Waal, '#PublicAuthority'.

political marketplace. The political elite, spearheaded by Ali Abdullah Saleh, regulated political life, using institutions such as the military-security apparatus and the Ministry of Tribal Affairs to maintain his control over the marketplace.³⁶²

The real business was done behind the scenes, and institutions were merely used to implement the political business decisions of the President and his inner circle.

Since Saleh was removed from office, institutions have played a similar role, both in the Houthi-controlled north, and the (nominally) government-controlled south. The Houthis have utilised the remaining shell of the previous government to exert their control over northern Yemen and to extort finance from the population through customs tariffs and taxation. Meanwhile in the South, the government has utilised institutions such as the Central Bank to facilitate large-scale corruption and money laundering.³⁶³ The role of institutions, therefore, has changed little since the Saleh days and represents a key characteristic of Yemen's political marketplace.

(2) The extent to which political finance is externally derived rents as opposed to domestic sources

The second variable which shapes the form a political marketplace will take is political finance, and the extent to which it is sourced domestically through mechanisms such as taxation as opposed to externally through mechanisms such

³⁶² Al-Hamdani and Stowe, 'The Tribal Dimension', 5.

³⁶³ Middle East Monitor, 'UN observers accuse Yemeni government of money laundering and corruption' [online], , 27 January 2021, accessed 1 December 2021, [https://www.middleeastmonitor.com/20210127-un-report-accuses-yemen-government-of-money-laundering-houthis-of-taking-state-revenue/amp/?__twitter_impression=true](https://www.middleeastmonitor.com/20210127-un-report-accuses-yemen-government-of-money-laundering-houthis-of-taking-state-revenue/).

as resource rents, humanitarian aid and foreign security assistance. This political finance is then allocated based on elite bargaining and the price of loyalty, then channelled through state budgets to its recipients.³⁶⁴

In Yemen under Saleh, the majority of the political budget was derived from external sources, including natural resource rents (predominantly oil) and foreign security assistance from the international community, and particularly the USA. As outlined in Chapter 1, Saleh fomented a cyclical political culture of permanent crisis, using the threat of violent extremism to extract security assistance from his foreign allies. One could argue that it was Saleh's failure to generate political finance domestically that led to his downfall, as his control over the political marketplace began to unravel when the oil revenues and foreign security aid began to dry up.³⁶⁵

During the years since Saleh left office, this has remained much the same, with one major exception. On the one hand, in the South, the Yemeni government and other key factions like the STC derive most of their political finance from foreign sources – primarily funding from regional powers such as Saudi Arabia and the United Arab Emirates. In the north, the Houthis – although supported to an extent by financial assistance from Iran – derive much of their political finance from local sources. Since their rise to power in 2014, they have developed a robust

³⁶⁴ De Waal, *The Real Politics of the Horn of Africa*, 19; De Waal, #PublicAuthority.

³⁶⁵ Boucek and Ottaway, *Yemen on the Brink*, 80.

system of customs and taxation, as well as taking control of the import, distribution and sale of fuel, the telecommunications sector and car imports.³⁶⁶ In both cases, these sources of finance continue to sustain the networks of patronage that characterised the Saleh era, although the patrons and client have in many cases changed.

(3) The extent to which control over the means of organising violence is distributed among members of the political elite, rather than being concentrated in the hands of the ruler

Control over the use of violence – a key subject of much of the traditional literature on states and state-building – is a crucial determinant of the form a political marketplace will take. According to De Waal, ‘Control over the organization of violence can vary between: fully centralized; distributed among governmental institutions (e.g., regular army, national security, police, presidential guard); and decentralized across society (to include militia, rebels, vigilantes and criminal gangs).’³⁶⁷

In Yemen under Saleh, control over violence was relatively dispersed, although Saleh was an expert in managing the various ambitions and interests of those capable of utilising violent means, and even utilising violence himself to sustain his flows of political finance and his control over the marketplace. The army itself was not particularly powerful in terms of its control over violence, with the

³⁶⁶ Sana’a Center for Strategic Studies. ‘Corruption in Yemen’s War Economy’, 3. Al-Deen, ‘The Houthi–Tribal Conflict in Yemen’, 7-8.

³⁶⁷ De Waal, *The Real Politics of the Horn of Africa*, 20; De Waal, #PublicAuthority.

exception of a few elite units such as the Republican Guards (commanded by Saleh's son Ahmed Ali) and the 1st Armoured Division (commanded by Saleh's former ally and latter enemy, Ali Mohsin al Ahmar).³⁶⁸ The use of violence was common, however, among many of Yemen's tribes, as regional and tribal elites knew exactly how to utilise violence and rebellion – often in the form of kidnappings and attacks on critical infrastructure – to extract resources and patronage from the government. Meanwhile, Saleh himself (as highlighted above) at times actively facilitated violence by Islamic extremist groups such as AQAP in order to extract security assistance from overseas.³⁶⁹

During the period of chaos and civil war that has engulfed Yemen since Saleh was ousted in 2011, the organisation of violence has dispersed further still, and there no longer exists an individual personality or faction with a monopoly over the use of force. In the North, the Houthis have struck a delicate balance of relationships with local tribes in order to sustain their own power and prevent the tribes from rebelling against them. This can only be maintained, however, as long as the Houthis are able to provide sufficient incentives to maintain that balance, and reports of unrest in Houthi ranks, including in their northern tribal heartland, have been frequent.³⁷⁰ The situation in the South is even more turbulent, with tribes and factions nominally under the banner of the

³⁶⁸ International Crisis Group, 'Yemen's Military-Security Reform: Seeds of a New Conflict?', *Middle East Report*, 139 (2013): 7.

³⁶⁹ Phillips, *Yemen and the Politics of Permanent Crisis*, 131.

³⁷⁰ Al-Deen, 'The Houthi-Tribal Conflict in Yemen'.

government fighting frequently with one another, and regional powers such as Saudi Arabia and the UAE sponsoring competing factions like the STC and other local militias such as the Shabwani Elite Forces and the Hadhrami Elite Forces.³⁷¹ Similar tactics of fostering rebellion in exchange for patronage continue, but these are no longer focused on one central regime or force.

(4) The terms on which the country's political marketplace is regionally and internationally integrated

De Waal suggests that the degree to which a political marketplace is integrated into the regional and international system is a key factor determining the internal dynamics of that marketplace.³⁷² For example, the degree to which political business managers and CEOs are able to derive sponsorship and rents from foreign sources will impact the strength of the ruler, the price of loyalty and the cost for new entrants to the political marketplace.³⁷³ During the Saleh era, Yemen was integrated into the regional system in a number of ways. Firstly, the importance of oil revenues from the country's eastern provinces made the Yemeni political marketplace dependent on international financial systems and oil prices. Secondly, Saudi Arabia's long-standing patronage networks benefiting Yemen's tribes inevitably affected the price of loyalty in Yemen and therefore

³⁷¹ Abdullah Baabood, *Seas, Checks, and Guns: Emirati and Saudi Maritime Interests in the Yemen Conflict*, (Washington: Carnegie Endowment for International Peace, 2023), 2, accessed 4 August 2024, https://carnegie-production-assets.s3.amazonaws.com/static/files/Baabood_Yemen.pdf.

³⁷² De Waal, 'The Political Marketplace'.

³⁷³ Ibid.

Saleh's ability to control the political marketplace.³⁷⁴ Finally, Saleh's reliance on western security assistance made it impossible to extricate the country from the global political order.

Research Design

The previous section has outlined the theoretical framework on which this thesis rests. It has also made a case for why Yemen is the ideal political marketplace in which to test that framework. The following sections sets out the problems this thesis addresses, the research questions it seeks to answer, and how this is achieved.

Problem Statement and Vision

As outlined in the previous chapter, much of the existing literature in the field of diaspora studies focuses overwhelmingly on diaspora communities in the west, severely limiting the scope of the field by failing to take into account the presence and role of diasporas elsewhere in the world - particularly in the Global South. Furthermore, much of this literature emerged at the beginning of the twenty-first century, as conflict itself was undergoing huge changes due to technology and connectivity, rendering it outdated today as the conflicts the world is witnessing are clearly different to previous eras. Since 2011 in particular, with the rise of the so-called Arab Spring and the subsequent civil wars that have swept the Middle

³⁷⁴ Khaled Fattah, 'Yemen: A Social Intifada in a Republic of Sheikhs', *Middle East Policy Council*, 18 no. 3 (2011): 79-85.

East, new waves of diasporas have been formed in the Middle East and beyond. These communities and the specific set of circumstances that gave rise to their migration have been the subject of startlingly little research, and that which has been undertaken is largely empirical in nature, lacking academic rigour and overlooking the implications for how we understand the concept of diaspora itself.

This thesis tackles these issues both conceptually and empirically. Firstly, it aims to contribute to building a deeper understanding of how the technological developments and increased connectivity associated with globalisation is shaping diaspora relations and mobilisation. Secondly, it hopes to shed light on how diasporas' use of technology, and particularly social media, are shaping identity and community formation, as well as patterns of mobilisation - which in turn affect conflict analysis and conflict resolution efforts at an academic and a policy level. Thirdly, it develops existing research on how the positionality of diasporas in their host state shapes engagement with the homeland, providing a key insight into how this is taking place in the context of a twenty-first century, highly internationalised and fragmented conflict. This analysis touches upon key elements from the diaspora studies literature such as host state politics and geographical proximity, exploring how these factors have themselves been affected by technology and globalisation.

Empirically, this research develops a map of the online networks and webs of connectivity within the Yemeni diaspora. This network map incorporates organisations, networks and individuals, providing a three-dimensional view of how they are using technology to 1) connect with each other, the homeland and with influencers such as journalists and policymakers, 2) to develop and promote specific narratives around Yemen and the civil war, and 3) to mobilise in response to the conflict in Yemen. It explores how this online web of interactions translates into the offline space, through in-person research into Yemeni diaspora communities around the world, with an emphasis on Yemenis in the United Kingdom. Overall, the theoretical and empirical contributions of the study will support both the research and policy communities in developing a more nuanced understanding of the role diasporas are playing in twenty-first century conflicts, in order to mitigate against potential negative impacts and support more constructive diaspora engagement.

Rationale and Significance

Over the last century, conflict researchers and conflict resolution practitioners have often engaged diaspora actors out of pragmatism, citing the need for actors who can provide access and crucial knowledge of the local context in order to support their work. However, such practitioners have also issued warnings about the role diasporas should play in resolving homeland conflict, arguing that their interests are not always aligned with those of the people living in the homeland and that they are often less willing to compromise when it comes to

political negotiations due to their geographical distance from the fighting on the ground.³⁷⁵ Given the tendency to rely on diaspora actors throughout the process of conflict transformation, it is essential that the research behind the role of diasporas in homeland conflict remains up to date and takes into account the ever-evolving nature of conflict.

The benefits of this particular study from the perspective of the conflict research and resolution communities are clear: on a theoretical level, it contributes to a more nuanced understanding of how developments in technology and in conflict itself are affecting the role that diasporas are willing and able to play. Thus, the research hopes to yield key knowledge that might help conflict researchers and practitioners to leverage this technology in order to engage diasporas in a positive way at every stage of conflict transformation, from conflict research and analysis to inclusive peace processes and transitional justice. The empirical focus on Yemen is also extremely important at a time when the conflict appears to be entering a new phase, with the direct intervention of the US, UK and Israel in response to Houthi attacks on shipping in the Red Sea, while millions of Yemenis continue to pay the price of the war. It may also support those researching or working to resolve other regional and global conflicts that share the internationalised, fragmented dynamics of Yemen's war.

Research Questions

³⁷⁵ Jonathan Powell, *Talking to Terrorists* (London: Penguin Random House, 2014), 54.

This research seeks to answer three key questions around the theme of diaspora mobilisation in twenty-first century political marketplaces:

1. How is the proliferation of the internet and social media reshaping diasporic processes of identity formation, community building, and mobilisation in homeland conflict?
2. What are the implications of this for our theoretical understanding of the concepts of diaspora and diaspora mobilisation?
3. What positions and roles do diasporas occupy in the political marketplaces of their homelands?

Scope

This study focuses on the case of Yemen, whose long history of migration makes it a useful example of the heterogeneity of diaspora in terms of demographic makeup and host state destinations. It also allows for the comparative analysis of well-established Yemeni communities and more recent, conflict-driven migrants, both in the west and the Middle East. The research consists of both online and in-person elements. The online element seeks to map diaspora organisations and associations around the world, along with key individuals with a significant online presence, observing the networks that exist between them and their activity. It also encompasses research into prominent conflict narratives, keywords and thematic areas of engagement and mobilisation. The in-person research reflects this by targeting primarily individuals with known affiliations with diaspora organisations and associations or known mobilisation activities.

It highlights in particular the case of the Yemeni diaspora in the United Kingdom, which, it argues, represents a useful microcosm of the global diaspora and enables analysis of some of the key themes and dynamics from the diaspora studies literature. It seeks to understand the attitudes and mechanisms of engagement of Yemenis in Britain, seeking to represent both Yemenis from established migrant communities – for example second generation Yemenis from well-established communities in cities like Sheffield, Cardiff and Liverpool (Shiban) – as well as more recent migrants and those who left seeking safety and stability after 2011, in order to compare and contrast their experiences.

The research took place over the course of one year, providing a snapshot into the Yemeni diaspora at a particular point in Yemen's conflict. The online and in-person research occurred concurrently, with both elements directly supporting one another thereby providing a three-dimensional view of the Yemeni diaspora. For example, the online research identified key individuals as potential subjects for in-person research, while the in-person research identified dominant online associations, platforms and tools used by the diaspora, which may differ according to factors such as age, language and geographical location.

The in-person research was conducted via Zoom, although the researcher endeavoured to meet with subjects in person where possible for introductory meetings that will build trust and establish rapport. The research took into account the heterogeneity of the Yemeni diaspora actors and individuals studied,

in particular the Yemeni community in the UK, which is home to Yemenis who have migrated from Yemen in multiple waves, from different parts of Yemen and with significantly different demographic backgrounds. The research sought to capture these nuances fully enough that they enriched the study instead of limiting its potential, reinforcing the notion of diasporas as fluid and dynamic that is central to this research.

Methodology

The study employed a mixed methods approach, combining non-experimental quantitative and qualitative research methods. It began by mapping existing Yemeni diaspora organisations and activities online, using the websites and social media profiles of organisations and associations as a starting point, or 'nodes' of organisation. They were identified through search engine and social media queries using Arabic and English keywords. This portion of the research was desk-based, and generated a map of sorts of the online connections between key diaspora organisations and individuals around the world.

The findings were categorised in order to distinguish analytically between them based on aspects such as type (e.g., charity/non-profit, association, etc.), geographical location, thematic areas (e.g. political, humanitarian, education, etc.) and activity (active, inactive), using an expanded version of Ben-David's framework for researching into the Palestinian digital diaspora.³⁷⁶ This helped to

³⁷⁶ Ben-David, 'The Palestinian diaspora on the Web', 464.

identify key information such as the geographical locations where most online activity and mobilisation takes place, which may differ across platforms. It also identified the key thematic areas and kinds of activities that Yemenis in the diaspora are engaging in online. It was expected that Yemenis in the west would be more active online in engaging with the conflict in their homeland than those living in host states in the Middle East, given the sensitivity of the topic and the lack of freedom of expression in countries in the region which play host to large Yemeni communities, such as Egypt and Saudi Arabia.

The next stage took place in person, consisting of some in-person meetings, surveys and semi-structured interviews conducted via Zoom with active members of the diaspora such as heads of organisations or community figures based around the world, and particularly in the UK. They were identified initially through the researcher's existing personal and professional networks, along with search engine and social media searches using English and Arabic keywords (for example, 'Yemeni community' + 'United Kingdom' / 'Sheffield' / 'Oman' etc.). The surveys focused on their demographic background and the circumstances of their migration in order to gain an overview of the different backgrounds of participants and to ensure diversity.

The semi-structured interviews asked open-ended questions designed to yield a greater depth of information about their diasporic experience, considering four key areas: Firstly, questions addressed how the participants' experiences of

migration and living in the host state has affected how they identify themselves. Secondly, they explored their experiences in the host state, asking about their participation in Yemeni associations, organisations and/or networks, along with their participation in cultural activities that link them with other Yemenis. Thirdly, the questions explored how the participants relate to the conflict in the homeland, asking about their involvement in activities in Yemen such as political or humanitarian projects relating to the current conflict and exploring the ways in which the conflict has affected their experience in the host state. Finally, they investigated the participants' use of the internet and social media in their daily lives, their work, and in their interactions with other Yemenis - both in Yemen and internationally.

This yielded information about their demographic background, their role in the community, key relationships and networks, their political orientation and their position vis-à-vis the conflict in Yemen. When analysed alongside the online network map, it shed light on how these online and offline webs of relationships interact with one another, and therefore how technology is affecting interactions and mobilisation in the diaspora.

All interviews were conducted online, although where possible they were preceded by informal in-person meetings with the participants to build trust and rapport. Online interviews, while providing valuable access to participants across geographical boundaries, come with certain limitations that must be

acknowledged. One key limitation is the potential for reduced rapport and interpersonal connection compared to in-person interviews, which can impact the depth of responses and the richness of the data collected (mitigated where possible by the prior meetings with as many of the participants as possible). Additionally, technical issues, such as poor internet connectivity or unfamiliarity with the digital platform, can interrupt the flow of the interview and potentially affect data quality.

Furthermore, participants may feel less inclined to speak openly in an online setting, particularly when discussing sensitive topics such as political engagement or conflict. Online interviews, while efficient, may lack the non-verbal cues and immediate emotional responses that in-person interactions provide, which can hinder the interviewer's ability to fully interpret responses.³⁷⁷ Despite these limitations, the use of online interviews was deemed necessary for reaching a geographically dispersed sample, particularly in the wake of the pandemic when some travel restrictions remained intermittently in place, and enabled the collection of diverse perspectives on the topic.

The in-person elements of the research were undertaken within the framework of patchwork ethnography, which refers to 'ethnographic processes and protocols designed around short-term field visits, using fragmentary yet

³⁷⁷ De Villiers, Farooq, & Molinari, 'Qualitative Research Interviews Using Online Video Technology – Challenges and Opportunities', 1769-1771.

rigorous data, and other innovations that resist the fixity, holism, and certainty demanded in the publication process'. According to Gökçe Günel, Saiba Varma, and Chika Watanabe, 'patchwork ethnography refers not to one-time, short, instrumental trips and relationships à la consultants, but rather, to research efforts that maintain the long-term commitments, language proficiency, contextual knowledge, and slow thinking that characterizes so-called traditional fieldwork while fully attending to how changing living and working conditions are profoundly and irrevocably changing knowledge production'.³⁷⁸ By maintaining contact and spending time with participants on an ongoing basis, as opposed to limiting the interaction to a one-off interview, the researcher gained insights into how being Yemeni in the diaspora affects one's life, and how this differs across contexts, demographics and host states. It also allowed the researcher to build trust and rapport with the participants, which culminated in more reliable and insightful findings during the eventual interview process.

Non-probability sampling was used to identify participants, relying initially on the researcher's own personal and professional networks along with the results of search engine and social media searches. A sample of twenty individuals was sought to be interviewed for the study, with at least a third being located in the UK in order to enable deeper and more rigorous analysis of this particular case. The sampling process began by identifying key organisations and associations,

³⁷⁸ Gökçe Günel, Saiba Varma, and Chika Watanabe, 'A Manifesto for Patchwork Ethnography', *Society for Cultural Anthropology*, 9 June 2020, accessed 19 December 2021, <https://culanth.org/fieldsights/a-manifesto-for-patchwork-ethnography>.

mapping their networks along with key individuals and activities in order to generate an initial sample of participants.

The researcher's network was engaged as an initial sample, but this ultimately extended to key figures in the global Yemeni community as identified by members of this network themselves. Efforts were taken to ensure the sample encompasses a diverse array of individuals from different demographic backgrounds, genders and communities in the host state – including, where possible, minority communities such as Muwalladin. In the UK, the researcher ensured that the most significant communities (in cities such as Sheffield, Birmingham, Liverpool, etc.) were represented.

As alluded to above, the study used snowball sampling to identify participants – relying on the introductions of Yemenis in the researcher's existing network to yield additional participants. Snowball sampling 'yields a study sample through referrals made among people who share or know of others who possess some characteristics that are of research interest'.³⁷⁹ According to Peter Biernacki and Dan Waldorf, this method is particularly well suited when the topic of research is a sensitive issue. Moreover, scholars assert that it is a method uniquely designed for sociological research because it allows for the sampling of natural interactional units (ibid.). This mode of sampling is particularly appropriate for

³⁷⁹ Patrick Biernacki and Dan Waldorf, 'Snowball Sampling: Problems and Techniques of Chain Referral Sampling', *Sociological Methods & Research*, 10 no. 2 (1981)

this study given the sensitive nature of the topic – particularly from the perspective of participants located in the Middle East – the need to observe natural interactions between Yemenis in the diaspora, and the issues around accessing harder-to-reach communities such as refugees and elites.

The researcher's network consists of political elites and Yemeni professionals around the world, including those who have lived outside of Yemen for decades and others who left as a result of the political instability and conflict after 2011. This provided a broad cross-section of Yemenis from a wide array of backgrounds to act as starting 'nodes' of connection to others in their communities. The broad base of this existing network, along with the researcher's background conducting due diligence research in the Middle East, helped to mitigate against some of the potential pitfalls of snowball sampling identified by Biernack and Waldorf, including finding referral chains and verifying the eligibility of participants.³⁸⁰

By highlighting the case of the UK, which is geographically thousands of miles away from Yemen and has a long history of cross-border migration, the study yielded useful information about the impact of technological developments on the importance of positionality. For example, some of the literature outlined in the previous chapter argued that technology bridges the geographical divide between diaspora communities and the homeland, thus suggesting that

³⁸⁰ Ibid., 157.

geographical proximity is no longer as relevant as it once was. The depth of research into the Yemeni diaspora in Britain in the modern, globalised era therefore added nuance to these debates.

It is important to acknowledge that many of the interviewees in this study came from relatively privileged, middle, or upper-class backgrounds, with higher levels of education and professional occupations. This positionality likely influenced the nature of the data collected, as individuals from such backgrounds may have had greater access to digital tools, digital literacy, more opportunities for political engagement, and more mobility, both physically and socially. This could have shaped their perspectives and experiences in ways that differ from those of less privileged members of the diaspora, particularly those from lower socio-economic classes or with less access to technology.

It is also worth noting that many of the research participants (although not all) were located in the 'West', in countries such as the UK, the US and Europe, where they enjoy levels of political freedom that their counterparts in countries such as Egypt and the GCC do not. The host countries of the participants are referenced throughout, to acknowledge the ways in which this might shape their diasporic experiences and the opportunity structures determining how they mobilise, as well as the ways in which they were willing and able to share their experiences with the researcher. Future research could build on this study by seeking to include a broader range of participants from diverse socio-economic

backgrounds to better capture the full spectrum of experiences within the diaspora.

Aside from noting the positionality of the research subjects, it is also pertinent to acknowledge the positionality of the researcher herself. It is important to acknowledge how her background, identity, and experiences have influenced both her approach to the research process and the data she collected. As a white, British woman with extensive experience living in the Middle East and a strong command of Arabic, the researcher was able to access communities and engage in conversations with participants in a way that facilitated understanding and trust. Her knowledge of regional dynamics and language allowed her to navigate complex political and social landscapes more effectively than someone without these cultural and linguistic competencies.

However, this positionality also presented challenges. While her experience in the region afforded her some degree of credibility, it also positioned her as an outsider in the context of the Yemeni diaspora. This could have impacted how participants viewed her, potentially leading to either increased openness or wariness depending on their perspectives on foreign involvement in their communities. Furthermore, her status as a researcher from outside the diaspora may have shaped the nature of the data she collected, as participants might have been more – or less - cautious or selective about the information they shared than

if they were speaking to a Yemeni or Arab woman (or man), particularly on sensitive political issues.

The researcher was mindful of these dynamics and worked to mitigate any power imbalances by ensuring that participants' voices remained central in the analysis and by maintaining ethical research practices, including informed consent, confidentiality, and minimizing potential risks to participants. Awareness of these positional complexities was crucial in ensuring the integrity of the research process and maintaining an ethical approach throughout.

Research Findings

As outlined above, this research used Ben David's methodology for examining the Palestinian diaspora in the online space as a framework, although her approach was adapted to take into account both the Yemeni context, and the significant changes in the online space that have taken place since her research was published in 2012. Ben David first identified 'websites of associations and organizations of Palestinian communities that already represent existing structures and nodes of organization' as 'nodes' or 'starting points'.³⁸¹ She then performed search engine queries in Arabic and other languages to identify the top actors for keywords such as 'Palestinian community in [host country]'. She

³⁸¹ Ben-David, 'The Palestinian diaspora on the Web', 7.

classified her findings by factors such as actor type, physical location, thematic areas of focus, languages used, and primary and secondary activities.³⁸²

This research has taken a similar approach, but the researcher did not limit herself to only websites on the basis that many actors, organisations and causes now use social media platforms either alongside, or as an alternative to a website in a way they may not have done when Ben David conducted her research over a decade ago. Therefore, traditional search engines (predominantly Google) were used, as well as keyword and hashtag searches of prominent social media platforms including Facebook, Twitter, Instagram, YouTube, LinkedIn and Clubhouse. Searches of these platforms were conducted both in English and Arabic, predominantly for the keywords 'Yemen/Yemeni/Yemenis + community/diaspora + host country', or 'الجالية اليمنية (al-jāliya al-yamaniyya)' + the equivalent in Arabic. Hashtags that were searched on social media include: #yemen #yemeni #yemenidiaspora #rememberyemen #yemeniculture #yemencrisis #yemencallsforhelp #yemencantwait #yemenchildren #yemenwecare #yemenfamine #saveyemen #yemenia #yemenunderattack #yemenfans #yemenilivesmatter #yemengenocide #stopbombingyemen - among others. Research began with a short list of key hashtags, but additional hashtags were identified organically and added throughout the process.

³⁸² Ibid.

This research echoes Ben David's approach by including not only actors that could be considered 'diaspora actors' (either because they specifically declare themselves as such or because their activities focus specifically on the diaspora), but also considers 'diasporic elements/dimensions'. In order to identify these 'diasporic elements', the findings were classified according to the actors' basic information, activities, use of online platforms, physical location, target audience, and associated individuals/entities. The full classification scheme - which was adapted from Ben David's and expanded upon - is shown in the table below, including notes and explanations where necessary:

Category	Classifier	Select List	Notes
Basic Information	Name		
	Actor Type	Community Association	
		Campaign/Initiative	
		Event	
		Charity/Non-Profit	
		Media Outlet	
		Foundation	
		Online Community	
	Company		
Description			
Activities	Thematic area(s)	Arts & Culture	
		Education	
		Health	
		Politics	
		Justice & Human Rights	
		Humanitarian	
		Diaspora	
		Media	
		Mediation & Reconciliation	
		Refugee Rights	
		Youth	
	Women		
	Nature of activities	Events	
		Research	
		Humanitarian Interventions	
		Fundraising	
		Awareness Raising	
		Lobbying	
		Advocacy	
		Programs	
Community discussion			
Online / offline / blended	Online	Whether activities take place exclusively online or are a blend of online and offline	
	Online/Offline Blended		
Online Platform & Content	Primary platform(s) used	Facebook	Platform(s) with visibly highest levels activity and/or highest number of followers
		Twitter	
		Instagram	
		YouTube	
		Clubhouse	

	Active / Inactive	Active	Considered active if they have posted content within the last twelve months
		Inactive	
	Regularity of online engagement	Less than 5 posts monthly	Average number of posts per month, last 3 months
		5-10 posts monthly	
		11-20 posts monthly	
		21-30 posts monthly	
		More than 30 posts monthly	
	Primary kinds of content	Original	
		Reposted	
		Both	Balance of original and reposted content
		Community discussion	Option added in the case of certain platforms such as Facebook groups, where the platform owners/administrators themselves are not necessarily posting content but they exist as a community space for their members
	Number of followers across identified platforms	0-1,000	Combined across the various platforms identified
		1,001-10,000	
		10,001-50,000	
		50,001-100,000	
100,000+			
Physical Location	Country of registration / HQ		
	Location(s) of key personnel		
Target Audience	Primary language		
	Demographics actively targeted	Diaspora	Either where stated directly, or visibly obvious through the activities/content
		International community	
		Yemenis in Yemen	
		Host community	
Other / none			
Associated Entities	Key individuals		
	Partner organisations		
	Donors		

Table 1: Classification scheme for research on diasporas

The resulting dataset consists of 56 organisations, communities and platforms (referred to as 'actors' from here onwards) with an online presence that can either be considered 'diaspora actors' or exhibit 'diasporic elements/dimensions', for example: some are self-declared 'diaspora' actors, while others specifically target Yemenis in the diaspora or are registered/managed either outside of Yemen or by individuals located in the diaspora. While this dataset is a result of extensive desk-based research, it is necessary to acknowledge its limitations: It is inevitable that this research will not have captured every single existing Yemeni or Yemen-focused actor with 'diasporic elements', however it is useful for identifying key trends. The dataset consists of organisations, associations, social media platforms etc. but individuals were purposefully excluded – although the crossover between these actors and diaspora individuals is an interesting dynamic explored in greater detail later in this chapter.

A number of challenges arose while conducting this research that raise interesting questions in themselves about how the internet and social media are affecting the Yemeni diaspora and how they mobilise in response to the conflict. Firstly, it was at times difficult to distinguish between CSOs based on the ground in Yemen, and those based outside of the country. In cases where these actors did not make their physical location explicitly clear, factors such as the language they use, the nature of their activities, their target audience and the location of key personnel (often determined through Twitter and LinkedIn searches) were considered – although the answer was still not always completely clear.

Additionally, it was at times difficult to clearly distinguish between the activity of organisations or entities on the one hand, and individuals on the other. At times, individuals appeared to be affiliated with organisations, entities or platforms, but the links between them were not entirely clear – for example where they shared one another’s content or appeared to be organising and promoting the same activity. It was therefore often unclear whether the entity was supporting the mobilisation efforts of the individual, or the other way around. These challenges raise questions about if and how the lines are becoming blurred between the homeland and the diaspora on the one hand, and between diaspora organisations and individuals on the other, and what this might mean for mobilisation.

The researcher sought to fill in some of the gaps identified above through a series of interviews with individuals in the diaspora, many of whom are affiliated with the organisations identified in the dataset, in order to add colour and nuance to the findings in the dataset. While the dataset is useful for providing a two-dimensional view of mobilisation activities in the diaspora, the public nature of this data means that it can only go so far to explain the interpersonal relationships and community networks and dynamics that shape these activities. The mapping exercise helped the researcher to begin to visualise networks, connections, and funding flows in the diaspora. Pairing this data with interviews with some of the individuals and key actors involved allowed the researcher to build on this and

begin to capture the dynamism, fluidity and transitory, evolving nature of these networks.

The researcher conducted semi-structured interviews with twenty-one individuals in the diaspora, each of whom is, or has been actively mobilised in, or working on issues relating to, the ongoing conflict in Yemen. Each participant completed a pre-interview survey, in which they were asked a series of short answer questions about their demographic background and use of the internet and social media for communication with other Yemenis (both in Yemen and in the diaspora). A standard set of open-ended, non-leading interview questions was developed that expanded on the questions asked in the survey, designed to explore in greater depth the issues of identity and mobilisation in the diaspora, and how the internet and social media influence both. For example, questions were asked about the interviewees' lives in Yemen, the circumstances of their migration, how they identify themselves, their lives in the diaspora and their experiences of diaspora 'communities', with a cross-cutting theme of how the internet and social media have influenced all of the above. The interviews were semi-structured and at some points the flow was guided by the participant, although the survey responses were used to tailor the questions to each individual participant. The interviews were conducted via Zoom and WhatsApp voice notes in a combination of English and Arabic, and most lasted between one and one and a half hours.

The initial participants were identified from the researcher's own network and selected on the basis that they represent a diverse range of backgrounds and experiences in the diaspora. Additional participants were identified through snowball sampling, with many of the original subjects identified suggesting or introducing other participants based on the subject matter. The interviewees originate from an array of regional backgrounds in Yemen, representing a combination of both northern and southern Yemenis whose families originate from eleven different governorates: Aden, Al-Bayda, Al-Dhalea, Dhammar, Hadhramaut, Hodeidah, Ibb, Lahj, Sana'a, Sana'a City and Taizz. They come from a diverse range of socio-economic backgrounds, including some from politically influential and economically affluent families, and others from humbler backgrounds. For example, the group includes children of politicians and diplomats who spent significant periods of their lives abroad, individuals born in remote mountain villages, and one of mixed Yemeni-Ethiopian heritage who experienced the racial stigma associated with being 'muwallid' during their upbringing in a 'poor' neighbourhood in Sana'a.

The sample also represents individuals who are currently residing in a range of host countries around the world, including Bahrain, Belgium, Canada, Egypt, Germany, Oman, Portugal, Sweden, the United Kingdom and the United States. Almost all of the participants fell into the 25-34 and 35-44 age brackets, though all migrated from Yemen at different ages ranging from three months old to thirty-six years old, and for different reasons. Some have spent parts of their lives

in other countries outside of their current host state, including Tunisia, Turkey, Saudi Arabia, the Netherlands, Lebanon, Jordan, Qatar, Switzerland, and Malaysia, while others are political asylum seekers who left Yemen during the years since 2011. Fifteen out of the twenty-one interviewees were female. Many, but not all, have returned to Yemen since migrating, either to visit family or for work, some multiple times.

The interviewees are engaged in a wide variety of mobilisation activities (lobbying, advocacy, humanitarian, research, fundraising, awareness raising and development programming) across multiple thematic areas (politics, justice and human rights, refugee rights, media, mediation and reconciliation, women's issues, and arts and culture). All of the participants selected have some form of public online presence on social media, varying in the number and kinds of platforms they use, the nature and frequency of the content they publish, and the size of their audience across these platforms. They also represent a variety of political positions, including non-aligned/pro-peace, pro-southern secession, and strongly anti-Houthi.

During the interviews, the researcher tried not to ascribe concrete or pre-determined definitions to terms like 'diaspora', 'identity', 'community', 'homeland' and 'social media', instead allowing the participants to interpret these in their own ways. At times, the interviewer did not mention the internet or social media specifically, but instead simply mentioned 'technology'. Where

this was the case, all participants responded directly with answers relating to social media, highlighting the importance of this particular area of technological development in their lives and their mobilisation.

The findings of the online research and the interviews are summarised and analysed across the following two chapters (4 and 5), according to two key themes identified in the literature on diasporas: 1) identity and community, and 2) mobilisation.

Chapter 4 focuses on identity and community, and the findings of the interviews are used to answer the following questions: What effect does being in the diaspora have on how Yemenis identify as individuals, with other Yemenis, and with their homeland? To what extent, and how is the proliferation of the internet and social media blurring the lines that have traditionally existed between Yemenis in Yemen and Yemenis in the diaspora? How are the internet and social media affecting concepts of transnational and 'imagined communities'?

Chapter 5 focuses on the mobilisation activities of the Yemeni diaspora, drawing on the combined findings of the dataset and interviews to answer the following questions: How are Yemenis in the diaspora using the internet and social media to mobilise and form social movements in response to the conflict? To what extent are the internet and social media changing the ways in which Yemenis in the diaspora mobilise alongside other Yemenis, both in the diaspora and in Yemen? How do the physical and online spaces interact and overlap with one

another, and does the use of the internet and social media in mobilisation activities vary across different physical/geographical locations? By answering these questions, Chapter 5 sheds light on some of the issues raised during the previous chapter's exploration and conceptualisation of the role of the diaspora in Yemen's political marketplace, at the levels of both political circuitry and the public sphere. It explores the extent to which the blurring of the lines between Yemenis in Yemen and those in the diaspora is reshaping the roles diasporas are able to play in the local political marketplace, going beyond the simplistic portrayal of diasporas simply as sources of foreign remittances. It critically examines the ways in which the proliferation of the internet and communications technologies, including social media, are reconfiguring the factors, interests and opportunity structures affecting why and how diasporas mobilise in homeland politics and conflict. At certain points, where relevant, references are also made to social movement theory, particularly while discussing the role of diasporas in narrative formation and the construction of collective action frames. It returns to De Waal's political marketplace framework in order to draw conclusions around the roles played by diaspora actors in Yemen's political marketplace. Finally, it analyses the ways in which diasporas are using such technologies to both perpetuate and push back against political marketplace dynamics in Yemen, sometimes simultaneously, thus shaping the trajectory of Yemen's political marketplace during a critical period of violence and political turbulence.

Chapter 4: Identity Politics in the Digital Diaspora

Over the last decade, the proliferation of the internet and social media has had profound implications for the way we live our lives, identify with and relate to the world around us, and mobilise around social movements and causes. It is natural to assume, therefore, that these same platforms have had profound impacts on the ways diasporas do the same, thus potentially challenging how we understand the concept of diaspora and diasporic processes such as mobilisation in homeland conflict. The following chapters explore this phenomenon in the case of the Yemeni diaspora, against the backdrop of the arguments and frameworks put forth by much of the existing diaspora literature presented earlier in this thesis.

Drawing on the data presented in Chapter 3, this chapter seeks to explore how the internet and social media are affecting how Yemenis in the diaspora identify, as individuals, with their homeland and with one another. It also explores the ways in which these platforms have shaped their engagement with other Yemenis – whether inside Yemen, within their host countries or elsewhere around the world – and the formation of diaspora communities. This lays a foundation for Chapter 5 to examine the roles that the internet and social media are playing – both positive and negative – in processes of mobilisation and how this is shaping the dynamics of Yemen's conflict.

Identity Formation in the Diaspora

The processes of identity and narrative formation are key mechanisms by which diasporas influence the internal dynamics of the political marketplaces in the homeland. Yet in order to understand these processes and the extent of their influence, it is first important to have an understanding of how diaspora actors themselves perceive their identity, the narratives that exist around homeland conflict in diaspora communities, and how these are formed. The language used and online content shared by the actors identified in the dataset provide some insights into this. For example, when describing themselves, many of the actors identified used terminology such as 'non-partisan' and 'independent', emphasising that they are not affiliated with any political or religious cause. The vast majority describe themselves as 'Yemeni', with some specifying that they are working in the interest of 'all Yemenis' and all steering clear of referring to or affiliating themselves with a particular region or population within Yemen. On the surface, this suggests that diaspora actors do not strongly identify with any particular side or faction in the current conflict but are concerned with the interests of Yemen as a whole, and Yemenis of all backgrounds and identities. The responses of the interviewees call this into question, however, highlighting that the reality behind the public statements of the actors in the dataset around how they identify and who they claim to support are often much more complex and multifaceted than they first appear.

Each interview began with a series of questions relating to how the individual identifies, both as a Yemeni and with other sources and markers of identity such as the host nation, region of origin within Yemen, political orientation, religion and sect. Their responses provide critical context for understanding the motivations behind their perceptions of the conflict in the homeland and the ways in which they are mobilising in response, which are explored in detail in Chapter 5.

All of the interviewees except one had lived in Yemen at one point or another during their lives. Approximately one third spent all or parts of their childhood overseas. Most of those who did mention that they travelled frequently to Yemen, particularly during summers, to visit family. One interviewee, who was born and raised in the United States, described the ritual of these trips, and how formative they were for her own sense of Yemeni identity:

I would go back and forth to Yemen quite often. So, my first passport, which I got when I was three months old, [was] for the purpose of going to Yemen. I mean, the minute I was able to go on a plane, my parents were like, 'Okay, time for you to go to Yemen'. And then I would spend maybe two to three months a year in Yemen, so I think it's become a big part of my identity.³⁸³

Some of the interviewees either relocated or returned to live in Yemen after living abroad, and then emigrated again later. Some still reside in the same host country

³⁸³ WJ3, interview with the author, 21 May 2023.

they originally emigrated to, while others have moved around and lived in different host countries in Europe, the US, the Middle East and North Africa. Approximately half of the interviewees lived in Yemen during the transitional period from 2011 onwards and left the country for political reasons or because of fears for their safety, either claiming asylum or returning to previous countries where they held visas/passports and could travel freely. In the pre-interview survey, ten of the participants selected their Yemeni nationality as their most important identity marker, ahead of their nationality in the host country, their region of origin in Yemen, and their religious and sectarian identities. All described their Yemeni identity as hugely important to them in the subsequent interviews, including those participants who spent the majority of their lives, including all or parts of their childhood, outside Yemen. While this might suggest a level of primordial or innate identity, as opposed to one that is constructed, the remainder of this chapter will show that this is not necessarily the case, and that there are a number of factors - including the sense of distance from the homeland and their experience of its internal politics - that contribute to this strong sense of 'Yemeniness'.

When asked what being Yemeni meant to them, many referred to Yemeni culture, citing things like language, clothing, music, cuisine, superstitions, shared history and tribal customs as giving them a sense of Yemeni identity and

belonging.³⁸⁴ One cited the influence of her mother who, she said, passed down her culture through practices such as cooking and wearing traditional clothing together.³⁸⁵ Another, meanwhile, referenced Yemen's political culture and history of mediation, dialogue and pluralism as being a key factor that they associate with being Yemeni. Others mentioned the importance of their Yemeni identity to their current work or activism, as something that gives them a sense of purpose.³⁸⁶ As one interviewee stated:

It's everything to me ... My whole entire career has been Yemen, I'm obsessed ... Yemen was my sense of purpose. In fact, right now I feel like, oh, my God! I lost my sense of purpose because I feel like Yemen is just doomed. What am I going to do with my life? I have no idea. That's how much Yemen means to me. Because it's been everything – my career, my life, my friends, my everything, you know? But also it's my country, and I love being Yemeni and I'm proud of being Yemeni.³⁸⁷

Such insights highlight the crossovers that can exist between the personal, the political and the professional in the lives of diaspora actors, and how questions of identity necessarily influence the ways in which they mobilise in homeland conflict – whether through narrative formation or other activities, either

³⁸⁴ BG7, interview with author, 28 March 2023, via Zoom; CY4, interview with the author, 24 March 2023, via Zoom; SK3, interview with the author, 24 April 2023, via Zoom; VK5, interview with the author, 21 May 2023; XC1, interview with the author, 1 April 2023, via Zoom.

³⁸⁵ WJ3, interview with the author, 21 May 2023.

³⁸⁶ BG7, interview with the author, 28 March 2023, via Zoom; FL7, interview with the author, 10 April 2023, via Zoom.

³⁸⁷ BG7, interview with the author, 28 March 2023, via Zoom.

individually or professionally. One interviewee specifically mentioned Yemen's political history as a source of tension for her Yemeni identity, explaining that Yemeni national identity had for many years been associated with former President Ali Abdullah Saleh's years of tyrannical rule. She explained how the end of his regime had led many Yemenis to grapple with, and seek to redefine their Yemeniness, outside of this lens:

I think Yemen has had one identity, or at least they were under the impression that they had one identity for thirty-three years with Ali Adullah Saleh telling people, 'Okay, this is who we are. This is what our religion looks like. This is what our nationalism looks like.' This is how we wake up every day, and you know, sing the National Anthem, and there [were] very strict rules about who we identify as. And when that fell apart, I think there were thousands and thousands of oppressed groups ... that just felt like they were so oppressed, and now they can speak up, and they felt like their identity wasn't kind of presented, or ... like they cannot identify as who they are.³⁸⁸

The current conflict in Yemen has clear regional dynamics, echoing the country's complex regional history (outlined in Chapter 1); The Houthis' expansion throughout the country is seen by many in the south as the latest attempt by northern tribes to dominate the south, while the south itself has become increasingly divided between those who wish for Yemen to remain one united country and those who want to see the South secede as an independent state.

³⁸⁸ VK5, Interview with the author, 16 May 2023.

Despite these regional dynamics, not one of the diaspora actors identified in the dataset directly stated having a clear regional position or focus when describing themselves and their work. At a surface level, this indicates that the regional dynamics of the conflict have not transcended the country's geographical borders. In order to verify and add nuance to this – undeniably simplistic – assumption, the interviewees were asked to describe how they felt about their regional identity and its importance in their lives and work.

The participants expressed different perspectives on the importance of their regional origins, but the vast majority agreed that regional identity did not play a significant role in their lives and expressed concern about its increasing politicisation. When questioned on what their regional identity meant to them, two participants – one originating from Sana'a and the other from Ta'izz – stated that they identified with their region of origin primarily on a cultural level. The interviewee from Sana'a quoted above specifically referred to her Sana'ani (of Sana'a) accent, Sana'ani food, and local traditions such as the way Sana'anis burn bakhoor as giving her a sense of affinity with the city and pride of her Sana'ani roots. However the interviewee, who has spent the majority of her life in Europe and the US, stated that this did not affect her political views or stance towards the conflict, going as far as to say that she would likely align more closely with the South than the North politically given the region's history of left-wing politics. She admitted her pride at being Sana'ani only reluctantly, expressing

concern that, in highlighting specific Sana'ani customs and attributes, she might unintentionally contribute to the growing regional divisions between Yemenis.³⁸⁹

One interviewee whose family originated from Ta'izz also said she relates to aspects of local culture, such as the city's distinct food. She also spoke in detail about the politically outspoken and resilient nature of the Ta'izzi people, as well as the city's vibrant civil society, as things that made her feel a sense of regional affinity and pride. This sense of Ta'izzi identity, however, does not seem to have shaped the demographic makeup of the Yemeni friends in the diaspora who she considers her 'community', none of whom are of Ta'izzi origin.³⁹⁰

Another participant whose family originated from Hajjah noted that, although his regional identity didn't make a difference to him personally, he was often tasked with representing the international organisation he works for in meetings and consultations with individuals and communities from Hajjah because of his family background in the region allows him to relate more closely with them. The same happened, he said, when he was part of the National Dialogue process in Sana'a in 2011. He clarified, however, that this was purely for practical reasons and it did not prevent him from doing the same with communities from other

³⁸⁹ CY4, interview with the author, 24 March 2023, via Zoom.

³⁹⁰ BG7, interview with the author, 28 March 2023, via Zoom.

regions and governorates. He added that he would never claim to speak on behalf of the people of Hajjah simply because he originated from the area.³⁹¹

Despite these regional affiliations of varying kinds, most interviewees visibly downplayed the importance of their regional identity, with some directly expressing concern at the increasing politicisation of regional divisions between Yemenis³⁹². One interviewee – a political analyst originating from Ibb governorate – argued that the conflict had intensified this phenomenon:

In the past I didn't feel it was very important. Now I feel, because politically our concerns are now different, this makes us [feel] more that we are northern [or southern] ... Before the war, we were all Yemenis. In the past it was more political division ... It was more political than regional.³⁹³

Another participant echoed this view, criticising 'the identity politics that happened during the conflict where everyone started to say, 'Oh, if you're not with us, then you're against us!'' Being from Sana'a, she says, has come to be associated with being pro-Houthi, while being from Aden is now perceived by many to mean that one is pro-secession. For this reason, she decided to stop telling others that she was from Sana'a when they asked about her region of origin, referring instead to the specific neighbourhood in Sana'a where she grew up in order to avoid assumptions about her politics or her views on the conflict.

³⁹¹ SK3, interview with the author, 24 April 2023, via Zoom.

³⁹² FL7, interview with the author, 10 April 2023, via Zoom.

³⁹³ PA9, interview with the author, 15 April 2023, via Zoom.

Another reason for this, she says, is because this particular neighbourhood is associated with being 'poor' or underprivileged, and by identifying herself with it she is making a statement about social mobility and expressing pride in her humble roots.³⁹⁴

There were two clear exceptions to this trend, however. One of the participants was born in Aden and also lived in Lahj and Al-Dhalea before migrating to the United States at the age of ten. When asked whether she identified as Yemeni and what being Yemeni meant to her, she responded immediately, 'I do identify as Yemeni, but being from the South, I always clarify ... You know, I'm from Yemen, but then South Yemen.' The interviewee spoke in detail about the importance of the historical division between North and South Yemen, stressing that unity in Yemen was not a natural state, but something that was brought about by force through the unification process in the 1990s. She stressed her southern identity throughout the interview:

My regional identity is very important to me. I have to clarify I'm from South Yemen because I always believe that there is a difference. There is a religious difference. There is a cultural difference. There are historic differences where I, as somebody from South Yemen, don't share the same cultural identity, or even sometimes accent and language and religion as people from North Yemen. So that's very important to me, because it's part of who I am.³⁹⁵

³⁹⁴ FL7, interview with the author, 10 April 2023, via Zoom.

³⁹⁵ XC1, interview with the author, 1 April 2023, via Zoom.

A second interviewee also expressed that she felt a strong sense of affiliation with her identity as a southerner, recognising that this is sometimes problematic in the eyes of other Yemenis:

I always identify myself as a South Yemeni. I say South Yemeni and, unfortunately, some people take offence. The southerners take offence because I'm using the word Yemeni, while some of the southerners and the northerners get offended because I'm using the word 'south'.³⁹⁶

It is interesting to note that both of the participants who were keen to stress their regional identity were both southern. Contrastingly, none of the northern participants claimed to identify strongly as norther, citing only aesthetic and cultural elements that they associated with North Yemen or their specific regions of origin, as noted above. Both these participants' eagerness to clarify their regional identity, as well as the strong reluctance of multiple others to acknowledge its importance, clearly indicate that regional tensions and divisions are felt in the Yemeni diaspora to some degree, even if they are not expressed directly or publicly by individuals or diaspora actors. However, while clearly felt, regional tensions do not necessarily prevent Yemenis in the diaspora from connecting with one another. Multiple interviewees assured the interviewer that, in their experience, Yemenis in the diaspora continue to form connections with

³⁹⁶ MS2, interview with the author, 3 May 2023.

others based on their shared ‘Yemeniness’, in person at least, regardless of their region of origin.³⁹⁷

The interviewees also shed light on the complexity of religious identity in the diaspora. One participant explained that she had been a ‘militant atheist’ when she arrived in Germany from Yemen, preferring to practise certain elements of Buddhism and Hinduism in rejection of the Islamic faith she had grown up with. In Germany, however, she found herself becoming defensive of Islam and questioning her own resistance to it, in reaction to the anti-Muslim sentiment she witnessed from some Germans. She describes this as an inner conflict between holding onto her individual reasons for rejecting her religion, while also feeling the urge to defend it against those whose hatred and bigotry towards Muslims was based on misconceptions.³⁹⁸

Further exploration is therefore needed to understand how these identity politics manifest in the mobilisation activities of Yemenis in the diaspora, and what role the internet and social media might be playing in this process.

When investigating how diasporas form social movements and mobilise in response to homeland conflict, it is helpful to explore how they themselves understand the concept of diaspora, its importance in their lives, and the extent

³⁹⁷ CY4, interview with the author, 24 March 2023, via Zoom; XC1, interview with the author, 1 April 2023, via Zoom.

³⁹⁸ VK5, interview with the author, 16 May 2023.

to which they identify as being in diaspora. This will shed light in particular on the diasporic processes of identity and narrative formation that are critical manifestations of diaspora mobilisation.

Of the set of 55 diaspora/diasporic actors identified in the research, 30 are considered for the purposes of this research as 'diaspora actors' – meaning they refer to themselves as such or their primary beneficiaries are Yemenis in the diaspora – while the remaining 25 are considered actors with visible 'diasporic elements' – such as being registered and managed outside of Yemen, conducting their activities outside of Yemen, or where some or all of their key personnel (Directors, Board Members, Management etc.) are Yemenis in the diaspora. Of the 30 'diaspora actors' many refer specifically to the 'Yemeni community' in the geographical location where they are based or working when describing their activities. This suggests that such actors have a local, or geography-based understanding of the concept of diaspora, understanding the word as referring to a particular community of common origin in a particular place. However, this does not rule out the possibility that they also understand diaspora as referring to a transnational or imagined community as well. Having said that, almost none of the actors identified – whether diaspora actors or actors with diasporic elements – refer to a global or transnational Yemeni diaspora when describing their purpose or their activities, either explicitly or implicitly, although some refer to the 'Yemeni community' without clarifying what they mean by this. This implies that, generally, diaspora actors perceive diasporas to be 'real', physical

communities in a specific geographical space or within a host state, as opposed to transnational and fluid.

In reality however, as highlighted by the interviewees, the process of community formation in the diaspora is not always geographically localised and is perhaps more 'imagined' than they may acknowledge - although a number of factors relating to the host state clearly continue to play a key role. When asked how they understand the concept of diaspora, many of the interviewees initially responded with a broad definition relating to migration as being the key factor, echoing scholars who define diaspora in simple terms such as 'that segment of a people living outside the homeland'.³⁹⁹ However, when they elaborated further, almost all narrowed down their definitions to focus on aspects such as a feeling of connectedness and attachment to the homeland or processes of active engagement in the affairs of the homeland. One participant suggested that the term diaspora captures the struggle of feeling like you are in two places at one time, echoing Kadhum's discussion of the notion of 'in-betweenness' that many in the diaspora feel as a result of the various 'roots and routes' that have shaped their identity.⁴⁰⁰ As one interviewee argued:

It's in that dual experience, because everything I experience in Sweden, I see it with two dimensions. Even though I'm not in Yemen, I see it

³⁹⁹ BG7, interview with the author, 28 March 2023, via Zoom; CY4, interview with the author, 24 March 2023, via Zoom; DF1, interview with the author, 4 March 2023, via Zoom; FL7, interview with the author, 10 April 2023, via Zoom; XC1, interview with the author, 1 April 2023, via Zoom; Tölöyan, 'Rethinking Diaspora(s)', 3 and 10.

⁴⁰⁰ Kadhum, 'Diaspora Mobilisation and Belonging in the UK', 110.

with my Yemeni dimension, while also trying to have a Swedish, local dimension. But it's a struggle. I'm always thinking 'I'm here, but I'm there. I'm there, but I'm here. So, this is why we say diaspora, I think. Because there are people living in the diaspora that are completely removed, unattached...So, it's really about the attachment, I think.⁴⁰¹

Others focused more on processes of engagement with the homeland, arguing that, even if a person had lived all their life in a particular host state and the act of migration had taken place generations ago, a person could still be living in diaspora if they were engaged with what was happening in the homeland⁴⁰². One participant took this one step further, arguing that to be in diaspora, one had to be serving the homeland in some way, political or otherwise⁴⁰³. The same participant, when first asked, stated that she did not feel like she was a member of the diaspora because she was not part of 'the Yemeni community' in her host country. However, when she elaborated on the concept, she acknowledged she felt she was playing a role as a diaspora Yemeni in the sense that she is still involved in Yemeni politics (in her professional career as a political analyst)⁴⁰⁴. Interestingly, this was the only response that implied an element of transnationalism, although the concept was not explicitly referred to.

⁴⁰¹ FL7, interview with the author, 10 April 2023, via Zoom.

⁴⁰² CY4, interview with the author, 24 March 2023, via Zoom; SK3, interview with the author, 24 April 2023, via Zoom.

⁴⁰³ PA9, interview with the author, 15 April 2023, via Zoom.

⁴⁰⁴ Ibid.

One thing all interviewees had in common in their responses to this question was a sense of confusion. Many paused to think before answering, and their answers evolved or changed direction as they spoke. Their confusion might echo the complexity of the myriad definitions of diaspora summarised in Chapter 2. However, it could also be a reflection of how fundamentally the concept of diaspora is being challenged by contemporary developments such as the proliferation of the internet and social media, and the ways these developments are affecting processes of identity formation and community dynamics, both locally and transnationally.

Despite this confusion around how exactly to define diaspora, all the interviewees who were asked felt that being in the diaspora had shaped their identity in some way. One participant described feeling an increased sense of attachment to Yemen while living outside of its borders:

When I was in Yemen, I was like, I love my country but I don't know if I want to live here forever because I kind of want to be free, you know? And I fantasised a lot about moving to the West ... But when I left Yemen, I became a lot more attached to my country... A lot more attached ... A lot more passionate about Yemen.⁴⁰⁵

Another interviewee, who left Yemen aged ten and emigrated to the United States, spoke about feeling a sense of friction within her identity between her two cultures. She spoke about a 'battle' between different religions, cultural norms

⁴⁰⁵ BG7, interview with the author, 28 March 2023, via Zoom.

and societal rules, saying, 'It is very interesting when you're trying to bridge the two or combine the two – you can't really be one'.⁴⁰⁶

This question, however, evoked different responses depending on a variety of factors relating to the host country of the interviewee, such as geographical proximity to Yemen, whether they moved around or stayed in one host country, and the political and cultural context of the host state – echoing some of the core concepts in the diaspora studies literature outlined in Chapter 2. One interviewee, who had spent time living in both the United States and Jordan since leaving Yemen, said that being away from Yemen felt 'a lot easier' and 'less remote' while she was in Jordan, compared with the US, due to the cultural similarities, the physical presence of a large number of Yemenis, and relative geographical proximity to Yemen. In the US, she said she felt driven to engage more with Yemen through her work, explaining:

I feel like sometimes I overcompensate because I feel like, oh, I'm distant from Yemen, I'm remote. I can't lose Yemen. I have to do more. I have to work more. I have to write more. And it ends up being my life, basically, you know, doing a lot more things than I need to do or should do just because I feel like, oh, my God, no, I can't be that distant.⁴⁰⁷

⁴⁰⁶ XC1, interview with the author, 1 April 2023, via Zoom.

⁴⁰⁷ BG7, interview with the author, 28 March 2023, via Zoom.

Interviewees who had spent time in Egypt expressed similar views, with one explaining that 'life in Egypt 'is more simple and lovely - it's quite similar to Yemen'.⁴⁰⁸ Another interviewee explained that she felt different about her Yemeni identity in different places. When living in Saudi Arabia as a teenager, she was mocked for being Yemeni, which drove her to want to hide her identity. She explains that she still feels a sense of shame for having pretended to be Saudi, speaking with a Saudi accent to avoid derogatory comments. While living in the United States, then later Tunisia and Egypt, however, the same interviewee felt very different about her Yemeni roots. In the US, she says, she felt 'freer' to be Yemeni, while in Egypt and Tunisia she felt a desire to emphasise, or 'prove her Yemeniness' in an attempt to push back against stereotypes of Yemeni culture as limited, and of Yemeni women as conservative and uneducated⁴⁰⁹. Another interviewee stated that spending parts of his childhood in the UK then returning to Yemen and experiencing the contrast in education systems between the two countries made him feel 'privileged', heightening his awareness of how different his experience was from that of other Yemenis in Yemen⁴¹⁰.

While the above offers an insight into how being in diaspora can shape the way Yemenis identify with their homeland, it is also important to consider diaspora actors' relationship to the host state and the extent to which they feel a sense of national identity in the country where they reside. As outlined in Chapter 2, this

⁴⁰⁸ HS9, interview with the author, 29 May 2023.

⁴⁰⁹ CY4, interview with the author, 24 March 2023, via Zoom.

⁴¹⁰ SK3, interview with the author, 24 April 2023, via Zoom.

is a critical dynamic that influences how diasporas identify, experience community, and mobilise in response to events in the homeland. When asked how important host state nationalism was to them, the interviewees gave a mixture of responses. Interestingly, multiple participants who had migrated to the US stated definitively that they felt ‘American’, or that the US felt like ‘home’⁴¹¹. Two out of the three had spent parts of their childhood in the US. One said that she sometimes felt more American than Yemeni (interestingly, this was the only participant who identified strongly and politically with a specific region inside Yemen)⁴¹², in contrast with the rest of the group who put their Yemeni national identity ahead of all other identity markers in the pre-interview survey. Some expressed that their relationship with their American identity was complicated due to rampant racism and Islamophobia in the US, as well as the country’s role in supplying weapons to parties to the conflict in Yemen. This led to a sense of inner conflict around their Americanness.⁴¹³

The interviewee based in the UK, who also spent part of his childhood there, expressed that he also felt a sense of British national identity, although he added that he felt ‘a little more Yemeni than British’⁴¹⁴. One does not necessarily come at the cost of the other, however, as one interviewee was keen to clarify: In her view, having two sources of national identity – in her case Yemeni and American

⁴¹¹ BG7, interview with the author, 28 March 2023, via Zoom; CY4, interview with the author, 24 March 2023, via Zoom; XC1, interview with the author, 1 April 2023, via Zoom.

⁴¹² Ibid.

⁴¹³ WJ3, interview with author, 21 May 2023, via Zoom.

⁴¹⁴ SK3, interview with the author, 24 April 2023, via Zoom.

– was not a question of ‘either/or’. For her it was an advantage, giving her space to be different and allowing her to break out of the traditional societal expectations of either nationality⁴¹⁵. Another interviewee echoed this view, explaining that living in Sweden had not detracted from her Yemeniness, but had instead enriched her culturally by adding an extra layer to her identity, which now encompassed Yemeni, Arab, Swedish and ‘global citizen’⁴¹⁶.

In contrast, the two participants who had spent most, if not all of their time outside of Yemen in the Middle East, did not feel this way: One of the two, despite spending most of her life outside of Yemen (in Tunisia, Egypt and, most recently, Bahrain), said that she felt nothing other than Yemeni⁴¹⁷. However this may be less a product of the countries to which she migrated, and more a product of the transience of her experience, moving frequently between countries as opposed to putting down longer term roots in one host state. The other, who emigrated to Egypt for fear of her safety after a member of her family was killed by the Houthis in 2017, also said that she did not feel Egyptian at all. She explained that Egyptians are very accepting of Yemenis, and that Yemenis feel they can express their culture comfortably in Egypt without having to conform to local customs⁴¹⁸.

⁴¹⁵ CY4, interview with the author, 24 March 2023, via Zoom.

⁴¹⁶ FL7, interview with the author, 10 April 2023, via Zoom.

⁴¹⁷ PA9, interview with the author, 15 April 2023, via Zoom.

⁴¹⁸ DF1, interview with the author, 4 April 2023, via Zoom.

The stories highlighted above, while anecdotal, exemplify the diversity of experiences of Yemenis in different host countries and highlight how these individual experiences, as well as the dynamics of specific host state(s) influence the ways in which Yemenis identify. They emphasise that identity is not static, but dynamic and multi-layered, formed and continuously reformed through a complex set of processes that differ according to every individual's experience – of home, of migration, of diaspora and of community. By understanding these processes, we can also begin to answer the research questions around how dynamics such as demographic background and the politics and culture of the host state inevitably affect the factors, interests and opportunity structures that determine how diasporas mobilise in homeland conflict and influence the political marketplace of the homeland.

For example, the ways in which Yemenis experience their identity in the diaspora can have profound effects on how they mobilise in response to homeland conflict. One participant, who is based in the US and actively engaged in lobbying for the secession of South Yemen, said that she felt it was her 'outside perspective' that had shaped and driven her political activism. She said:

I think I probably wouldn't be involved in politics or activism, because I've always looked at what's happening there from an outside perspective, from an American perspective. Like the changes I want – I want them as an American, you know? I want what I experience here in the US to also be there, or to be available there. I probably wouldn't be like that, I wouldn't be trying to

implement a political change or a societal change if I was living there ... I probably wouldn't be involved. Maybe I would just be overwhelmed like everyone else in Yemen with all the difficulties, and not be involved politically. But then also, I think it's [the case] for all immigrants. When you move to the West ... [when] you grow up here in the United States, and then you see all the freedoms, you see all the advances, and you want it there. You want it for your cousins. You want it for your family. So, I think that's why I became an activist, or I got involved – I'm heavily involved in what's happening in South Yemen because I want what I have here to be implemented there too. I don't know if it's part of, like, an identity crisis – like I want this there.⁴¹⁹

This echoes the arguments discussed in Chapter 2, which contend that diasporas tend to be more attached to abstract, politicised outcomes than people on the ground in the homeland who are more concerned with survival and the day-to-day realities of the conflict on the ground. For this individual, her diasporic experience – of feeling the privilege of living somewhere that provides her with access to freedoms and opportunities that her family and other fellow South Yemenis do not have – is clearly shaping her interest in mobilising. Meanwhile, the access to opportunities and resources that being in the United States affords her shapes the opportunity structure within which she is mobilising for the purpose of Southern Secession.

Imagined Communities in the Digital Age

⁴¹⁹ XC1, interview with the author, 1 April 2023, via Zoom.

The above sheds light on how being in diaspora shapes processes of identity formation on the one hand, while also affecting the factors, incentives and opportunity structures that determine the ways in which diasporas mobilise in homeland conflict on the other hand. Using the case of Yemen, it has provided empirical evidence and analysis of some of the core scholarly concepts in the diaspora studies literature presented in Chapter 2. One question that has yet to be answered, however, is how these processes are evolving in the age of the internet and social media, which are undeniably changing the ways in which Yemenis – and all diasporas – are able to communicate with, relate to, and be in community with one another. Answering this question would provide critical context for understanding how these technologies are subsequently affecting the ways in which diasporas mobilise. The subsequent sections of this chapter investigate the extent to which the proliferation of the internet and social media are ‘bridging the gap’ between Yemenis in the diaspora and Yemenis in the homeland, as well as creating opportunities for the development of transnational, imagined communities that are not confined to any particular geographical territory.

A key theme in the diaspora studies literature reviewed in Chapter 2 is the deterritorialisation of diasporas, who are becoming increasingly connected through cyberspace both to the homeland and one another, transcending geographical borders and transnational boundaries and bridging traditional divides. The interviews conducted by the researcher demonstrate that this

phenomenon is clearly visible in the Yemeni case. New communications technologies are providing diaspora Yemenis with new opportunities to hold onto – and even dynamically redefine – their Yemeni identity. The increased frequency of communication between Yemenis inside and outside of Yemen, as well as the ways in which this communication is becoming more direct and ‘human’ through tools like voice calls and video, are bridging the gap between communities that would have traditionally been divided by the practicalities of geography and physical distance.

Identity formation in the diaspora previously took place in silos, shaped by local community dynamics and access to cultural production within a particular context. Today, Yemenis in the diaspora have constant opportunities to virtually experience their homeland, its people and its culture, thus shrinking the sense of distance between themselves and the homeland and increasing their cultural and emotional connection to Yemen.⁴²⁰ One interviewee mentioned that she watches Yemeni television dramas and series every Ramadan thanks to YouTube, which makes programmes that traditionally would have only been available in Yemen accessible all over the world. She also said that, through social media, she had discovered new generations of Yemeni musicians creating contemporary music inspired by Yemeni culture and tradition. Not only has this provided her with new ways to stay ‘up to date’ with cultural production in Yemen and influenced

⁴²⁰ Alinejad, ‘Mapping homelands through virtual spaces’, 45; Helland, *Diaspora on the Electronic Frontier*, 974.

her own cultural identity, but it has also allowed her to pass on this cultural connection to the next generation, as the music resonated with her young daughter in a way that the music of previous generations had not.⁴²¹

While in the past, diasporas' access to cultural production in the homeland was considerably more limited, Yemenis 'held onto' their connection to Yemeni culture and social norms in other, less dynamic ways. For example, one interviewee suggested that the Yemeni community in the UK in places like Sheffield and Birmingham – where Yemenis have lived for generations – are in fact more culturally conservative than many Yemenis in Yemen. He recalled attending *iftār* (the evening meal that breaks the fast) events during Ramadan hosted by the Yemeni community in the UK which were always segregated by gender, while the same events he had attended in Yemen were more mixed – some men and women would segregate by choice while others would mingle, and this was considered 'normal' and socially acceptable.⁴²² This could be because Yemenis in the UK have not, until very recently, had the level of exposure to culture and society within Yemen that is available today through the internet and social media, meaning that their identity as a community developed within a very particular context and remained more static as a result.

⁴²¹ CY4, interview with the author, 24 March 2023, via Zoom.

⁴²² SK3, interview with the author, 24 April 2023, via Zoom.

Another interviewee echoed this phenomenon when describing a Yemeni-British couple engaged in Yemen-focused arts and culture initiatives in the UK. 'They're quite open minded,' she said, 'for second generation immigrants'.⁴²³ This highlights a clear bias among first generation Yemenis in the west towards their fellow Yemenis of previous generations, suggesting that Yemeni migrants of particular generations are perhaps more likely to form imagined communities with others of the same generation.

Today, Yemenis have access to cultural influences from across different generations and cultural contexts, both inside and outside of Yemen. The effects on identity formation are complex. On the one hand, this is leading them to identify more closely with Yemenis in the homeland and feel a stronger sense of 'Yemeniness'. On the other hand, diaspora Yemenis are now experiencing a variety of different cultural elements from across different communities and groups in Yemen and the diaspora – not just from the particular region, tribe or social group from which they originate – thus adding new layers of richness to their Yemeni identity. While they might feel a stronger connection with Yemeni culture, it is possible that even their Yemeni identity has become less localised and more dynamic – although determining the extent to which this is true would require further sociological study and is beyond the scope of this research.

⁴²³ VK5, interview with the author, 16 May 2023, via Zoom.

As well as having profound implications for how Yemenis identify, the internet and social media are increasing the frequency and nature of communication between Yemenis around the world, deepening interpersonal connections between Yemenis in the diaspora and those in Yemen. Two of the interviewees nostalgically recalled how, during their childhood, family members in different countries would record news and messages on cassette tapes and send them to their loved ones in the suitcases of people who were travelling. The cassettes could take weeks to arrive – a far cry from the real-time video calls and voice notes many Yemenis today rely on to stay in touch with their loved ones. One interviewee said that listening to her grandmother’s cassette tapes as a child has made her appreciate how the experience of living in the diaspora is ‘becoming easy’ as a result of modern technology, while another described how her relation to Yemenis in Yemen was becoming stronger and stronger as a result.⁴²⁴

WhatsApp in particular was mentioned specifically by every interviewee as a key platform that they use to communicate with both Yemenis in Yemen, and others in the diaspora. Almost all of the participants said in the pre-interview survey that they are in touch with Yemenis in Yemen on a daily basis, and all responded that they use instant messaging apps like WhatsApp more than any other communication tool. According to one interviewee, this was not always the case – before platforms like WhatsApp became widespread, she communicated with

⁴²⁴ FL7, interview with the author, 10 April 2023, via Zoom; XC1, interview with the author, 1 April 2023, via Zoom.

friends and family on a weekly basis, whereas now she speaks to them every day.⁴²⁵ One reason why such platforms are so widely used by Yemenis is that many people in Yemen are illiterate, so the voice note function makes them accessible to less educated Yemenis who cannot write or type messages.⁴²⁶ WhatsApp Groups are also a popular way to stay in touch. One participant explained:

I have a million groups on my phone – different groups, you know, like there's the cousins' group, and there's the worldwide cousins' group, then there's the friends group in Yemen. There are some, like, solidarity groups. There's a bunch of different WhatsApp groups that I had to mute because it's just too much. But yeah, it's every day almost.⁴²⁷

When asked whether they felt that such platforms were bridging the gap between Yemenis in the diaspora and those in the homeland, the participants gave mixed responses. Some were quick to argue that the increased frequency of contact and the diversification of communication tools and platforms had reduced the gap.⁴²⁸ Others made comments suggesting that they still felt a gap existed, highlighting their relative privilege as Yemenis who had received education in more developed countries, or who had avoided the daily struggles of living

⁴²⁵ XC1, interview with the author, 1 April 2023, via Zoom.

⁴²⁶ FL7, interview with the author, 10 April 2023, via Zoom.

⁴²⁷ CY4, interview with the author, 24 March 2023, via Zoom

⁴²⁸ BG7, interview with the author, 28 March 2023, via Zoom.

through the war on the ground.⁴²⁹ Others warned against exaggerating the role of the internet and social media, on the basis that internet penetration and access to such platforms in Yemen is still low compared with many other countries, particularly among older people and rural communities. It is therefore important to avoid overplaying its importance in deepening ties between Yemenis inside and outside of Yemen, in order to avoid excluding certain segments of society to whom such a generalisation may not apply.

The above illustrates that the internet and social media are undeniably affecting community dynamics in the diaspora, but the reality is perhaps more complex than it first appears. Firstly, the relationship between Yemenis in Yemen and Yemenis in the diaspora are not bi-directional, but rather dispersed across the globe. It is difficult today to argue that the Yemeni homeland itself represents a centre of gravity connecting these nodes, as suggested previously by some diaspora scholars.⁴³⁰ In fact, the communities and networks of Yemenis around the world do not necessarily include, or rely on Yemenis geographically located in the homeland in order to exist and develop a sense of 'Yemeni' identity. This more closely echoes Koinova's term, 'multi-site embeddedness', which she uses to explain how diasporas identify and engage with multiple different localities at once⁴³¹. However even this term does not quite capture the complexity of

⁴²⁹ FL7, interview with the author, 10 April 2023, via Zoom; SK3, interview with the author, 24 April 2023, via Zoom.

⁴³⁰ Ben-David, 'The Palestinian diaspora on the Web', 461; Hanafi, 'Rethinking the Palestinians abroad as a diaspora', 174.

⁴³¹ Koinova, 'Diaspora Mobilisation for Conflict and Post-Conflict Reconstruction', 1262.

diaspora networks in the digital age: While certain ties are indeed deepening between Yemenis across traditional – particularly physical, geographical – borders and boundaries – these tools and platforms are not necessarily erasing such borders and boundaries altogether to create one united, transnational Yemeni community. Rather, they are redefining communities both within and across different diaspora groups.

On the one hand the internet and social media are facilitating connections within host countries by enabling Yemenis to identify and find others in their host country. After they connect virtually, many end up meeting in person, thus enabling them to connect with a broader group of fellow Yemenis than they might previously have done, when they might only have come into contact with those in their particular town or city. This was the case for one of the interviewees based in the UK, who said that he had met up in person with a number of Yemenis who had seen him speaking on television or online and had subsequently reached out to him via his Twitter account.⁴³² Meanwhile, one participant living in Sweden said that she was aware of other Yemenis living in different Swedish cities because she followed them on Snapchat. Another interviewee located in the US said that she was surprised to discover through Facebook that there were other Southern Yemenis living in the US in places she never expected:

⁴³² SK3, interview with the author, 24 April 2023, via Zoom.

Here in the United States we are in New York, Chicago, Michigan. Alabama, Louisiana, Mississippi, California, Indiana. Before I used to think we're only in Michigan, New York, and Chicago, Illinois. But after that, well, especially due to the Internet, I met Southerners in Nebraska, in Arkansas. I did not know if they existed there, like in the middle of America, the middle of nowhere. But it was because of the Internet ... opening more communications and opening more opportunities to meet new people. So we met new Yemenis ... here in the same country ... And it made these different groups living in different states feel like one community and one place, rather than you know, all living in different states and having different lives.⁴³³

In such cases, the internet is facilitating a combination of virtual and in-person connections by allowing Yemenis to identify others located in their host country and make contact with them, thus connecting different local communities in the host state into broader, more dispersed communities and networks. In this way, the internet is de-localising diaspora communities, although not necessarily de-territorialising them altogether.

This is also taking place on an international level, as Yemenis in different host countries around the world are connecting online and building new relationships, communities and networks. One interviewee explained that she was in contact with other Yemenis located all over the world, from the UK to the Gulf to Southeast Asia.⁴³⁴ Another said that she is in touch with other Yemenis

⁴³³ XC1, interview with the author, 1 April 2023, via Zoom.

⁴³⁴ Ibid.

all around the world via WhatsApp groups, and that the conflict had intensified their virtual connection:

We talk every day. We have like these WhatsApp groups and we talk and we gossip, and you know, if we're pissed off about something, we share that. And then we kind of, you know, have each other's shoulders ... The first five years of the war, we talked a lot about politics, about the conflict, about what's happening. I mean, it was just obsession, all the freaking time. Now we don't talk as much anymore. I mean, we talk every day, but it's much less about the conflict and more about our lives, what we do ... I guess we're all just tired, you know? We all felt like the conflict has taken over our lives, and we kind of need a balance ... I mean, [social media] it's been the only tool, it's been really great to help us connect with each other. I don't know how I would have done this without social media.⁴³⁵

These relationships and networks manifest in different ways, often through a combination of online and offline interactions – for example, Yemenis living in different host countries who meet online sometimes go on to meet in person, where they have the opportunity to do so, and build deeper interpersonal connections.⁴³⁶ At the same time, Yemenis that meet at in person events or activities often continue their relationships virtually after the end of the activity. The internet and social media are therefore not always the exclusive platforms by which these relationships and networks exist, often playing a more nuanced

⁴³⁵ BG7, interview with the author, 28 March 2023, via Zoom.

⁴³⁶ SK3, interview with the author, 24 April 2023, via Zoom.

role of facilitator of hybrid online/offline connections and inter-community networks. These changes are therefore better described as the hybridisation of online and offline diaspora networks, as opposed to a total deterritorialisation of diasporas.

It is also worth noting that the networks that are forming as a result do not necessarily represent unified 'communities'. While some interviewees said they felt that the extended diaspora communities in their host country were closer and more united thanks to the internet and social media, not everyone agreed. There are a variety of factors, interests and opportunity structures that determine whether or not virtual networks form 'communities'. One interviewee explained that, to her, having the illusion of a community online was powerful and 'psychologically soothing' in the absence of a 'real' - presumably local or physical - community.⁴³⁷ Another argued that Yemenis in the US of all different backgrounds were able to find commonality with one another based on their shared experience of being immigrants. She clarified, however, that she felt this was specifically a product of American culture's emphasis on equal opportunities and community spirit, regardless of differences in religion or politics.⁴³⁸

⁴³⁷ PO8, interview with the author, 17 April 2023.

⁴³⁸ XC1, interview with the author, 1 April 2023, via Zoom.

Another interviewee – the same individual who described her WhatsApp group community above – disagreed with this, however. On the one hand, she acknowledged that the shared experience of being in diaspora bonds people, particularly where there is a sense of privilege or guilt derived from living a ‘good life’ abroad while Yemenis in the homeland are suffering. This, she explained, also created a sense of commonality with members of other diaspora communities too, such as Syrians and Iraqis. She describes meeting an Iraqi woman in the US and feeling a bond based on their similar experiences of being in diaspora and experiencing homeland conflict from the US:

There's an Iraqi woman here. She and I talked a couple of times, and we follow each other on social media – that's how we found each other. And I don't really talk to her much, but the few times I talked with her, I felt like, you know, she kind of validated a lot of the things that I was confused about. And so yeah, there is that kind of bond.⁴³⁹

On the other hand, her experience demonstrates the potential of social media to cement divisions between individuals in the diaspora on the basis of their political views and stance towards the conflict. When asked how she found her WhatsApp ‘community’ (described in the quotation above) and whether they share demographic characteristics in common, she responded:

Believe it or not, like mostly on social media. Almost everybody I have in my community who was not living in Yemen, I picked on social

⁴³⁹ BG7, interview with the author, 28 March 2023, via Zoom.

media. That's how we found each other – on social media talking about the conflict ... then it became a community. Not [common in] age, not geography. No, it's mostly based on our views of the conflict. That's the main common denominator between us. And that's what makes us come together or divided us ... For Yemenis who left after the war – and again I'm telling you, [in] my community [there] is not a single one from Ta'izz. I'm the only one from Ta'izz. So even though I have that regional identity abroad, my identity is more about how this group thinks about the conflict and the solutions.⁴⁴⁰

The most interesting word here is 'picked' – it highlights that, while social media has clearly created myriad new opportunities for connection across the Yemeni diaspora, it has also allowed people to make quick judgements about one another's political position based on the content and views they share, and handpick their online communities on this basis. This is indicative of what appears to be a broader trend, whereby communities, or sub-communities of Yemenis – consisting of both individuals in Yemen and in the diaspora – are forming on the basis of personal and professional interests, politics and social dynamics, with the internet and social media as their primary vehicles for connection and interaction. Echoing Brinkerhoff's 2006 discussion of 'horizontally structured 'cybercommunities'', these communities often exist in a hybrid world of fluid online/offline interactions that transcend traditional geographical borders and demographic divides.⁴⁴¹

⁴⁴⁰ BG7, interview with the author, 28 March 2023, via Zoom.

⁴⁴¹ Brinkerhoff, 'Digital diasporas and conflict prevention', 32.

One interviewee shed light on how this process can occur, speaking to her own experience of forming a friendship group with politically likeminded Yemenis after initially meeting them and learning about their political views in a professional - and often online - context:

We all met organically, like we'd be doing this work and then someone would come to a call and be like, 'Hey, I agree! Can we talk?' Like, you know, I would do a meeting or whatever and someone would be there, or you would be asked to be on a panel, and then someone else would be on a panel. They're like, 'Oh, my God! I agree with everything you're saying. You're incredible. Let's connect!'⁴⁴²

Other interviewees described having similar experiences, though their communities were not necessarily aligned over politics. One political analyst writing about Yemen's conflict described being part of a community of writers and people involved in public affairs.⁴⁴³ Another felt a sense of community with other Yemenis involved in the arts, some of whom were based in the diaspora while others remain in Yemen:

I do feel like I fit in in the artistic Yemeni community. And yeah, and that there's a group of us, you know? There's this Yemen cultural hub, I feel, and they're all over the world, and I do feel like that's kind of my community, and some are in the diaspora, and some are in Yemen, and both feed into each other. So, the artists in Yemen do

⁴⁴² WJ3, interview with the author, 21 May 2023.

⁴⁴³ PA9, interview with the author, 15 April 2023, via Zoom.

their arts. We try and promote it from abroad – you know, you can translate things, you can spread it, try and... I don't know... organise festivals or exhibitions wherever you live and do it together sometimes, you know? So yeah, in a way [the line between Yemenis in the diaspora and Yemenis in Yemen] has been blurred.⁴⁴⁴

Another Yemeni, located in the UK, described being part of a community of Yemenis geographically based in London who kept in touch through Instagram. Although they were located in the same city, it is their liberal cultural and social values that seem more important in bonding them together as a community. The individuals in the community came from different regions in Yemen and consisted of a diverse array of political views and levels of engagement with Yemeni politics. Yet the interviewee explained that the members of this community felt much more comfortable with one another than they did with the Yemenis in places like Birmingham and Sheffield who had migrated to the UK generations before and did not have the same experience of the post-2011 period and the conflict. One of the major reasons for this is the level of perceived social conservatism within the Yemeni community in the UK, despite the fact that they have been in the UK for decades longer than these new arrivals. He said that women generally feel much more comfortable, and that even 'someone who identifies as homosexual, he'd be comfortable around this group of people than

⁴⁴⁴ CY4, interview with the author, 24 March 2023, via Zoom.

... you know, explaining whatever they are going through with the rest of the community'.⁴⁴⁵

Another interviewee, who had migrated to the US from Yemen, described a similar phenomenon among Yemeni communities in New York, echoing Koinova's discussion of how diasporas can become 'frozen in time'.⁴⁴⁶ They stated:

I was not part of the traditional communities. You know, I interacted with the Brooklyn community and the Bronx community briefly, but ... in my opinion the Yemenis in Yemen were far more educated, far more aware, far more progressive than the Yemeni communities that I was meeting in the US. They almost felt backwards to me ... I don't want to say backwards here with judgment. But the fact [was] that they were not keeping up with the time that they were living in, which was shocking because people inside of Yemen wanted to change and wanted to be part of the world, and part of like, just getting to the next level. The Yemenis abroad kind of closed down and held on to their traditions from like the 60s and just would not move past that time. So, I felt that the Yemeni communities outside of Yemen were more conservative than the communities in Yemen.⁴⁴⁷

The above examples highlight the complexity of factors and opportunity structures shaping the formation of horizontal communities of Yemenis in the

⁴⁴⁵ SK3, interview with the author, 24 April 2023, via zoom.

⁴⁴⁶ Koinova, 'Diaspora Mobilisation for Conflict and Post-Conflict Reconstruction' 1259.

⁴⁴⁷ PO8, interview with the author, 17 April 2023.

post-2011 era and the modern digital age. They confirm that it is impossible to say with much certainty whether the internet and social media are increasing or decreasing the sense of community within and across diaspora communities, nor whether they are widening or bridging the gap between diasporas and the homeland. What is clear, however, is that the processes of identity and community formation are becoming increasingly fluid, dynamic and multi-layered, transcending – but not eliminating the role of – traditional borders and boundaries.

This chapter has directly addressed the research question regarding how the proliferation of the internet and social media are reshaping diasporic processes of identity formation, community building, and mobilisation in homeland conflict. It has demonstrated how Yemenis are using the internet and social media to redefine their identity on their own terms, contrary to the traditional sources and mechanisms of identity formation such as government policies and other external factors such as those explored by Halliday and day, as outlined in Chapter 1 of this thesis. It has clearly shown how the many layers of an individual's identity are not static, but constantly evolving, continuously forming and reforming through a complex set of processes that differ according to every individual's experience - of home, of migration, of diaspora and of community.

The subsequent chapter will build on this research to add further clarity and nuance surrounding the question of how the internet and social media are reshaping processes of mobilisation in the diaspora. This will enable critical analysis to be conducted addressing the second and third research questions of this thesis, around the implications of the findings for our understanding of diasporas and the roles they play in the political marketplaces of their homeland.

Chapter 5: Online Mobilisation in Yemen's Political Marketplace

*'Social media has been a driving force behind actions that shape policies and interventions in Yemen ... It's insane how powerful social media is. Really insane.'*⁴⁴⁸

By exploring the dynamic, multi-layered and constantly evolving processes by which Yemenis in the diaspora identify and form communities, Chapter 4 began to shed light on some of the key factors, interests and opportunity structures driving diaspora mobilisation in Yemen's conflict, critically engaging with the complex interplay between identity politics and self-interest shaping patterns of mobilisation. This chapter delves deeper into this topic, exploring the ways in which Yemeni diaspora actors and individuals are using these technologies for specific mobilisation activities. It begins by providing an overview of the dataset introduced in Chapter 4, sharing insights into the activities of the actors identified and their use of online platforms in their work. It uses this data, supplemented by the findings of the interviews with members of the diaspora, to explore in detail the ways in which the internet and social media are reshaping the factors, interests and opportunity structures that determine *how* diasporas mobilise.

It critically examines the ways in which the internet and social media are reshaping diaspora mobilisation in the case of Yemen, presenting key empirical

⁴⁴⁸ BG7, interview with the author, 28 March 2023, via zoom.

findings that enables analysis of both the role of diasporas vis-a-vis homeland conflict, as well as the impact of this mobilisation on the political marketplace dynamics of the homeland. It considers the ways in which Yemenis in the diaspora are forming and reforming social movements, with particular reference to their use of collective action frames for mobilisation. It also explains where and how Yemeni diaspora actors fit into the networks of patronage driving Yemen's political marketplace, considering factors such as the price of loyalty and processes of supply and demand that shape trajectories of violence on the ground. Moreover, it considers the role diasporas play in integrating Yemen's marketplace in the international system. Based on the conclusions drawn, it alludes to the ways in which diasporas can both perpetuate and push back against political marketplace dynamics in their homelands – a phenomenon that will be analysed more deeply and critically in Chapter 7.

Findings I: Identifying the Digital Diaspora

The dataset identified in the previous chapter consisted of 55 actors, including a combination of those which can be considered 'diaspora actors' or actors with 'diasporic elements/dimensions' (as in Chapter 4). Of these, 30 refer specifically to the Yemeni 'diaspora' in their online profiles and/or content, either as a key target audience or beneficiary, or as a thematic area on which they work. Therefore, for the purposes of this research, these can be considered 'diaspora actors'. Eleven of these are listed under the actor type 'online community', with the thematic area 'diaspora', and use Facebook groups as their primary platform.

The remaining 25 actors can be considered for the purposes of this research to exemplify 'diasporic elements/dimensions', though they are not necessarily 'diaspora actors' as their focus on the diaspora is not as explicit or exclusive. These actors implicitly target Yemenis in the diaspora, are registered and/or managed in countries outside of Yemen and/or have key personnel located primarily outside Yemen, though they may not state these links to the diaspora directly. In reality, there are likely many more actors outside of the dataset that would also be considered to have 'diasporic elements/dimensions'. This is because many other actors exist that do not specifically refer to the diaspora, migration, or key diaspora communities in their online profiles or content and were therefore not captured by the researcher's keyword searches.

Of the actors documented in the dataset, there were 26 charities or nonprofits, 12 online communities, 6 associations, 5 campaigns/initiatives, 4 media outlets and 2 foundations. 18 of these appear to operate exclusively in the online space, while the remaining 37 actors appear to engage in a combination of online, offline and hybrid activities. The breakdown of actors working on the identified thematic areas and activities is shown in Table 2 below, in order to indicate the most and least common areas and mechanisms of mobilisation:

Thematic Area(s)	Number of Actors	Nature of Activities	Number of Actors
Arts & Culture	12	Events	3
Education	7	Research	5
Health	3	Humanitarian Interventions	7
Politics	9	Fundraising	3
Justice & Human Rights	4	Awareness Raising	8
Humanitarian	8	Lobbying	3
Diaspora	18	Advocacy	8
Media	4	Programs	15
Mediation & Reconciliation	3	Community discussion	12
Refugee Rights	2		
Youth	3		
Women	4		

Table 2: Diaspora actors according to area and mechanisms of mobilisation.

Of the actors identified, 32 use Arabic as their primary language while 25 use English, and 3 use Arabic interchangeably with a second language (usually English). 34 actors directly target the diaspora through their content and/or activities (this is either explicitly stated in their platform descriptions, or visibly obvious through their online content), while 10 clearly appear to target the international community and 8 appear to target Yemenis in Yemen. The primary platforms used by the actors (in descending order starting with the platform used by the highest number of actors) are Facebook (primary platform for 41 of the identified actors), Twitter (primary platform for 16 actors), Instagram (primary platform for 12), YouTube (2) and Clubhouse (1). Of the 55 actors identified, 47

are actively using their online platforms, while 8 are inactive.⁴⁴⁹ Further information about their online activity and audience is listed in Table 3 below:

Frequency of Online Engagement (monthly)	Number of Actors	Primary Kind of Content Shared	Number of Actors	Audience across Identified Platforms	Number of Actors
Less than 5 posts	27	Original	42	0-1,000	7
5-10 posts	4	Reposted	1	1,001-10,000	26
11-20 posts	9	Both	3	10,001-50,000	20
21-30 posts	5	Community Discussion	9	50,001-100,000	0
More than 30 posts	10			100,000+	2

Table 3: Online activity of diaspora actors.

During the data collection process, the researcher sought to note any clear donor, partner, or affiliate relationships between the diaspora/diasporic actors identified in the dataset on the one hand, and other actors or organisations that might be relevant to this research on the other. For example, some actors had direct links with one or more other actors in the dataset, while others had clear relationships with local councils, government institutions, community organisations, or academic institutions in the host state. Some were clearly affiliated with or supported by the Yemeni Embassy in their host countries, while others had obvious partnerships with civil society organisations working on the ground in Yemen. A small number appeared to be working with the UN and/or other international NGOs, while some had clear relationships with think tanks

⁴⁴⁹ Defined by the researcher as having published content on their primary platform(s) in the last year since their inclusion in the dataset.

and media outlets. Finally, it is worth mentioning that a small number of the actors identified had demonstrable links with other non-Yemeni diaspora actors in their host country or overseas, including organisations representing/targeting Palestinian, Afghan, Sudanese and general/other Arab diaspora communities.

The subsequent section of this chapter explores in more detail the different ways in which diaspora and diasporic actors use their online presence and platforms to support an array of mobilisation activities in response to the conflict in Yemen. It draws heavily on supporting evidence from the interviews with members of the diaspora – many of whom are directly engaged with one or more of the actors identified above. This sheds light on the complex ways in which the internet and social media are contributing to the continuous evolution of the factors, interests and opportunity structures that shape the diaspora mobilisation landscape in the case of Yemen. This, in turn, enables analysis of the impact and influence of diasporas in the political marketplaces of their homeland – a phenomenon that will be explored in even greater detail in Chapter 7.

Findings II: The Internet, Social Media and Diaspora Mobilisation in Yemen's Conflict

Chapter 2 of this thesis highlighted a number of the activities traditionally associated with diasporas in relation to the escalation, management and settlement of conflict in their homelands, such as economic remittances, philanthropy, human capital and political activities, which include advocacy and

participation in peace processes.⁴⁵⁰ This chapter investigates the role of the internet and social media in the process of mobilisation, in relation to why and how diasporas mobilise. In parts, it also considers how these technologies might determine the impact of mobilisation activities, where there is sufficient evidence to do so and where this allows for relevant conclusions to be drawn about the position of diasporas in Yemen's political marketplace. For example, it provides empirical examples of how the Yemeni diaspora have both perpetuated and pushed back against the onset of Yemen's political marketplace, with profound implications for the marketplace on the ground. Chapter 7 elaborates further on this by analysing the role of diasporas in the marketplaces of their homeland in greater theoretical depth.

The following mobilisation activities are considered: narrative formation, lobbying and advocacy, public debate and information sharing, cultural production, human rights, humanitarian efforts, peacebuilding, and economic remittances. The primary online platforms being used by the diaspora for each of these activities are highlighted and discussed, considering how they are being employed, by whom, for what purpose, and the potential implications – both for conflict dynamics on the ground (although measuring impact and influence on the conflict is beyond the scope of this research) and for the ways in which we understand the concepts of diaspora and mobilisation. This is framed in terms of De Waal's Political Marketplace Theory – considering concepts such as market

⁴⁵⁰ Brinkerhoff, 'Diasporas and conflict societies', 119.

conditions, political finance, patronage and the price of loyalty, as well as political circuitry, vertical/horizontal communities, and the public sphere.

Social Movements and Narrative Formation in Yemen's Political Marketplace

One of the most overt ways that the Yemeni diaspora mobilises in and shapes the dynamics of Yemen's conflict and political marketplace is through the formation of narratives – an activity to which the internet and social media have become central – and the application of these narratives for lobbying key stakeholders and inspiring collective action. In terms of the political marketplace, such activities are significant at the levels of both political circuitry – the processes through which political business is transacted – and the public sphere, in which public debate is conducted.⁴⁵¹

It is useful here to explore elements of social movement theory, which centralises framing processes, resource mobilisation, and political opportunity processes. Social movement theorists such as David Snow and Robert Benford employ the verb 'framing' to describe the active, dynamic and evolving processes of meaning-making and reality construction that are fundamental to social movements.⁴⁵² These processes result in collective action frames, which are defined in the literature as 'action-oriented sets of beliefs and meanings that inspire and legitimate the activities and campaigns of a social movement

⁴⁵¹ De Waal, *The Real Politics of the Horn of Africa*, 196.

⁴⁵² Robert Benford and David Snow, 'Framing Processes and Social Movements: An Overview and Assessment', *Annual Review of Sociology*, 26 (2000).

organization'.⁴⁵³ According to these scholars, 'collective action frames are constructed in part as movement adherents negotiate a shared understanding of some problematic condition or situation they define as in need of change, make attributions regarding who or what is to blame, articulate an alternative set of arrangements, and urge others to act in concert to affect change'.⁴⁵⁴

The following categorisations by social movement theorists are helpful for understanding the variety of frames employed by the Yemeni diaspora to make sense of the conflict: injustice frames, through which 'movements identify the victims' of a given injustice and amplify their victimization'; boundary framing & adversarial framing, which employ 'related attributional processes that seek to delineate the boundaries between 'good' and 'evil' and construct movement protagonists and antagonists'; prognostic framing, which refers to 'the articulation of a proposed solution to the problem, or at least a plan of attack, and the strategies for carrying out the plan.'; and finally, motivational framing, which 'provides a 'call to arms' or rationale for engaging in ameliorative collective action, including the construction of appropriate vocabularies of motive'.⁴⁵⁵ Importantly, the literature on collective action frames emphasises that the process of framing is dynamic and ongoing, and does not occur in a vacuum but

⁴⁵³ Ibid., 614.

⁴⁵⁴ Ibid., 615.

⁴⁵⁵ Ibid., 615-617.

rather is informed by key factors such as political opportunity structures, cultural opportunities and constraints, and the targeted audiences.⁴⁵⁶

Yemenis in the diaspora employ a number of online tools for the formation and dissemination of collective action frames, with different platforms playing specific roles in the framing process. Instant messaging apps such as WhatsApp and Signal, for example, have become important tools for Yemenis engaged in activities such as lobbying and advocacy to share their work – for example written articles, interviews or campaigns articulating or promoting a particular frame – with their personal and professional networks, and to rally support for their narratives, particularly among other Yemenis in the diaspora and the homeland.⁴⁵⁷ Email is also key for communicating narratives and frames with government officials and policymakers within host states and INGOs, who have the power to shape market dynamics.⁴⁵⁸

Twitter, meanwhile, has become a crucial platform for raising awareness and support for particular frames among the – particularly English-speaking – international community, which includes policymakers and the global media. One interviewee, who is based in the US and actively engaged in lobbying and advocacy work, described Twitter as a tool she uses for ‘really aggressively

⁴⁵⁶ Ibid., 628.

⁴⁵⁷ SK3, interview with the author, 24 April 2023, via Zoom.

⁴⁵⁸ ID5, interview with the author, 19 May 2023, via Zoom; LE0, interview with the author, 21 May 2023, via Zoom.

political stuff, conflict stuff'.⁴⁵⁹ Another interviewee, who actively lobbies for the secession and independence of South Yemen, echoed this assertion, saying 'I use Twitter as a very, very powerful tool to get my message out about what's happening in South Yemen'.⁴⁶⁰ These are clear examples of the use of Twitter for the dissemination of both boundary framing and prognostic framing, as defined above. A third interviewee stated that he uses Twitter 'to hold people accountable, especially MPs or other actors' while lobbying for policy change in the UK on issues such as the sale of arms to Saudi Arabia, thus exemplifying the use of the platform in adversarial framing and motivational framing.⁴⁶¹

A fourth interviewee, when discussing the use of Twitter for her advocacy work, highlighted the importance of language in the process of framing as something that varies according to the target audience, and which shapes the very nature and articulation of the frame itself. According to the interviewee, many Yemenis engaged in advocacy write tweets in English, even when this is not their first language, because it allows them to reach a wider audience on the platform. She elaborated that, when tweeting in Arabic, Yemenis promoting certain narratives and frames – particularly adversarial frames where blame is being assigned to a particular party or side, as well as prognostic frames where they are attempting to rally support for a particular (usually military) solution – tend to use more aggressive and provocative language than they would when tweeting in English,

⁴⁵⁹ BG7, interview with the author, 28 March 2023, via Zoom.

⁴⁶⁰ XC1, interview with the author, 1 April 2023, via Zoom.

⁴⁶¹ LE0, interview with the author, 21 May 2023, via Zoom.

in an attempt to appeal to the emotions of other Yemenis and Arabic speakers and to rally support for their narrative. By tempering their language in English, on the other hand, they attempt to situate their frame appropriately within the language and frameworks of international policy and political analysis.⁴⁶²

These framing processes are evident in the online activity of the diaspora and diasporic actors identified in the researcher's dataset. The Peace Track Initiative (PTI), for example, is a non-profit based in Canada that was co-founded by South Yemeni Gender, Peace and Security expert, Rasha Jarhum. The initiative 'aims at localizing and feminizing the peace process through promoting inclusion and enhancing feminist knowledge leadership in the Middle East and North Africa with a focus on Yemen'.⁴⁶³ According to the organisation's website, PTI was founded by Yemeni women in Yemen and in the diaspora, and the team are located around the world in countries including Canada, the UK, France, Germany, Switzerland, Sweden, Lebanon, Jordan, and Yemen.⁴⁶⁴ PTI is an interesting case study of a diaspora actor that employs prognostic framing in the way that it situates its work on Yemen, primarily its 'Feminist Peace Roadmap', within the context of internationally recognised feminist narratives and frameworks for understanding conflict and peacebuilding such as the UN

⁴⁶² WJ3, interview with the author, 21 May 2023, via Zoom.

⁴⁶³ Peace Track Initiative, 'Homepage', [online], accessed 5 July 2023, <https://peacetrackinitiative.org/>.

⁴⁶⁴ Peace Track Initiative, 'Meet Our Team', [online], accessed 5 July 2023, <https://peacetrackinitiative.org/our-team/>.

Women, Peace and Security agenda.⁴⁶⁵ For example, on 6 June 2022, PTI tweeted a picture of its team with UN Special Envoy to Yemen, Hans Grundberg, with the following caption:

Today PTI had a meeting with @OSE_Yemen that focused on the efforts of ensuring the inclusivity of the peace process in #Yemen. The Feminist Peace Roadmap content and impact were presented, in the hopes to achieve a sustainable and comprehensive peace. #FeministPeaceYE.⁴⁶⁶

This is a clear example of how Twitter can be used by diaspora actors as a central tool to framing processes that can help diaspora actors achieve their goals: On the one hand, by highlighting its cooperation with the UN Special Envoy, PTI is benefiting from the international legitimacy of the UN and UN-led efforts to achieve peace in Yemen. Moreover, the Tweet serves to situate PTI's flagship project, the Feminist Peace Roadmap, within the broader context of international frameworks for inclusive conflict transformation.

Another example of this is the Yemeni Liberation Movement, an online campaign 'educating & mobilizing for an end to the Yemen war'. The US-based campaign uses Twitter as a primary platform, however it also has a significant presence on Instagram, which could be because it is trying to target a younger audience

⁴⁶⁵ Peace Track Initiative, *Feminist Peace Roadmap: A Guiding Framework for Mediators and Negotiators*, accessed 17 July 2023, <https://peacetrackinitiative.org/feminist-peace-roadmap/>.

⁴⁶⁶ Peace Track Initiative, @Peace_Track, 'Today PTI had a meeting with ...', *Twitter*, 6 June 2023, accessed 15 July 2023, https://twitter.com/Peace_Track/status/1533794826944143362.

(interviewees signalled that Instagram is a more appropriate platform than others for reaching the youth).⁴⁶⁷ The campaign uses a number of different categories of frames, including injustice and adversarial framing (whereby they rally against western countries selling arms to Saudi Arabia, blaming them directly for fuelling the war and the humanitarian crisis),⁴⁶⁸ as well as boundary framing (advocating for the use of terms such as ‘blockade’ and ‘famine’ in order to call out war crimes in Yemen),⁴⁶⁹ and motivational framing to inspire collective action, calling on their audience to lobby their representatives in Congress to stop the war.⁴⁷⁰

But what is most interesting in this case is the way the movement uses social media to frame its activities within the broader context of the struggle for social justice in the US and around the world, showing support for other narratives such as the Black Lives Matter and Free Palestine movements. For example, the campaign has gone as far as to embed the hashtag #SaveSheikhJarrar within its name on Twitter, referencing the East Jerusalem neighbourhood where Palestinians’ homes are being occupied by Israeli settlers. On Instagram

⁴⁶⁷ HS9, interview with the author, 29 May 2023, via Zoom.

⁴⁶⁸ Yemeni Liberation Movement, @LiberateYemen, ‘We’ll be having a teach-in with for our Dearborn/Detroit community to learn about what is currently happening in Yemen as well as ask questions’, *Twitter*, 31 January 2022, accessed 17 July 2021, <https://twitter.com/LiberateYemen/status/1488168633884975110?s=20>.

⁴⁶⁹ Yemeni Liberation Movement, @LiberateYemen, ‘CALL TO ACTION US Special Envoy to Yemen Tim Lenderking came into town 8/17. Here’s what happened: #YemenCantWait #EndtheBlockade’, *Twitter*, 2 September 2021, accessed 17 July 2023, <https://twitter.com/LiberateYemen/status/1433450600394489861?s=20>.

⁴⁷⁰ Yemeni Liberation Movement, @LiberateYemen, ‘Today is a big day guys. The House will vote on the National Defense Authorization Act, and Yemen is on the agenda: #NDAA #YemenCantWait’, *Twitter*, 23 September 2021, accessed 17 July 2023, <https://twitter.com/LiberateYemen/status/1441091143727386635>.

meanwhile, on 21 February 2023, the campaign shared a picture of Malcolm X, commemorating the date of his assassination with the following caption:

On this day of his assassination (Feb 21, 1965), We remember Malcolm X as an international revolutionary. He imprinted on us the knowledge of our connected struggles to forge a collective liberation outside the western thought of isms: colonialism, racism, US imperialism. From Yemen to Palestine to Haiti to Detroit. Malcolm Eternal!⁴⁷¹

By situating their Yemen campaign within the broader context of the struggles against racism and imperialism, Yemeni Liberation Movement benefits from the legitimacy of these intersectional movements, as well as the potential to reach a wider audience that may not be directly focused on Yemen, but who might support their cause. One interviewee added nuance to this, sharing that it is not uncommon for different diasporas in the US to support one another's causes and campaigns, attending protests for other movements and sharing each other's content online. However, she argued that this is usually the extent of the cooperation, and that a broader, cross-movement or even cross-diaspora struggle for justice and peace has not emerged as many are too busy and fatigued by their own efforts to advocate in more substantial ways for other movements.

I think a lot of Arab diaspora who are politically involved are so exhausted and already so focused on their own issues. Like we support Palestine, I'll make the post about Palestine. I'll show up to a protest.

⁴⁷¹ Yemeni Liberation Movement, @yemeniliberationmovement, 'On this day...', *Instagram*, 21 February 2023, accessed 17 July 2023, <https://www.instagram.com/p/Co8PuTkv5zb/>.

But can I actually, realistically also mobilise for Palestine? No, and I know vice versa. I know the Palestinian will show up to my protest, will like my post. But can they realistically also meet with their politicians? We all have too much on our plate already.⁴⁷²

That is not to say that the use of framing by diaspora actors cannot fundamentally alter marketplace conditions and conflict dynamics on the ground in Yemen – on the contrary, the ways in which Yemenis overseas frame issues in the homeland can have very real implications for Yemenis suffering the day-to-day consequences of war, with social media often playing a central role. One interviewee described social media as a ‘driving force behind actions that shape policies and interventions in Yemen’ and ‘the birthplace of narratives’. She referenced the framing of the humanitarian situation in Yemen as a ‘famine’ on social media by advocacy groups in the US, arguing that this led the US government to pressure Saudi Arabia and the UAE to suspend a planned operation by the Yemeni government to retake the seaport of Hodeidah from the Houthis. This policy shift, she argues, allowed the Houthis to regroup and take over the majority of the north of Yemen, shaping the entire course of the war with disastrous implications for Yemeni civilians.⁴⁷³

This position was reflected by a second interviewee, who argued that the Yemeni community in the US ‘sugar-coated anything to do with the Houthis’. She

⁴⁷² WJ3, interview with the author, 21 May 2023, via Zoom.

⁴⁷³ BG7, interview with the author, 28 March 2023, via Zoom.

described the community as 'a very misleading community', which raises an important point, Although they may have influence in their host countries and even online, the narratives and frames formed and disseminated in the diaspora are not necessarily always representative of 1) the realities on the ground in Yemen, and 2) the views of the majority of Yemenis - whether in Yemen or in the diaspora. This echoes one of the key concepts identified in the diaspora studies literature outlined in Chapter 2: namely, the contention that diasporas can sometimes be 'out of touch' with issues in the homeland, often prioritising more abstract issues over issues of day-to-day survival.

While such arguments were undoubtedly convincing and widely accepted in the past, the role of the internet and social media and the ways in which they are changing the dynamics of interaction between Yemenis in Yemen and Yemenis outside mean that the reality today is likely less clear-cut. In the past, diasporas were seen as detached from the homeland, with limited insight into the daily realities of those suffering the immediate, physical consequences of war. They also had unique access to resources and centres of power simply as a result of their geographical location. Today however, Yemenis in the diaspora are able to see first-hand through online content and video communication how the conflict is affecting the lives of their loved ones and communities in the homeland, which might lead one to assume they are forming more nuanced views and political positions. Moreover, the factors and opportunity structures that give certain

voices and narratives the potential to influence policy in the host state are much more complicated in the age of social media.

The use of more aggressive language by some Yemenis in the diaspora, as mentioned above, highlights the potential of the internet and social media to mislead audiences and misrepresent events in Yemen. But this is not the only way in which online narratives and frames can obscure realities on the ground or misrepresent the views of the diaspora. Algorithms on social media can play key roles in this process, amplifying certain voices over others based on factors dictated by the platforms themselves. This taps into broader debates that have become mainstream in western societies in recent years regarding the role of social media in political polarisation. Such debates centre around the idea of ideological homophily, which refers to the ways in which humans tend to associate with others similar to themselves in their political ideologies. This, coupled with algorithms that display content to individual based on what they are likely to engage with, creates echo chambers of individuals online who share similar views, thus deepening political divides and perpetuating identity-based politics.⁴⁷⁴

⁴⁷⁴ Andrei Boutillne and Rob Willer, 'The Social Structure of Political Echo Chambers: Variation in Ideological Homophily in Online Networks', *Political Psychology*, 38 no. 3 (2017): 551; Emilie Robichaud, 'How Social Media Algorithms Drive Political Polarization', *Medium* [online], 9 October 2020, accessed 13 September 2024, <https://medium.com/swlh/how-persuasive-algorithms-drive-political-polarization-75819854c11d>.

While a comprehensive examination of the polarising effects of social media on the Yemeni diaspora is beyond the scope of this research, it is useful to mention this phenomenon insofar as it affects the opportunity structures shaping how diasporas mobilise online. Knowledge of these platforms and how they work, as well as the resources required to leverage them, can therefore have an important impact on the ability of diaspora actors to use these tools effectively to disseminate and rally support for particular narratives and frames.

According to some of the interviewees, certain political actors are leveraging this extremely successfully, employing social media where they might once have relied on traditional media like television channels – if they had access to such platforms at all. While some social media content is overtly political, framing can also be subtle, referencing factors such as history and cultural heritage in order to situate a political frame within a context that might increase its resonance and legitimacy.

An example mentioned by one interviewee is the way in which some Houthi representatives and supporters in the diaspora are using social media to link the Houthi movement with the historical Kingdom of Mutawakkiliya of their ancestors, which existed in what is now North Yemen between 1919 and 1962. According to the participant, Houthi supporters located in the diaspora in countries like the UK are sharing content glorifying the history and culture of the Kingdom of Mutawakkiliya in an attempt to legitimise and advocate for the

continued influence of their descendants in Yemen - i.e. the Houthis. The interviewee stated that, although the Mutawakillite family represents a small minority of Yemenis in the diaspora and the approach is somewhat niche, their adeptness at using social media platforms for narrative formation and framing means that their influence online in propagating pro-Houthi narratives is growing.⁴⁷⁵

Another group that, according to one interviewee, is successfully leveraging social media to disseminate its narratives is the Islah party, which was established in 1990 representing an alliance at the time between the Muslim Brotherhood and religiously conservative Yemeni tribal sheikhs⁴⁷⁶. According to the interviewee, 'the Islah party has the best propaganda machine on social media', having built a presence across a large number of social media channels and platforms, at times very subtly so that the affiliation to the party is not overt or clear. She argues that this has allowed Islah to spread certain political opinions and ideas without their audience necessarily realising.⁴⁷⁷

Factors like access to finance can play a key role in providing diaspora actors with the ability to master the use of platforms like Twitter to achieve their goals and exert influence. For example, the well-funded Tawakkol Karman Foundation and its large media arm, whose work is predominantly conducted out of Turkey,

⁴⁷⁵ HS9, interview with the author, 29 May 2023, via Zoom.

⁴⁷⁶ Laurent Bonnefoy, 'Sunni Islamist dynamics in context of war: What happened to al-Islah and the Salafis?'. *Politics, Governance, and Reconstructions in Yemen* 29 (2018): 23.

⁴⁷⁷ PA9, interview with the author, 15 April 2023, via Zoom.

was also mentioned by multiple participants as contributing disproportionately to narratives and frames due to its large online presence and mastery of social media platforms. According to one interviewee – a political analyst researching and writing about the conflict – the foundation uses its various platforms and channels to ‘influence’ the Yemeni people, leveraging the soft power of film, music and other forms of cultural production, which it disseminates to its online audience.⁴⁷⁸

The internet and social media have thus become a new arena in the battle for narratives among stakeholders to the war in Yemen, with competing narratives fighting with one another for resonance and attention online. As these technologies are not limited to any particular geographical space, diaspora actors around the world are playing increasingly important roles in these processes – according to opportunity structures and other motivating factors. Unfortunately, a number of interviewees suggest, non-politically aligned voices using their online platforms to promote peace often lose out to the narratives of those with the resources and know-how to master the use of social media platforms and their algorithms – for example governments or parties to the conflict.⁴⁷⁹ This suggests that those diaspora actors who are seeking to perpetuate marketplace dynamics in Yemen by continuing the conflict are having disproportionate influence with regard to framing and narrative formation than those who are

⁴⁷⁸ Ibid.

⁴⁷⁹ PO8, interview with the author, 17 April 2023; WJ3, interview with the author, 21 May 2023, via Zoom.

pushing back against Yemen's political marketplace by calling for non-violence and peace. It also clearly shows that the formation and propagation of narratives online – while deterritorialised and thereby democratised to an extent – remains subject to factors shaping power dynamics such as political finance and patronage.

One interviewee based in the US explained how this phenomenon is particularly prominent in the western Think Tank world, often obscuring the real views and opinions of Yemenis – whether in Yemen or in the diaspora – about the conflict and Yemen's political future. According to the participant, the number of Yemenis working in this space and using their online platforms to support lobbying and advocacy activities is relatively small and limited to a 'small subset of a large community'.⁴⁸⁰ Yet, she argues, the influence some of these actors wield online – particularly those who are calling for a continuation of the war or promoting the narratives of a particular party to the conflict – is disproportionate and can obscure the needs, interests and beliefs of the majority of Yemenis in the diaspora, who do not always agree with their positions.⁴⁸¹

This is obscured further by the fact that it is at times difficult to distinguish between individuals and the organisations they are affiliated with or funded by. For example, an organisation or think tank sponsored by a particular party to the

⁴⁸⁰ WJ3, interview with the author, 21 May 2023, via Zoom.

⁴⁸¹ Ibid.

conflict might be employing – officially or unofficially, overtly or otherwise – individuals in the diaspora to lobby on their behalf, promoting particular narratives of the conflict using their personal platforms online. Where this occurs, the opportunity structures and transactional politics behind it are often unclear, and the narratives and frames disseminated as a result can therefore be misleading or disproportionately influential. While some organisations disclose their sources of funding publicly, when it comes to individuals in the diaspora this is often harder to gauge. One might look at the institutions they are affiliated with and their donors to draw certain conclusions. For example, an ‘activist’ or lobbyist that is publicly affiliated with a think tank such as the Washington DC based think tank the Middle East Institute (MEI), whose largest donor is the Embassy of the United Arab Emirates might face limitations if engaging with or promoting anti-UAE narratives online.⁴⁸² However, unless these links and funding flows are publicly documented or acknowledged, it can be difficult to ascertain the extent to which individuals really believe in the narratives they are known for disseminating, as opposed to adhering to the narratives and frames of their funders.

This phenomenon was discussed at length by one interviewee, who claimed that a number of the prominent diaspora individuals – and, by extension, their

⁴⁸² The Embassy of the UAE donated \$2.3m USD to the Middle East Institute in 2022. The second largest donor was the Embassy of the State of Qatar, which donated \$375,000. See Middle East Institute, ‘2022 Contributors’, 18 April 2022, accessed 9 September 2023, <https://www.mei.edu/sites/default/files/2023-04/2022%20Contributors%20ammended%204-18.pdf>.

affiliate organisations – are directly receiving political finance from parties to the conflict through incentives such as salaries and scholarships. This, she contends, prevents them from engaging in pro-peace narratives or criticising these parties online, and often leads them to directly support the parties through the narratives they propagate online, thus perpetuating the conflict and political marketplace dynamics in Yemen. According to the interviewee, this is often not out of a desire to promote conflict in Yemen, rather out of desperation or the need for security – financial or otherwise. She mentioned that the ‘activists’ who are aligned with and financed by parties to the conflict such as Saudi Arabia and the UAE often come from families that face stigma or financial struggle in Yemen, or have themselves been ostracised or ‘burned’ by the Yemeni community, thus causing them to look for security and legitimacy elsewhere. Paradoxically though, by aligning themselves in such a way, they often end up being dependent on the patronage of their donors and further ostracised from Yemenis who want peace. In some cases, according to the interviewee, this results in them being unable to return to Yemen – thus, she argues, distancing them further from events on the ground and causing their work on Yemen to lack legitimacy.⁴⁸³ Other interviewees echoed this, emphasising the need to observe the sources of funding and salaries of Yemeni analysts and commentators projecting particular narratives on social media.⁴⁸⁴

⁴⁸³ WJ3, interview with the author, 21 May 2023, via Zoom.

⁴⁸⁴ PO8, Interview with the author, 17 April 2023, via Zoom.

The above examples highlight the ways in which social media and the internet are transforming the role diasporas are able to play in homeland conflict in terms of collective action framing and narrative formation. These technologies, while on the one hand creating space for new actors to engage in collective action framing and narrative formation processes, have also become the new arena for the battle of narratives – which is often heavily influenced by factors and opportunity structures such as political finance and transactional politics. The examples above highlight how problematic it can be when certain frames and narratives are amplified over, or become more resonant than others, firstly because of their very real potential to shape market dynamics on the ground in Yemen both positively and negatively, and secondly because they can be misleading and are often not as representative of Yemeni voices as they may appear.

The empirical evidence presented above also highlights the multitude of ways in which Yemenis in the diaspora can be engaged in Yemen's political marketplace. At the level of political circuitry, diaspora Yemenis are embedded in networks of patronage through personal transactions in which their political loyalties and services are sold to patrons and financiers, with real implications for market dynamics in Yemen. Meanwhile, at the level of the public sphere, Yemenis in the diaspora have been shown to play a key role in the politics of identity and the formation of narratives that drive politics, conflict and marketplace dynamics on the ground. Finally, it has explored to some extent the complex interplay between

social movements on the one hand, and political marketplaces on the other, presenting clearly the ways in which social mobilisation in the diaspora can influence homeland marketplaces and the patronage networks that sustain them.

‘Digital Majlises’ and The Broadening of the Public Sphere

One of the most obvious, and perhaps most pervasive ways that the internet and social media are being used by diaspora actors is as a means of instant, day-to-day communication, which is facilitating information sharing, reshaping community dynamics, and creating new spaces for discussion and debate that previously did not exist. This is occurring locally and transnationally, between diaspora actors themselves at one level, between Yemenis in the diaspora and Yemenis in Yemen on another, and also between Yemenis in the diaspora and other relevant stakeholders such as host governments, policymakers, the media, and the wider international community.

Day to day, Yemenis in the diaspora and in the homeland are in closer and more frequent contact than ever before thanks to instant messaging platforms and apps such as WhatsApp. Every Yemeni interviewed by the researcher mentioned WhatsApp specifically as one of the principal ways they stay in touch with their families, communities and colleagues back in Yemen, with multiple participants saying that checking their WhatsApp is the first thing they do when they wake up in the morning to ensure their family members in Yemen are safe.⁴⁸⁵ They use

⁴⁸⁵ ID5, interview with the author, 19 May 2023, via Zoom.

the mobile app to share news, photos and voice notes in a continuous and dynamic stream of communication – often via groups of multiple Yemenis based both in Yemen and in the diaspora. Voice notes are particularly widely used to communicate with Yemenis inside the homeland, given the high rates of illiteracy that make them accessible to many who would not be able to communicate easily in written form.⁴⁸⁶ WhatsApp is not the only platform used for this purpose: many Yemenis also use similar apps such as Signal, which is perceived to provide higher levels of digital security,⁴⁸⁷ as well as Imo, which many have found to work better inside Yemen than other apps, leading to the adoption of the tool across the diaspora as well.⁴⁸⁸ Facebook is also extremely popular with Yemenis both inside and outside Yemen and has become a key platform for information sharing.⁴⁸⁹

While these tools allow Yemenis in the diaspora to stay up to date with events on the ground, this also works the other way around, as diaspora actors are sometimes able to share critical information with Yemenis in Yemen that they might not otherwise have access to. According to one interviewee based in Sweden, when the war broke out in Yemen in 2015, it was she who informed her direct family members on the ground in Yemen of what was happening. While an electricity blackout in Yemen had cut off the radio and television overnight,

⁴⁸⁶ DF1, interview with the author, 4 April 2023, via Zoom.

⁴⁸⁷ CY4, interview with the author, 24 March 2023, via Zoom.

⁴⁸⁸ PA9, interview with the author, 15 April 2023, via Zoom.

⁴⁸⁹ BG7, interview with the author, 28 March 2023, via Zoom.

she had been following the media coverage of the Saudi bombing of Sana'a and was therefore able to update her family on the ground via instant messaging and voice calls⁴⁹⁰. Instances such as these provide Yemenis on the ground facing the direct effects of the conflict with essential contextual information that can guide their decision making with potentially life-saving consequences.

In the context of homeland conflict, diasporas have long been credited for their role in the bi-directional transfer of information from the ground to the outside world, and vice versa. The proliferation of the internet and social media, as exemplified in the cases above, have key implications for the role of diasporas in this regard. On the one hand, the increase in the frequency of contact, as well as the dynamic and three-dimensional nature of the communication that occurs via these tools, have increased the volume and the depth of the information diasporas are able to share. On the other hand, the fact that many are now communicating simultaneously with individuals and groups within Yemen and around the world suggests that a rethink of how we conceptualise the information sharing process is needed: rather than occurring bi-directionally, the process of information sharing is becoming increasingly dynamic, dispersed and open to new actors and influences.

One might argue that the increased capacity for communication with the homeland makes the role of diasporas as sources of critical and contextual

⁴⁹⁰ FL7, interview with the author, 10 April 2023, via Zoom.

information more important than ever, increasing their potential to shape the dynamics of the political marketplace in the homeland. On a basic level, they are able to share more nuanced and accurate information with both the outside world on the one hand, and with the affected communities in the homeland on the other. At the same time, through their use of these tools, diasporas now have more information than ever at their disposal to support and shape mobilisation efforts such as lobbying, advocacy, fundraising, humanitarian efforts and development programming.

However, these very same platforms are also serving to open up new spaces for discussion and information sharing on a broader public level, potentially lessening the importance of diaspora actors as gatekeepers to the homeland and affected communities on the ground. Platforms like Facebook and Twitter, for example, have created new arenas for public discussion and debate about the conflict in Yemen, or as De Waal might put it in political marketplace terminology, have broadened and reshaped the 'public sphere'. Facebook is particularly widely used by Yemenis, both in Yemen and in the diaspora. This has occurred to the extent that diaspora actors engaged in research and political analysis rely heavily on the platform as a barometer for monitoring public sentiment and rhetoric. For example, one interviewee based in Bahrain mentioned that she regularly observes the activity and discussions that occur within a school alumni group on Facebook consisting of women from a variety

of socioeconomic backgrounds and political affiliations, in order to analyse dynamics such as public sentiment towards the Houthis in Sana'a.⁴⁹¹

Perhaps the most transformative social media segment in this regard is that of drop-in audio platforms such as Clubhouse – a mobile app launched in 2020 that allows users to communicate in audio chat rooms that can accommodate groups of up to thousands of people – as well as the Twitter equivalent, 'Spaces'. These platforms have become popular with Yemenis around the world, who use them as spaces to discuss a wide range of issues from politics and society to culture and daily life. An example of this is the Yemen Discussion Board, a 'solution oriented discussion space on Clubhouse and Twitter Spaces' that hosts weekly discussions around topics such as development, science, technology, history, art, food & culture in Yemen⁴⁹². The platform is managed by a Yemeni located in Germany, who informed the researcher that it reaches a combination of Yemenis in Yemen and Yemenis in the diaspora, with the latter constituting the vast majority of guest speakers.

Such spaces have given Yemenis – both in Yemen and around the world – the opportunity to connect virtually in a way that is more personal and direct than through shorter, written form content such as Facebook posts, comments or Tweets.⁴⁹³ They have also opened up the space for public dialogue to new actors

⁴⁹¹ PA9, interview with the author, 15 April 2023, via Zoom.

⁴⁹² See Yemen Discussion Board, @YemenDB, *Twitter*, accessed 10 July 2023, <https://x.com/YemenDB>.

⁴⁹³ XC1, interview with the author, 1 April 2023, via Zoom.

who may not previously have had access to particular ‘rooms’, particularly on the ground in Yemen, where factors such as illiteracy or lack of access to Yemeni ‘gatekeepers’ overseas would previously have prevented their participation in such discussions.

One interviewee conceptualised why platforms like Clubhouse have become so prominent and popular among Yemenis using the analogy of the *majlis* – social gatherings popular in Yemen and other Arab countries where people (particularly men) come together in groups to discuss issues such as politics and society.

You know how Yemenis love to sit in the majlis - Arabs in general, they love to sit in a majlis – and just talk and shout at each other. One will shout something, another will shout something else, and you know, they'll argue and they'll cajole each other ... and that's what they love about Clubhouse, and Twitter Spaces.⁴⁹⁴

This also happens on an informal and not necessarily organised basis, with Yemenis creating Twitter Spaces and Clubhouse ‘rooms’ to connect with other likeminded individuals and have casual, free-flowing discussions. For one interviewee based in Germany, Clubhouse had initially represented a space where she could connect with other Yemenis in the diaspora with similar political, social and religious outlooks. For her it represented a ‘safe bubble’ – a non-judgmental space to connect intersectionally, bonding over traditional

⁴⁹⁴ Ibid.

Yemeni music one minute, and their views on atheism and the limitations of Islam the next. Unfortunately, this experience was short-lived, as more socially conservative voices began joining the rooms that she and her friends were using, intentionally shifting the direction of discussion and even attacking the participants.

In no time, organised groups take over and they ruin everything ... You join a room, and everybody's shouting at each other. Everybody is cursing at each other. They would join your room, they would attack the women at some points.⁴⁹⁵

According to the participant, at times the attacks would continue even after the discussion rooms had ended, culminating in other forms of online harassment and even stalking. Soon, however, the women retaliated, utilising the very platform where the harassment had occurred to expose and publicly shame the perpetrators. A group of Yemeni women who had experienced this harassment joined forces with Middle Eastern women from other countries such as Egypt and Lebanon to start a group on Clubhouse called the Women's Safety Net. The women shared their stories of harassment, often finding that their perpetrators were the same people, in what the interviewee described as a 'silent Me Too movement'. Simultaneously, they campaigned to Clubhouse for stricter regulations to protect women from harassment on the platform.⁴⁹⁶

⁴⁹⁵ VK5, interview with the author, 16 May 2023, via Zoom.

⁴⁹⁶ Ibid.

This case study is important because it highlights the intersectional nature of diaspora mobilisation – in this case, as what began as a space for like-minded Yemenis to connect transnationally over their culture became part of a broader, global movement for women’s rights. It also clearly demonstrates the dynamic and continuously evolving nature of social media platforms as spaces for discussion and debate. Furthermore, it alludes to the way in which these platforms can often swing, pendulum-style, from being positive and democratic spaces for freedom of expression and resistance, to arenas for oppression and persecution and back again, as new opportunities and mechanisms emerge for both. This phenomenon is explored in greater detail throughout the remainder of the chapter in relation to other mobilisation activities such as lobbying, advocacy and peacebuilding, considering how internet and social media create opportunities for diaspora actors to both push back against, and perpetuate the dynamics of Yemen’s political marketplace – sometimes simultaneously.

Notably, examining the case study of platforms like Clubhouse and Twitter Spaces has highlighted a key way in which the internet and social media are creating new opportunities - and challenges - for diasporas to engage with the political marketplace in Yemen at the level of the public sphere. By facilitating the creation of online, transnational public spaces for discussion, such platforms make participation in dialogue and narrative formation more accessible for Yemenis both in Yemen and around the world, with both positive and negative

effects on the dynamics of the marketplace in the homeland, as articulated in the examples presented above.

The Hybridisation of Cultural Production

The proliferation of the internet and social media has fundamentally altered processes of cultural production worldwide, both in terms of facilitating exposure to new cultural influences which shape the formation of cultural identity, and insofar as they create new outlets and mediums for creative content and cultural expression. For many in the Yemeni diaspora, creative expressions of Yemeni culture have become a means of exploring and expressing their intersectional identities, celebrating and preserving Yemeni cultural heritage, and healing from the traumas of war.⁴⁹⁷ For some, this process is also inherently political and can be seen as a form of everyday resistance against hegemony – for example, where the expression of a particular element of identity (such as regional or gender identities) runs counter to dominant narratives and representations of Yemen, Yemenis and the conflict.

Arts and culture, as evidenced in a 2021 report by CARPO, have become a powerful tool for Yemenis to promote and educate on the values of peace, equality and cultural diversity, as well as documenting life during war, telling untold stories and preserving collective memory. Art has also been used for advocating against violence and human rights violations, for supporting the

⁴⁹⁷ CY4, interview with the author, 24 March 2023, via Zoom.

psychosocial wellbeing of traumatised people, and for rebuilding relationships in communities torn apart by the war. However, arts and culture tools, mediums and projects have also deepened divisions between Yemeni artists and have even been instrumentalised to promote violence and sow further division.⁴⁹⁸.

A number of cultural projects have emerged over the years since the outbreak of war in Yemen, many of which have been organised and led from the diaspora, that seek to present alternative portrayals of Yemen and Yemeni culture to the prominent narratives of violent conflict depicted in the mainstream media. While such projects and platforms may not overtly declare themselves to be political, they play a key role in promoting Yemeni unity and coexistence, pushing back against political and societal divisions and humanising the conflict – thus also pushing back against the forces sustaining Yemen’s conflict and political marketplace.

The researcher’s dataset identified 12 actors working in the arts and culture space, all of which were either charities/non-profits or foundations. Of these, 10 are engaged in a combination of online and offline activities, while 2 appear to operate exclusively online. Some of the actors are clearly based internationally (in the US, UK, France, Sweden and Turkey) and 2 were based out of Yemen, while the primary locations of the remaining 3 were unclear. The key personnel

⁴⁹⁸ Yazeed Al-Jeddawy, Maged Al-Kholidy and Kate Nevens, “*Broken People Can’t Heal a Nation*”: *The Role of Arts in Peacebuilding in Yemen* (Bonn: CARPO - Center for Applied Research in Partnership with the Orient, 2021), 4.

of all but one (including the organisation based in Yemen) appear to be located in the diaspora, in a variety of countries across the UK, Europe and the Middle East. These findings allude to the highly transnational – and arguably deterritorialised – nature of arts and culture initiatives in the Yemeni diaspora, raising questions about whether the proliferation of the online platforms they use are in fact blurring cultural lines between Yemenis in the diaspora and Yemenis in Yemen. The interviews conducted with Yemenis in the diaspora working in the arts and culture space shed further light on these questions, adding nuance to help explain how these platforms function online and offline, how they engage Yemenis across traditional borders and boundaries, and what this means for how we understand the role of diasporas in the twenty-first century conflict environment.

Interview participants working in this space shared that WhatsApp groups are an important tool for staying in touch with other Yemeni creatives who are based in Yemen and around the world. These groups facilitate network building and represent a space for creatives to share information about events, grants, festivals and opportunities for collaborative work.⁴⁹⁹ Instagram is also an important platform for Yemenis involved in arts and culture work because, according to interviewees, the algorithm is more receptive towards visual and creative content, and the platform is widely used by Yemeni youth and Yemenis in the diaspora. Twitter is also used, although to a lesser extent, depending on the target

⁴⁹⁹ VK5, interview with the author, 16 May 2023, via Zoom.

audience and the purpose of the content – for example, in the case of more overtly political content targeting the international community.⁵⁰⁰

An example of this in action is Yemen Used To Be, a youth-led online platform for research-based interactive content created by Yemeni culture enthusiasts and led by filmmaker Ahmed al-Hagri, who originates from Hadhramaut and Sana'a but now resides between Egypt and Oman. By centring storytelling and accountability, Yemen Used To Be aims to 'recognise and acknowledge Yemen as part of the human narrative' and 'connect the missing dots of Yemeni art and culture'.⁵⁰¹ Their projects have focused on showcasing the diversity of Yemen's culture and traditions, as well as preserving visual testimonies of recent Yemeni history. The primary language of their online content is English and they use a variety of social media platforms to communicate their work, including Instagram, Facebook and Twitter. This allows them to reach an international audience, including Yemenis in the diaspora and other key stakeholders such as policymakers and the international media (their work has been featured by a number of prominent international outlets).

Yemenis all over the world are using a variety of online tools to collaborate and co-create to produce artistic and creative work across borders, sometimes with a combination of target audiences in mind. These connections and creative

⁵⁰⁰ HS9, interview with the author, 29 May 2023, via Zoom.

⁵⁰¹ Yemen Used To Be, 'About', accessed 11 July 2023, <https://yemenusedtobe.org/about/>.

processes are often developed through a combination of online and offline interactions. Sometimes this occurs between Yemenis who knew one another while living in Yemen, who continue their relationships virtually after moving abroad and go on to collaborate on arts and culture initiatives. In other instances, Yemenis connect online through their shared interest or work in arts and culture and may go on to meet in person at events or activities occurring in the diaspora. Yemenis (inside and outside Yemen) are hereby increasingly engaging in hybrid processes of online and offline interactions consisting of relationship building, brainstorming, co-creation and supporting one another's work.⁵⁰²

An interesting dynamic of this kind of work that has arisen through the research – and one that is present in other mobilisation activities explored elsewhere in this chapter – is the increased levels of day-to-day collaboration between Yemenis in the diaspora and Yemenis in Yemen, facilitated by the internet and social media. As highlighted earlier in the case of Peace Track Initiative, collaboration between Yemenis inside and outside of Yemen is occurring across a number of different spaces and for a multitude of purposes, however it is particularly well exemplified in the arts and culture space. Where this occurs, certain activities often naturally fall to one group or the other depending on a variety of factors shaping opportunity structures. Some of these factors are

⁵⁰² CY4, interview with the author, 24 March 2023, via Zoom.

dictated by physical location, including visa access and ability to travel, as well as political factors such as censorship and freedom of speech.

For example, a Yemeni filmmaker interviewed described working on a cultural heritage preservation project with a team of Yemenis based in a variety of locations worldwide, including Yemen. The Yemenis in Yemen were able to provide the content for the film, conducting research and interviews on the ground and filming video footage where possible – although their ability to do so freely was at times limited by Houthi censorship and fear of having their equipment confiscated.⁵⁰³ Meanwhile, Yemenis in the diaspora were able to upload the content and simultaneously conduct activities such as editing and production of the final output. The team used a variety of digital platforms to support their work, including Slack (a dynamic instant messaging tool and community platform for professional and organisational communications), as well as Instagram and Twitter to disseminate the resulting film. This is a clear example of how the internet and social media are facilitating dynamic and transnational collaboration between Yemenis around the world (including in the homeland), through increasingly hybridised online-offline interactive processes.⁵⁰⁴

⁵⁰³ HS9, interview with the author, 29 May 2023, via Zoom.

⁵⁰⁴ Ibid.

By reducing the need for travel and facilitating virtual, cross-border working relationships, as well as providing increased access to new audiences and harder to reach populations, the internet and social media are fundamentally changing the opportunity structures shaping how diasporas engage with the homeland through arts and culture initiatives. By facilitating transnational cooperation and collaboration, these tools are fundamentally reshaping diaspora-homeland networks and simultaneously broadening and strengthening horizontal communities. Based on this, one might be tempted to conclude that – in the arts and culture space at least – the opportunities created by the internet and social media are reducing the gap between diasporas and populations in the homeland. The reality, however, is more nuanced, with the research suggesting that gaps still remain, particularly driven by factors such as access to funding.

While many Yemenis working in arts and culture try to avoid appearing to take a political stance through their work, this is not always possible due to the opportunity structures and funding flows. According to one interviewee, Yemeni creatives – both inside and outside of Yemen – are increasingly tailoring their creative work and aspirations to fit the demands of international donors, thus playing into the transnational political dynamics of the conflict and its stakeholders. For example, many Yemeni creatives in the diaspora are shifting from working on independent projects or projects focused on culture and cultural heritage, towards working for international charities and NGOs on projects such as promotional or fundraising campaigns. In such cases, these

creatives must self-censor in order to adhere to the (sometimes overtly political) narratives and standpoints of their funders, thus affecting the potential of arts and culture as a tool for diaspora actors to promote peace and create independent or alternative narratives of the conflict.⁵⁰⁵

One reason for this could be that Yemenis in the diaspora often struggle to access – particularly European – donor funding for creative or cultural heritage work, as this funding tends to be ring fenced for Yemenis inside Yemen in the interest of supporting the development of arts and culture on the ground. In many cases however, rather than achieving this objective, this instead creates opportunities for entrepreneurs on the ground seeking to profit from international donor funds and the lack of accountability and oversight that comes with running such initiatives in conflict zones. According to one interviewee, this has become like ‘a game’ in Yemen.⁵⁰⁶ Institutes and organisations have either emerged out of nowhere or have shifted from other kinds of work towards the arts and culture space in order to capitalise on international funding opportunities for creative projects such as magazines, podcasts and documentaries. In many cases, the outputs of such funding are either of extremely low quality or are never seen at all.⁵⁰⁷

⁵⁰⁵ Ibid.

⁵⁰⁶ Ibid.

⁵⁰⁷ Ibid.

This anecdotal evidence offers a number of insights relating to Yemen's political marketplace and the position within it of diaspora actors mobilising through arts and culture activities: Firstly, it clearly indicates that the arts and culture space is beholden to the transactional politics of Yemen's political marketplace - whereby donors and international organisations represent patrons, diaspora actors and local organisations represent their clients, and arts and culture activities are inevitably shaped by funding flows and the 'price of loyalty'. Secondly, it exemplifies how opportunity structures are shaping the ways in which diasporas are able to mobilise through arts and culture. Furthermore, it highlights how Yemen's political marketplace has become integrated into the global international system through donor funding structures and networks. Finally, it highlights how international funding that is arguably intended to push back against the dynamics of Yemen's political marketplace, is paradoxically contributing to sustaining these very dynamics by creating opportunities for corruption and profiteering, particularly at the local level where there is limited oversight and accountability.

This represents an interesting phenomenon that directly addresses the research question relating to the ways in which the internet and social media are reshaping mobilisation processes in the diaspora. On the one hand, the internet and social media are creating new, hybridised (online/offline) ways for Yemenis inside and outside of Yemen to work together at the level of cultural production. This reduces the traditionally conceptualised gap between diasporas and

populations in the homeland and creates new opportunities for diaspora actors to push back against political marketplace dynamics. On the other hand, international donors are unwittingly blocking this phenomenon by providing political finance to entrepreneurs and businessmen within the marketplace. It is therefore possible to conclude that, while important within the arts and culture space, the role of the internet and social media for diaspora mobilisation can be easily overplayed and misunderstood, as the opportunity structures determined by factors such as funding, freedom of movement, and censorship remain crucial to shaping mobilisation activities.

This also highlights another important phenomenon. While De Waal tends to distinguish in his Political Marketplace Theory between political circuitry on the one hand - which is associated with networks of patronage and transactional factors such as the price of loyalty and supply and demand - and the public sphere on the other - associated with less transactional processes such as public debate - the arts and culture space appears to represent an area where both of these levels intersect. While arts and culture activities have been utilised by Yemenis in the diaspora for engaging with processes such as identity and narrative formation, on the one hand, the arts and culture space has also become an arena for flows of funding between patrons, clients and entrepreneurs seeking to shape the dynamics of Yemen's political marketplace.

The Online Politics of Advocacy, Human Rights, Peacebuilding and Humanitarian Relief

The engagement of diasporas in homeland conflict through activities such as advocacy, human rights and transitional justice work, peacebuilding and mediation activities, humanitarian aid and development programming is well documented in the diaspora literature. While such activity on the part of diasporas is by no means new, the internet and social media are creating a multitude of new ways that this can occur. The role of diaspora actors in such processes is subsequently being reshaped, with profound implications for how we understand the concept of diaspora itself, as well as the trajectory of homeland conflict and conflict transformation efforts.

On an everyday level, social media platforms and tools are allowing activists, advocates and humanitarians to connect with one another, publicly and privately, to organise and coordinate their efforts, thus reshaping networks of mobilised individuals and organisations and creating new possibilities for amplifying their impact.⁵⁰⁸ At the level of advocacy and human rights work, the internet and social media – and particularly instant messaging tools like WhatsApp – are creating new opportunities for diaspora actors to organise and align their efforts. ‘We do organise a lot of advocacy on WhatsApp. That’s our main outlet – WhatsApp Groups in particular’.⁵⁰⁹ As well as allowing them to connect more easily with each other, tools like WhatsApp also allow advocates in the diaspora to connect directly with the Yemenis in the homeland they are

⁵⁰⁸ BG7, interview with the author, 28 March 2023, via Zoom; WJ3, interview with the author, 21 May 2023, via Zoom.

⁵⁰⁹ BG7, interview with the author, 28 March 2023, via Zoom.

advocating for. This can support their work in a number of ways, from helping them gather more accurate information about the needs of survivors and local communities to allowing them to share real and visual human stories with target communities such as donors and the public to build empathy and support for their cause, as well as raise funding.

Yemenis are using the internet to communicate the suffering of Yemenis through short videos and pictures, educational sketches, and some campaigns... Yemenis started trying to communicate the picture and it reached more [people], so there is now documentation of cases [being] communicated to the [West] to look at Yemeni suffering.⁵¹⁰

The internet and social media are also making it easier than ever to coordinate logistically and demonstrate the need for, and impact of humanitarian and development programming, enabling diaspora actors engaged in such work to fundraise more effectively and reach beneficiaries more easily. Yemenis in the diaspora are using WhatsApp on a daily basis to coordinate programmes and relief efforts, as well as making use of online public spaces created by the likes of Facebook to reach Yemenis around the world and crowd-fund for their campaigns.⁵¹¹ One US-based interviewee shared that the organisation founded by her family, which is well-funded by the international community, provides essential aid to Yemenis on the ground in the form of food, as well as delivering economic empowerment programmes and providing salaried employment for

⁵¹⁰ DF1, interview with the author, 4 April 2023, via Zoom.

⁵¹¹ WJ3, interview with the author, 21 May 2023, via Zoom.

Yemenis on the ground in the homeland. While many Yemenis inside the country have not received their salaries in years, such financial incentives put the interviewee and others like her in a position of power on the ground through their position in the networks of patronage sustaining many communities in Yemen.

Another interviewee shared that crowd-funding through her network on Facebook helped her start her humanitarian organisation, providing basic supplies such as food and water to families in need in conflict affected governorates such as Ta'izz, Aden and Sana'a – before she ever had access to international donor funding.⁵¹² The organisation, as well as providing basic essentials, had a secondary effect of creating a sense of purpose and community among youth in these areas, particularly men, who volunteered for the organisation to support their communities. If not motivated by the impact they were able to have through their volunteer work, she explained, these men would likely otherwise have been fighting.⁵¹³

These examples clearly show the role that diaspora actors are able to play as patrons and financiers within the networks of patronage sustaining Yemen's political marketplace – a role that has long been accepted in the case of the Yemeni diaspora, who have historically been important sources of remittances

⁵¹² KR3, interview with the author, 26 June 2023, via Zoom.

⁵¹³ Ibid.

for their families and communities back in Yemen since well before the war began (as outlined in Chapter 1). Since the outbreak of conflict, according to a number of interviewees, the diaspora has been engaged in more humanitarian-focused financial transfers, often for one-off cases of need on the ground. This suggests that the financial role played by diasporas is likely very different today than it was case during the pre-war years, when financial transfers from the diaspora to the homeland were more regular and consistent, and perhaps less targeted towards a particular cause but towards the diaspora actors' own families and direct communities.

The internet and social media are supporting these processes, allowing Yemenis to circulate stories of suffering with networks in the diaspora in order to crowd-fund for life-saving support. 'With the Internet,' explained one interviewee, 'your call is open and it's reaching far more places and far more people. So it has helped a lot, especially when it comes to humanitarian efforts.'⁵¹⁴ In such cases, the compelling nature of the stories is often a driving factor encouraging Yemenis overseas to donate. One interviewee based in the US described a case where she read a story online about a man she did not know personally but which resonated with her to the extent that she crowd-funded thousands of dollars via a

⁵¹⁴ BG7, interview with the author, 28 March 2023, via Zoom.

GoFundMe page to pay for his medical care. The money was donated by both Yemenis and non-Yemenis across her networks in the West.⁵¹⁵

The impact of the diaspora in these cases is undoubtedly positive, in the immediate term at least. Aside from providing immediate relief to populations suffering the effects of the war on the ground in Yemen, they are also promoting agendas of civility and morality in such cases where they are recruiting youth who would otherwise take up arms and fight - one of the ways in which De Waal argues that a political marketplace can be stopped in its tracks. However, such activities also raise questions about the potential longer-term impact of creating new, or entrenching existing networks of patronage and cycles of financial dependence between the diaspora (the patrons) and local beneficiary communities (the clients). Still, these examples clearly show the ability of Yemenis in the diaspora to shape market conditions on the ground in the homeland, and how the internet and social media are facilitating this process and the potential influence they are able to exert. It is worth mentioning however, that their ability to influence in this area can also limit their ability to influence in other areas: for example, the aforementioned interviewee also stated that her legitimacy in Yemen as a provider of humanitarian aid limited her capacity to speak out openly on issues such as politics and accountability, as she would run the risk of appearing to be affiliated with a particular side.

⁵¹⁵ Ibid.

This is particularly notable given that the internet and social media have been key for helping diaspora actors fighting for accountability for abuses in Yemen, with Yemenis in the diaspora often working alongside citizen journalists within Yemen, using such platforms to leak information which is used to advocate and lobby the international community. Yemenis in the diaspora are often considered assets for human rights and advocacy organisations as a result of their ability to access local beneficiary communities – both physically and virtually – due to their connections in Yemen and knowledge of the local language and culture.

One Yemeni interviewed described his work as consisting heavily of staying in touch with the families of victims of abuses for whom the organisation was trying to secure justice. Platforms such as WhatsApp allowed him to remain in frequent contact with the families, acting as a go between for the organisation from the communities they served on the one hand and the policymakers and officials who could help them achieve justice and accountability on the other.⁵¹⁶ Another interviewee, who previously worked for a large international human rights organisation, mentioned a particular case involving a group of doctors in the diaspora who would frequently share information gathered through their networks on the ground relating to abuses within the healthcare system in Yemen. She was subsequently able to use her platform and social media channels

⁵¹⁶ SK3, interview with the author, 24 April 2023, via Zoom.

to share the information, lobbying for justice and accountability on an international level.⁵¹⁷

In some cases, the Yemenis in the diaspora were located outside of Yemen for the very reason that their online advocacy had been contentious and created security risks for them as long as they remained in Yemen. Some had been forced to claim political asylum overseas for writing about human rights abuses in Yemen and sharing political content online - particularly those who had built substantial followings online for doing so.⁵¹⁸ In such cases, they were able to act as a mouthpiece for others inside the country who might face the same risks were they to share the content themselves. These examples highlight the ways in which the internet and social media are facilitating networks for information sharing and advocacy involving a combination of Yemenis in Yemen and those in the diaspora. Each has their own unique and complementary role to play in the process that is dictated by the opportunity structures arising from their respective access and physical location.

The internet and social media are also reshaping the role that diaspora actors - and particularly women - are able to play at the level of international peacebuilding efforts. At the Track II⁵¹⁹ level in particular, according to one interviewee working in this space, the majority of the actors engaged are drawn

⁵¹⁷ FL7, interview with the author, 10 April 2023, via Zoom.

⁵¹⁸ Ibid.

⁵¹⁹ Track II diplomacy refers to informal, non-governmental conflict resolution efforts involving unofficial actors, which can often occur simultaneously to the official, or 'Track I' peace process.

from the diaspora.⁵²⁰ The Peace Track Initiative is a clear example of this. Founded and run by Yemeni women located around the world, from Sana'a to Toronto, the organisation would arguably not have experienced the levels of growth and influence that it has without these technologies. Firstly, they have allowed for increased coordination between Yemenis inside and outside of Yemen, as well as providing an online space for the organisation and its members to engage directly with policymakers and the international peace building community. When interviewed for this research, one member of PTI said that she frequently attends Zoom meetings with others in the organisation and the peacebuilding community during the early hours of her morning, unphased by the difference in time zones and grateful for the opportunity Zoom affords her to be in the room.

At the same time, the organisation has built a digital database of Yemeni women peacebuilders in Yemen around the world called the Women's Solidarity Network, which has had a meaningful impact on the ability of Yemeni women in the diaspora to engage in the political process in their homeland:

We ended up with a website, like a database of women inside and outside of Yemen, and I think that process, which was started in 2018-2019. It flourished and now we have this big movement around the world. So, we know who is in Germany, who is in Switzerland, who's working with who – and so it's much more organised now. And I think

⁵²⁰ MS2, interview with the author, 3 May 2023, via Zoom.

... It really scared the warring parties when we started to organise among ourselves because our voices were really [loud]. But at the beginning we didn't have international funding – we still don't have it. We also don't have the channels, the platforms to amplify our voices. What happened was that I had a very strong voice, but I didn't have a platform, while [my colleague] had platforms, but she didn't have the stories and the local experience that I had on the ground. So, what we did is we teamed up together and we [created] the Women's Solidarity Network, and we were able to amplify our voices at the UN Security Council, in the Human Rights Council... Everywhere... Everywhere. I've been all over the world ... with everybody, and we started bringing other women to these spaces as well.⁵²¹

There are limits to the capacity of diasporas to play such roles, however. On a financial level, such activities are often woefully underfunded by the international community, meaning activists and peacebuilders are forced to participate voluntarily and balance their activities with their work and personal lives.⁵²² Additionally, such activity can take a severe toll on the mental health of diaspora actors – a toll which is arguably exacerbated by the internet and social media. A number of the Yemenis interviewed who are working in the fields of advocacy, human rights, peacebuilding and accountability expressed that they had experienced negative impacts on their mental health as a result of their work, ranging from exhaustion and survivors' guilt to severe depression and anxiety. For some, this arose from the traumatising nature of the content with which they

⁵²¹ KR3, interview with the author, 26 June 2023, via Zoom.

⁵²² Ibid.

were dealing on a regular basis, such as footage and testimonies of violence and extreme suffering. Often the interviewees would hear such testimonies directly from the victims and their loved ones themselves. One participant said that hearing such stories virtually through platforms like WhatsApp, Twitter or Zoom actually had a worse impact on her than hearing them in person, as they made her feel helpless and too far away to do anything to support the victims:

I would see something very horrific, and then you go back to your family and you talk to them about it and then you talk to your friends ... and then you feel like you've done something. This kind of physical interaction with people who are going through the same thing – it was fine. But when you're trying to experience things from the diaspora and through the internet and through Zoom calls and through texting the victims ... that was very heavy for me.⁵²³

For some, the pressure on their mental health came from the sense of responsibility they felt to do something from their position of relative safety for Yemenis in the homeland who did not enjoy the same luxury. As well as an expectation on themselves, they also felt a sense of expectation from survivors in Yemen, who often reached out to them directly online to beg for help and support.⁵²⁴ However, for others still – and predominantly women – their mental health has been affected by the bullying and harassment they have experienced online as a result of attempts to advocate for justice, accountability and peace.

⁵²³ ID5, interview with the author, 19 May 2023, via Zoom.

⁵²⁴ BG7, interview with the author, 28 March 2023, via Zoom.

Among the participants interviewed, attacks ranged from abusive tweets and the hacking and sharing of personal photos, to stalking and threats of physical violence and death. Two of the female participants interviewed stated that they had taken steps back from their political activity, which had included advocating for peace and accountability, due to fear and exhaustion from the constant attacks.⁵²⁵ This highlights the unique ways in which women in diaspora communities are being coming targets of transnational repression – particularly in socially conservative societies.

This also sheds light on how the internet and social media are affecting the opportunity structures that determine whether and how diaspora actors mobilise in the conflict, but the extent to which this is positive or negative is nuanced and complex. While diaspora actors have access to platforms that can facilitate their work and increase their potential for impact on a day-to-day basis, those very same platforms are also pushing some to their breaking point and causing them to disengage. Moreover, it highlights how inherently gendered such opportunity structures are, by exposing the additional barriers facing Yemeni women in the diaspora who choose to mobilise politically in the affairs of their homeland.

At the same time, tools for video calling like Zoom are enabling Yemenis within Yemen – often facilitated by Yemenis in the diaspora – to take seats at the table

⁵²⁵ CY4, interview with the author, 24 March 2023, via Zoom; PO8, interview with the author, 17 April 2023.

themselves to participate virtually in human rights and peacebuilding activities, for example at the UN Security Council.⁵²⁶ As one interviewee stated:

We bring Yemenis inside Yemen to talk directly to policymakers just to make sure that they have that on the ground perspective. And it's not just us ... speaking on their behalf.⁵²⁷

While on the surface, this is challenging traditional notions of diasporas as constituting a 'voice' for those in the homeland and suggesting that this role may be becoming obsolete, in reality this is not as simple as it seems. According to the interviewee quoted above, Yemenis in the homeland often still rely on those in the diaspora to make those connections and invite them into the room as (often foreign) policymakers and officials do not have the local access to do so. This, she argues, makes the role of diasporas in such cases quite clear and distinct as a facilitator and gatekeeper of such interactions.⁵²⁸ This affords diaspora advocates a certain level of power, as they have control over which local actors are able to represent themselves internationally and may choose to include locals whose testimonies will serve their goals. Another interviewee echoed this, highlighting the limitations of diaspora actors inviting voices from the ground to participate in international processes relating to peacebuilding and human rights.

Think about it. Who gets to select which Yemeni says what? Is it merit based, or visibility based, or is it, 'I know this person, so and so worked

⁵²⁶ XC1, interview with the author, 1 April 2023, via Zoom.

⁵²⁷ BG7, interview with the author, 28 March 2023, via Zoom.

⁵²⁸ Ibid.

with them before and they were the right fit'? Or a lot of times they end up picking a person because they have better Internet connection, because Internet connection in Yemen is horrendous. So, a lot of times it comes down to [the fact] they can speak English and they have good Internet, and a lot of times they still choose Yemenis not living in Yemen. And so that's the reality. And then, you know, why are they being brought in? And when they're brought in, what's the larger agenda ... and how much support do they get after they're brought in ... How much follow up exists? How does their participation in a Congress session lead to reform?⁵²⁹

This highlights a key structural barrier challenging the notion that the internet and social media are transformative in facilitating access to Yemenis in the homeland, whether facilitated by the diaspora or not: access to the internet. According to World Bank data, in 2017 just 27 per cent of Yemenis were using the internet.⁵³⁰ While this is the latest data available from the World Bank, online data source Data Reportal put this figure at 26.7 per cent at the beginning of 2023.⁵³¹ Therefore, while the internet and social media are clearly creating a multitude of possibilities for the work of diaspora actors engaged in advocacy, human rights and peacebuilding, such diaspora actors arguably still play a role as connectors and gatekeepers to communicate within Yemen.

⁵²⁹ PO8, interview with the author, 17 April 2023.

⁵³⁰ World Bank, 'Individuals using the Internet (% of population) - Yemen, Rep.', accessed 9 September 2023, <https://data.worldbank.org/indicator/IT.NET.USER.ZS?locations=YE>.

⁵³¹ Simon Kemp, 'Digital 2023: Yemen', accessed 9 September 2023, <https://datareportal.com/reports/digital-2023-yemen>.

At the same time, the problems with internet access and connectivity on the ground in Yemen have actually catalysed advocacy in the diaspora on an everyday level. A key example was the internet outage in Yemen in January 2022, when air strikes by the Saudi-led coalition led to four days without internet access for residents across the country.⁵³² The outage caused panic among those in the diaspora who were no longer able to communicate with their families, colleagues and communities, leading many – including those who would not normally engage actively in advocacy or awareness raising activities – to use their online platforms to seek and share information, as well as to call for action to resume connectivity and respond to urgent humanitarian needs from the ground.

Everyone was really concerned. Everyone started texting. Everyone started advocating ... doing some sort of activism without even being aware it was activism and advocacy ... I remember seeing on Instagram so many stories in Yemen from people that I haven't really seen such a thing from [before]. And this was very interesting because this has been happening, for example, for Palestine and Gaza for so many decades, so it's more like organised mobilisation. But for Yemen it was more individual mobilisation, and I don't even think the people were aware that this is a sort of advocacy. They started putting hashtags, [which was] something that I hadn't seen before. So the four

⁵³² Al Jazeera, 'Internet returns to Yemen after air raid caused four-day outage', [online] 25 January 2022, accessed 9 September 2023, <https://www.aljazeera.com/news/2022/1/25/yemens-internet-returns-after-airstrike-causes-4-day-blackout>.

days with the internet cut out that like that made really big changes for the community outside.⁵³³

While venting their individual frustrations at not being able to communicate with their families, the Yemenis mentioned above were also mobilising collectively – many of them without realising – to advocate for their communities in the homeland who were not only suffering the humanitarian consequences of the conflict but were also cut off from the world by the internet outage. As well as reiterating the importance of the internet and social media in allowing the Yemeni diaspora to maintain connection with Yemenis in the homeland, this incident demonstrates how the proliferation of these technologies is facilitating everyday acts of advocacy, activism and mobilisation that may not have occurred in years prior. It also highlights the impact of these technologies on the ability of diaspora actors to influence the dynamics of Yemen’s political marketplace, both at the level of political circuitry (for example, through potential influence of such activity on flows of funding) and the public sphere (through discourse and narrative dissemination).

Conclusions

This chapter has demonstrated how complex, dynamic and multi-layered the role of the diaspora in Yemen’s conflict and political marketplace really is. It has highlighted the collective action frames being employed by Yemenis in the

⁵³³ ID5, interview with the author, 19 May 2023, via Zoom.

diaspora for the purpose of social mobilisation, and how these frames or narratives are embedding social movements in the diaspora within the political marketplace of their homeland at the level of the public sphere. It has also highlighted the fundamental ways the internet and social media are reshaping both the opportunity structures that drive mobilisation, as well as the mobilisation processes themselves - two notable examples being the hybridisation of online and offline activity and the increased ability for diaspora actors to work collaboratively with those inside the homeland.

The roles diaspora actors play are rarely clear-cut, can be simultaneously empowering and disempowering, and are dependent on factors and opportunity structures just as Yemenis on the ground are. Digitally-enabled diasporas, as this chapter has clearly shown, can play both positive and negative roles in conflicts and political marketplaces in their homeland - sometimes simultaneously. One thing is therefore clear - diaspora actors who are mobilised in the conflict in Yemen cannot be considered as standalone actors who exist separately or outside of Yemen's political marketplace. Rather, they are intricately and intrinsically webbed into the networks of patronage and transactional politics sustaining its very existence, through mobilisation activities such as humanitarian fundraising and donor-funded programming. They are also intricately engaged at the level of the public sphere, contributing to the formation and dissemination of narratives that have a direct impact on the trajectory of Yemen's conflict on the ground. This chapter has also shown how all of the activities mentioned here

have been fundamentally affected and altered by the new opportunities and new challenges posed by the internet and social media, significantly reshaping traditional mobilisation processes.

Building on the empirical research set out in this chapter, Chapter 6 presents the case study of the Yemeni diaspora in the UK, re-examining the conclusions drawn in Chapters 4 and 5 in order to test their application to a specific – and a particularly dynamic and multi-dimensional – diaspora community. This lays the foundations for Chapter 7, which analyses in even greater depth the implications of the findings of this thesis for the way we understand diaspora and diaspora mobilisation in homeland conflict. This enables more concrete conclusions to be drawn surrounding the impact of diaspora mobilisation on politics and conflict in the homeland, by way of De Waal's framework for understanding how actors can both perpetuate, and push back against political marketplace dynamics – sometimes at the same time.

Chapter 6: The Yemeni Diaspora in the UK

Yemenis have been migrating to the United Kingdom since the nineteenth century, after Britain established its protectorate at the Port of Aden in 1839.⁵³⁴ The first wave of Yemenis, many of whom hailed from the highland villages surrounding Taizz and were employed by the British merchant navy, arrived and settled in the docklands area of the coastal town of South Shields from the 1860s onwards.⁵³⁵ On arrival in the UK, they set up Arab only boarding houses and took jobs that met local demands for skilled and unskilled labour⁵³⁶. Migration continued during the nineteenth and early twentieth centuries, with significant communities emerging and growing in areas such as Granby Street in Liverpool, Tiger Bay in Cardiff, and Hull. Migration continued as the economy in south Yemen stagnated under British colonialism and the demand for workers in Britain's steel and vehicle manufacturing industries grew in the 1950s and 1960s, with many moving inland to industrial cities including Birmingham and Sheffield, where some of the UK's most significant Yemeni communities still reside.⁵³⁷

⁵³⁴ Al Jazeera World, 'Britain's First Yemenis'.

⁵³⁵ Charlene Rodrigues, 'Yemenis in Britain: 'The war is like a fence between us', *Middle East Eye* [online] 27 January 2017, accessed 18 July 2024, <https://www.middleeasteye.net/features/yemenis-britain-war-fence-between-us>; Shibani, 'Over the mountains, across the oceans'.

⁵³⁶ Al Jazeera World, 'Britain's First Yemenis'; Halliday, *Britain's First Muslims*, 12.

⁵³⁷ Rodrigues, 'Yemenis in Britain'; Shibani, 'Over the mountains, across the oceans'.

According to a 2001 census, the Yemeni population in the UK was estimated to number between 70,000-80,000 people.⁵³⁸ Birmingham is home to the largest Yemeni community, with the most recent census data indicating that 33,000 Yemenis live in the city and its surrounding suburbs, predominantly in the Balsall Heath area⁵³⁹. 'It's a Yemeni hotspot,' remarked one of the interviewees for this study. 'There's just Yemenis everywhere - it's like Yemen in Birmingham'⁵⁴⁰. Liverpool too plays host to a significant Yemeni community, with the majority originating from the Radā' district of Al-Bayda governorate in central Yemen⁵⁴¹. In Sheffield, Ibb and Taizz are the main regions of origin for the majority of Yemenis⁵⁴². London, however, appears to be home to a much more diverse and decentralised community of Yemenis with a variety of diasporic experiences, from the families of wealthy southerners who settled on the Edgware Road in the 1960s and achieved business success in the capital, to networks of students on the UK Government's Chevening Scholarship programme, who migrated for their studies but remained as asylum seekers after the outbreak of the war⁵⁴³.

⁵³⁸ Al Jazeera World, 'Britain's First Yemenis'; Al-Deen, 'The Houthis-Tribal Conflict in Yemen', 2.

⁵³⁹ Halliday, *Britain's First Muslims*, x; Shibani, 'Over the mountains, across the oceans'.

⁵⁴⁰ AF0, interview with the author, 2023.

⁵⁴¹ David Harrison, 'Yemeni, Muslim, and Scouse: Ethnicity and Religion, Hybridity and Locality in Contemporary Liverpool' (PhD Thesis, University of Leeds, 2020), 129.

⁵⁴² Kevin Searle, *From Farms to Foundries: An Arab Community in Industrial Britain* (Bern: Peter Lang AG, 2010), 24-25.

⁵⁴³ AB3, interview with the author, 21 2023; ID5, interview with the author, 19 May 2023, via Zoom.

Despite their large numbers and significance as Britain's oldest Muslim community, Yemenis in the UK today remain a somewhat 'invisible' community. In recent years, Yemenis in Britain have expressed frustration that their voices have been unheard and their contributions to British society largely overlooked, creating a feeling of marginalisation.⁵⁴⁴ The dynamics of Britain's Yemeni communities have also shifted as a result of new waves of migrants generated by the political instability and conflict in Yemen during the years since 2011. Some suggest that these changes, and particularly the influx of new Yemeni migrants relocating from Saudi Arabia, have been beneficial for the community, bringing a 'different voice and new energy'. Others, meanwhile, express that the conflict has had a negative effect on community cohesiveness and that the Yemeni community as it once was is now in decline. One interviewee, lived in the UK for a period during the 1990s and returned to settle in Sheffield in the early 2000s, said:

When I came to the UK you could actually feel there is a something called Yemeni community ... They had their own venues ... houses belonging to the community as a common place you go, like a club or something like that. And they used to chew qat all the time together and do the weddings ... Now I don't feel there is anything called the Yemeni community in the sense of a unified body.⁵⁴⁵

⁵⁴⁴ Lisa Rand, 'The 'unheard voices' of Liverpool's Yemeni community that risked being lost forever', *Liverpool Echo* [online] 28 November 2020, accessed 18 July 2024 <https://www.liverpoolecho.co.uk/news/liverpool-news/unheard-voices-liverpools-yemeni-community-19355204>; Rodrigues, 'Yemenis in Britain'.

⁵⁴⁵ VZ7, interview with the author, 26 September 2023, via Zoom.

As outlined in Chapter 1, there is limited existing research to help us understand the ways in which Yemenis in the UK have engaged and mobilised politically in their homeland in recent years, as well as how the ongoing conflict in Yemen has shaped the evolution of the British-Yemeni community. Of the scholarly work that does exist on the Yemeni diaspora in the UK, much is focused on the historical patterns of migration that occurred from South Yemen to coastal cities such as South Shields, Cardiff and Liverpool, and later to inland cities following employment opportunities in industries such as steel in Birmingham and Sheffield.

Notable works include Fred Halliday's 2010 book, *Britain's First Muslims: Portrait of an Arab Community*, which follows the internal dynamics of Yemeni communities in the UK and considers their contribution towards British Muslim politics and culture up to 2010.⁵⁴⁶ Other works including Richard Lawless's 1995 book *From Ta'izz to Tyneside: Arab Community in the North-east of England in the Early Twentieth Century*, Kevin Searle's 2010 book, *From Farms to Foundries: An Arab Community in Industrial Britain*, and Seddon's 2014 work, *The Last of the Lascars: Yemeni Muslims in Britain 1836-2012*, offer historical overviews of the evolution of Yemeni communities in the UK.⁵⁴⁷ Other academic studies and

⁵⁴⁶ First published in 1992 under the original title *Arabs in Exile*, the updated edition was published in 2010 to include the post-9/11 period. See Halliday, *Britain's First Muslims*.

⁵⁴⁷ Richard Lawless, *From Ta'izz to Tyneside: Arab Community in the North-east of England in the Early Twentieth Century* (Exeter: University of Exeter Press, 1995); Searle, *From Farms to Foundries*; Mohammed Siddique Seddon, *The Last of the Lascars: Yemeni Muslims in Britain 1836-2012* (Leicestershire: Kube Publishing Ltd, 2014).

articles have been published focusing on the internal cultural dynamics of specific, localised communities, such as Harrison's thesis focused on identity among Yemenis in Liverpool.⁵⁴⁸

Such accounts have provided comprehensive historical overviews of the Yemeni-British 'community' since its earliest waves of migration, considering internal community dynamics, their integration into and relationship with British society, and their influence over domestic UK politics and local policymaking. However, there is very little examination of the ways in which Yemenis in the UK have engaged politically in the affairs of the homeland, particularly in the modern era. Most notably, none of these works take into account the specific dynamics of the post-2011 period, which has been transformative for both Yemeni politics and society both inside Yemen, and in the diaspora, as this thesis has repeatedly shown.

This chapter delves deeper into questions of identity, community and mobilisation in the Yemeni diaspora, presenting the UK as a case study that can test the broader analyses and conclusions drawn throughout this thesis relating to the Yemeni diaspora, the political marketplace, and the role of the internet and social media. Reflecting the trajectory of the thesis so far, this chapter explores how Yemenis in the UK specifically identify and form communities - locally, transnationally and virtually - as well as the ways in which they have been

⁵⁴⁸ Harrison, 'Yemeni, Muslim, and Scouse'.

mobilising in the conflict in the homeland. It also explores the ways in which social media and the internet are impacting these processes, and how this can help us understand diaspora mobilisation and the role of diasporas in the political marketplaces of their homelands more broadly.

The UK has been selected as an appropriate and illuminative case study for this thesis for a number of reasons. Firstly, the UK is home to multiple 'waves', or generations of Yemeni migrants, allowing for a nuanced exploration of the impact of factors such as the circumstances of migration, regional and generational differences, and class dynamics on mobilisation. Secondly, the political role of the UK in Yemen's war as a key supplier of arms to one of the conflict parties, as well as its important role as a donor of international humanitarian and development aid during the Saleh years, enable analysis of how the policies of the host state vis-à-vis the homeland also shape patterns mobilisation.⁵⁴⁹ Thirdly, Yemenis in the UK enjoy relative political freedoms and freedom of expression due to the country's democratic political system, in contrast to other states such as Egypt and the Gulf monarchies. This means there are a multitude of avenues for mobilisation available to Yemenis in Britain, thus enabling a more thorough analysis of why and how diasporas mobilise, and what impact the internet and social media are having on these processes. As a result of

⁵⁴⁹ Phillips, *Yemen and the Politics of Permanent Crisis*, 84.

these factors, this chapter assumes that Yemenis in the UK represent a unique microcosm of global diaspora mobilisation in Yemen's conflict.

The chapter draws on the various diaspora actors identified in the researcher's dataset for its analysis, as well as the interviews conducted with Yemenis in the diaspora, nine out of the twenty one of whom are based in the UK. Notable UK diaspora actors identified in the dataset that will feature in the analysis include the British Yemeni Society, the Labour Friends of Yemen and the Liverpool Arab Arts Festival (LAAF). As well as featuring in their own right in the researcher's dataset of diaspora or diasporic actors, these three organisations cropped up frequently in the research into other actors in the UK as partners and donors and appear to be highly involved in a wide variety of activities in the UK relating to Yemen.

The researcher travelled across the UK during the summer of 2023 to meet in person with key individuals in the diaspora, many of whom were subsequently interviewed for this thesis. She visited the northeast of England, Liverpool, Birmingham and London, attending arts events (including the LAAF), drinking Yemeni coffee with political activists and eating *fahsa* (spiced Yemeni lamb stew) and *mandi* (Yemeni meat and rice dish) with artists, humanitarians and community organisers. Their remarkable stories are peppered throughout this chapter to humanise and support the data gathered and the conclusions

drawn.⁵⁵⁰ The picture presented throughout of the Yemeni diaspora in the UK should be considered as a snapshot at a specific point in time (between 2023-2024, when the interviews were conducted). While not an exhaustive or static understanding of the people and communities referred to throughout, it represents how the individuals studied relate to the rapidly-evolving digital space and their positionality within the Yemeni diaspora and political marketplace at a particular moment.

Deconstructing Identity Among Yemenis in the UK

The first Yemenis arrived in the UK over a century and a half ago, with Yemeni seamen marrying British women and the community becoming a fundamental thread in the diverse patchwork of modern British society. Yet even today, the distinctness of Yemenis in Britain remains remarkable. Halliday described them as an ‘urban village’ – a ‘migrant community living within its own socially, linguistically and ethnically defined borders, and interacting in a selective way with the broader society around it.’⁵⁵¹ Some interviewees echoed this assertion, highlighting the uniqueness, pride and close-knit composition of the Yemeni community:

Here in the UK, I would say I'm part of the Yemeni community, definitely. [It's] where I [was] brought up. My best friend is Yemeni,

⁵⁵⁰ Their names have been changed to maintain anonymity.

⁵⁵¹ Halliday, *Britain's First Muslims: Portrait of an Arab Community*, xxii.

my mother's friends, my father's friends are mostly Yemenis, and my dad worked mostly in the Yemeni community.⁵⁵²

I've met a lot of different cultures, a lot of different Arabic cultures, and the kindest and humblest ones, I'll be honest, are the Yemenis. No arrogance ... No ego. They're willing to help. They're willing to break their back for you even though they don't know you ... There are very, very good traits and attributes in a Yemeni that can't be taken out, no matter where you are in the world. It's just Yemeni.⁵⁵³

'Yemeniness' is expressed in a multitude of ways. In his 2020 PhD thesis, Harrison, an academic researching the varying sources of identity within the Yemeni community in Liverpool, presented the idea that Yemeniness is experienced and expressed aesthetically. He coins the term, the 'aesthetic Yemeni diaspora' to describe how the Yemeniness of the community in Liverpool is often expressed in aspects of daily life such as clothing, food, weddings and other cultural or 'aesthetic' manifestations of Yemen in their daily lives.⁵⁵⁴ The interviewees, along with the researcher's own experiences, add colour to this concept of aesthetic manifestations of Yemeniness: the restaurants on Lodge Lane serving piping hot *fahsa* and fresh, traditional bread with nigella seeds;⁵⁵⁵ the Yemeni music played in homes and at community concerts, like those which took place in 2023 in Birmingham and Manchester with guest star Hussein Moheb, a

⁵⁵² AF0, interview with the author, 27 September 2023, via Zoom.

⁵⁵³ ZO2, interview with the author, 13 September 2023, via Zoom.

⁵⁵⁴ Harrison, 'Yemeni, Muslim, and Scouse', 280-281.

⁵⁵⁵ ZO2, interview with the author, 13 September 2023, via Zoom; Rand, 'The 'unheard voices' of Liverpool's Yemeni community that risked being lost forever'.

Yemeni singer renowned across Yemen and the diaspora who serenaded his audience with ballads from home on the oud;⁵⁵⁶ the typical Yemeni handshakes in mosques, weddings and community events that set meetings with Yemenis apart from the rest.⁵⁵⁷

Yet there are other sources of identity that play a role in the lives of the Yemeni diaspora in the UK – echoing the analysis in Chapters 1 and 4 of how Yemenis inside Yemen and across the global diaspora identify. In his thesis, Harrison described the ‘Yemeniness’ of the community in Liverpool as being ‘rooted in the translocal family beyond the gaze of the institutions of wider society, yet also negotiated alongside multiple other belongings’.⁵⁵⁸ These belongings include affiliation with Britain, connection to their home city or town in the UK, their religion, their region of origin in Yemen, and their political and social outlooks.

At times these ‘belongings’ seem to merge into one another – for example in the way in which Yemenis in Liverpool have ‘hybridised’ their Yemeni and local identities, referring to themselves as ‘Scouse-Yemenis’.⁵⁵⁹ Similarly, many Yemenis in Britain closely associate their religion with their Yemeni origins, to the extent that being Muslim and practising in a specific way is perceived to be

⁵⁵⁶ GH6, interview with the author, 6 October 2023, via Zoom; ID5, interview with the author, 19 May 2023, via Zoom.

⁵⁵⁷ ZO2, interview with the author, 13 September 2023, via Zoom.

⁵⁵⁸ Harrison, ‘Yemeni, Muslim, and Scouse’, iv.

⁵⁵⁹ Harrison, ‘Yemeni, Muslim, and Scouse’, 1; Rand, ‘The ‘unheard voices’ of Liverpool’s Yemeni community that risked being lost forever’.

integral to their Yemeni identity⁵⁶⁰. Some attribute this to the need to hold onto one's Yemeni roots while living far from the homeland. As articulated by one interviewee, this can sometimes occur to the extent that practising Islam becomes performative, for the purpose of proving one's Yemeniness to the community:

There was always this urge to prove that, even though they now live in the West, that they're still Yemeni and they're still practising Islam. So essentially ... that creates, I think, core aspects of the Yemeni community, of what it means to be Yemeni here.⁵⁶¹

Others attribute it to Yemen's unique position in Islamic history as the homeland of a number of key figures and prophets, which creates a sense of pride in their homeland for its symbolism within Islam.⁵⁶²

At the same time, layers of 'belonging' can conflict with one another in certain contexts. While research has shown that being both Yemeni and British is important to individuals of Yemeni origin in the UK, the interviewees shed further light on the complex relationship between these two layers of their identity.⁵⁶³ Most of the interviewees for this study did not hesitate to express their pride in both their Yemeniness and their Britishness – particularly those who are second generation Yemenis living within established Yemeni communities in areas like Birmingham and Liverpool.⁵⁶⁴ Some, however, were careful to clarify

⁵⁶⁰ Ibid.

⁵⁶¹ AF0, interview with the author, 27 September 2023, via Zoom.

⁵⁶² ZO2, interview with the author, 13 September 2023, via Zoom.

⁵⁶³ Ibid.

⁵⁶⁴ GH6, interview with the author, 6 October 2023, via Zoom.

that they would consider themselves Yemeni first and British second, and that they would tend to identify themselves as ‘Yemeni-British’ as opposed to ‘British-Yemeni’.⁵⁶⁵

However, as some interviewees explained, this can vary for people depending on the context within which they are identifying themselves and the people present. One Liverpool-based interviewee explained that, during her younger years, she had ‘rejected’ her Yemeni identity in favour of being more British in order to fit into a society where her Yemeniness made her feel ‘inferior’. She explained that it had required activism and resilience for her to move to a place where she felt truly comfortable in, and proud of her Yemeni identity, adding that she is still on that journey today⁵⁶⁶. Another participant, ‘Reem’, expanded on this inner conflict, admitting that she would feel uncomfortable identifying herself as Yemeni if asked by a white British person as opposed to other ethnic minorities.

Reem was born and raised in Birmingham, near Balsall Heath. Her father migrated to the UK at the age of fifteen, returning to Yemen to marry her mother, who left Yemen to join him in Birmingham. Every summer growing up, Reem and her parents and siblings would return to Yemen for multiple weeks to visit their family in Taizz. She grew up surrounded by Yemenis, practising Islam and

⁵⁶⁵ SK3, interview with the author, 24 April 2023, via Zoom; VZ7, interview with the author, 26 September 2023, via Zoom.

⁵⁶⁶ SV5, interview with the author, 12 October 2023, via Zoom.

going to Arabic school during the evenings. She is now researching the conflict in Yemen for her PhD at a UK university, although she doesn't discuss her academic research much with the Yemeni community in Birmingham because 'it's not something Yemenis really do'.⁵⁶⁷ She says:

I identify as Yemeni, but depending on who's asking me that question it can really change. If someone from an ethnic minority group is asking me where I'm from, then I'm very happy with saying Yemen – I don't really have problems with that. In fact, if my supervisor is asking me, and he's Irish, I'm like, 'I'm Yemeni'. But essentially, if it comes from an English person, or usually just a white person ... you know, it's that question of 'Where are you really from?', and even if they don't essentially mean that, for me, I think I'm automatically quite defensive. And I'm like, 'Birmingham!'⁵⁶⁸

Interestingly, while 'Yemeni', 'British', and 'Muslim' were all mentioned by the interviewees as being central tenets of who they are, few mentioned their region of origin in Yemen or their religious sect as having a significant influence on how they understand themselves.⁵⁶⁹ However, as will be shown below, these other, secondary 'belongings' still exist below the surface, and can create fissures and divisions within communities when subject to pressure.

The above examples highlight the complexity of being Yemeni, British, Arab and Muslim today, and the ways in which the local historical, political and social

⁵⁶⁷ AF0, interview with the author, 27 September 2023, via Zoom..

⁵⁶⁸ Ibid.

⁵⁶⁹ AB3, interview with the author, 21 September 2023, via Zoom.

dynamics, as well as race relations within the host state can significantly influence the complex processes of identity formation and evolution. Certain aspects of identity are prioritised or overridden by others at different times and in different localities and contexts. At times local identities are emphasised, while at others Yemeniness comes first. These examples therefore echo the assertions made in previous chapters about the highly contextual, dynamic, shifting and multi-layered nature of identity and positionality among Yemenis in the diaspora.

These findings are essential for understanding the makeup of the Yemeni community in the UK today and how it is shifting, particularly over the years since 2011, as a result of the influx of migrants from Yemen due to political instability and conflict. Interestingly, some interviewees who migrated to the UK from 2011 onwards expressed difficulty connecting with, and relating to the existing Yemeni communities in areas such as Birmingham, Sheffield and Cardiff. One reason for this, as explained by multiple interviewees, is that these communities often exhibit higher levels of religious and social conservatism than they had been accustomed to in their lives and communities back in Yemen, which subsequently dictates their behaviours and ability to build relationships with other Yemenis in Britain.

On attending a Yemeni ifṭār event in London during Ramadan, one interviewee – who migrated in 2014 due to fears for his safety as a result of his human rights

work – was surprised to find that the event was strictly gender segregated. This, he said, would not have been the case in many communities in Yemen today.⁵⁷⁰ Meanwhile another interviewee, who arrived in the UK and claimed asylum during the ongoing conflict, described grappling with negative perceptions held by Yemenis in the UK of people like him, who had travelled and lived in other western countries such as the US. He explained that he often felt pressure to change outward expressions of his identity in order to appear more respectful and conservative⁵⁷¹. This shapes the ways in which Yemenis in the UK form relationships with other Yemenis, and therefore community formation within the diaspora.

Echoing the findings of Chapter 4, some more recent arrivals to the UK appear to self-select their own Yemeni communities to avoid this pressure, forming relationships virtually and also transnationally, as opposed to naturally gravitating towards the existing and longstanding Yemeni communities in Britain. Ahmed’s story captures one such experience.

Ahmed was born in Yemen but has spent much of his life outside of the country since childhood due to his parents working overseas. He lived in northern Europe, then the United States, before moving to the UK to continue his education as a Chevening scholar during the war. Although initially hopeful that

⁵⁷⁰ SK3, interview with the author, 24 April 2023, via Zoom. .

⁵⁷¹ AB3, interview with the author, 21 September 2023, via Zoom.

the conflict would subside and he would be able to return to Yemen, he ultimately decided to claim asylum in the UK as the war continued to drag on. He currently lives in London and works in international development on projects relating to Yemen. His company relies on him for his native Yemeni Arabic and his knowledge of Yemeni politics and society, however he has become weary of working on conflict and humanitarian issues. He feels increasingly guilty that the war has created work opportunities for him while other Yemenis in his homeland suffer the daily consequences of the ongoing violence and instability. Ahmed says:

You'd be very surprised how many people would come up to me and ask me, you know, assuming that I've lived in the West, if I'm a playboy, or just ... ridiculous things. It's insane. So I just basically avoid [them]. Fellow Cheveners asking me very, very, very inappropriate questions that I wouldn't know [how] to answer. So there's this, you know, perception [among] Yemenis like, 'Oh, this guy's lived abroad - he must do all the sins.' ... It's hard for me to get away from that ... Tradition to them is very important, and if you break that it's really disappointing to them ... So, therefore, by me not engaging so much, I don't have to lie as much.⁵⁷²

He goes on to explain that he has instead found commonality with Yemenis across different countries - including in Yemen - with whom he has bonded over similarities in their backgrounds and outlooks. His use of words such as

⁵⁷² Ibid.

‘cultured’ and ‘cosmopolitan’ also implies the importance of education and social class for Yemenis in the diaspora in shaping how they find commonality with and form community with other Yemenis:

So, when I'm hanging out with Yemeni friends or whatever, I usually look for people who are very associated to me, so I do say that I try not to hang out with Yemeni friends, but ... I have a good group of friends that live across Europe or Yemen ... either in Germany or Italy or here, and so I'm quite happy with this group of friends that we have. We're very liberal ... We're all kind of like, very cultured in some sense. I mean, I'm not trying to brag or anything, but truly I mean, you know, they love to travel. They love to eat all kinds of various foods ... Because it is very hard for Yemenis to really change like that. And so I'm always looking for that kind of, I guess cosmopolitan Yemeni, who's like lived abroad everywhere.⁵⁷³

Another reason why some Yemenis who migrated to the UK from 2011 onwards struggle to relate to and form meaningful relationships with Yemenis within the existing UK communities, is their differing views and experiences of the conflict in Yemen and their varying levels of activism or mobilisation in response to it. Mohamed's story adds nuance to this phenomenon.

Mohamed was born in Sana'a and moved to the UK in 2011 with his wife to pursue their master's degrees. He now lives in the West Country with his wife and children, working on diaspora engagement in international development.

⁵⁷³ Ibid.

Since the outbreak of the war, he has been actively engaged in efforts to lobby the UK Parliament to prevent the sale of British arms to Saudi Arabia for use in Yemen's war. He also consults with international and local organisations working on humanitarian and development issues in Yemen, supporting them with strategy, fundraising, and operations. He explains:

The waves that came after the Arab spring, they are the dreamers, I would call them ... They're the dreamers because we dreamed of a better Yemen, we dreamed of 'enough is enough', we dreamed of a peaceful transition. It wasn't successful. And there were some lessons learned there because the whole thing has been hijacked by different political actors, etc. So that's what distinguishes us ... Those who came from the Arab Spring to now, they have [had] to shift a lot on a personal level, on a professional level... And they have proven themselves to be good, or excellent assets in the UK, in Yemen and other countries as well, because they have a goal in mind. They want to create value ... They need to make a change happen. And there was an opportunity cost in that as well, they lost their families. My wife, she lost her parent while she was in the UK. She couldn't even say [goodbye] or see them once before they died. So that's what made us different ... The diaspora ... they take it for granted ... I mean, they have their own family here, [their] extended family here, and Yemen becomes for them just a place to visit, just as a tourist, and come back. So, their identity is totally different.⁵⁷⁴

⁵⁷⁴ LEO, interview with the author, 21 May 2023, via Zoom.

The above story illustrates how political turbulence in Yemen over the last decade and a half has created a wedge between different generations and waves of migrants, particularly between those who migrated after 2011 and the second and third generation migrants in well-established communities like those of Birmingham, Sheffield and Cardiff. However, the conflict and the associated deepening of political and regional divisions in Yemen in recent years have also given rise to increased polarisation within these communities themselves.

Regional differences have always existed amongst Yemenis in the UK and have waxed and waned in their importance over the years, reflecting political developments on the ground in Yemen. For example, Fred Halliday contended that the civil war of 1994 led to renewed antagonism between northerners and southerners in the UK. He also recalled a visit to Birmingham in 2007, where he was struck by the fact that both had their own separate buildings and social centres in different parts of town.⁵⁷⁵ Since the outbreak of the ongoing conflict, regional tensions have once again risen to the fore. In an article for the Arab Reform Initiative on mobilisation dynamics of the Yemeni diaspora since 2011, Maysaa Shujaa Al-Deen argues that 'the war has divided the Yemeni diaspora in the UK in an unprecedented way and has created a widespread feeling of disappointment'.⁵⁷⁶ This echoes Baser and Féron's earlier mentioned discussion around conflict transportation, highlighting the ways in which conflicts can take

⁵⁷⁵ Halliday, *Britain's First Muslims*, x.

⁵⁷⁶ Al-Deen, 'The Houthi-Tribal Conflict in Yemen', 2.

on new forms in the diaspora, interacting with local social, political and cultural dynamics in an intersectional way.

The interviewees for this research echoed this assertion. One Yemeni-British interviewee based in Liverpool argued that internal racism between northerners and southerners had led to segregation in her community. She expressed her disappointment at the emergence of Arabic schools only for southern Yemenis during the years since the outbreak of the war, and was saddened at how this was excluding children from other regions and entrenching divisions among the community.⁵⁷⁷ Another participant elaborated further on these divisions, explaining that regional divisions have emerged out of a desire by Yemeni-Britons to project their Yemeni identity by engaging politically with the conflict and the associated regional politics. He suggested that this polarises people in the diaspora in ways that it would not polarise Yemenis in Yemen. 'You might actually see two people fighting in Sheffield about something that even in Yemen they don't fight about anymore,' he said, explaining that 'it's just because they want ... to prove their attachment to the country'. He noticed a significant change in relations between people in the community in Sheffield after the outbreak of the war.

Ali is the son of a well-known Yemeni author. He was born in Ibb, although his family originates from northern Yemen. Ali studied in the UK in the 1990s,

⁵⁷⁷ SV5, interview with the author, 12 October 2023, via Zoom.

returning to Sana'a in the early 2000s and working for a prominent Yemeni newspaper. He left Yemen again in 2016, moving his wife and children to the UK due to fears for their safety amid the ongoing civil war. Having already lived in the UK, it was not a difficult process for him to return. He settled in Sheffield and is actively involved with the Yemeni community across the UK, playing a prominent role in organisations lobbying and advocating for peace, as well as arts and culture initiatives focused on preserving Yemeni cultural heritage. He argues:

When the war started things were really bad, and you could see people who used to sit together in one place, they no longer sit because they had been fighting, arguing, all this kind of thing. And then they decided to just, you know, move away from each other. And then you have this polarisation, so ... local people from this area will sit together and not sit with the other ones, and this became the norm now. At the beginning I would sit in a place [and] meet people from Aden, from Dhalea, from Sa'adah, from Hajjah, from Hadhramaut – I mean, it's the Yemeni community. But now it is rare [to] go to a place where you will meet people from everywhere, everyone. Because they tend to have their own places.⁵⁷⁸

This is not so much out of a desire to create conflict, he argues, but instead to avoid it.⁵⁷⁹ Thus, the conflict is transported to the UK and manifests in local communities contextually unique ways. As well as having a detrimental effect

⁵⁷⁸ VZ7, interview with the author, 26 September 2023, via Zoom.

⁵⁷⁹ Ibid.

on community cohesion among the Yemeni-British, this polarisation is disincentivising people from expressing their views publicly and engaging with humanitarian and human rights issues, for fear that they will be perceived or labelled as supporting one side or another. One interviewee captured this phenomenon through the personal experience of her father: When their local mosque in Birmingham organised a march calling for an end to the war in Yemen, her father made plans to attend. He got dressed and ready to go and was walking to the protest when he ran into a friend who told him he should go home because it was a pro-Houthi rally. Although her father did not necessarily believe this and wanted to express his opposition to the war, he went home as his friend advised so as not to be perceived by the community as a Houthi sympathiser.⁵⁸⁰

Despite these regional divisions and binary perceptions of the conflict, many of those interviewed argue that, at the end of the day, being Yemeni comes first. One explained that, while many do hold views on the conflict dictated by their political or regional stances, they tend to keep these to themselves and will still gather together in person for occasions such as weddings, funerals and Ramadan. Another argued that tensions and disagreements – even those that have ended in violence or fighting – tend to be isolated incidents, and that you would not feel these tensions at community events attended by Yemenis from different backgrounds.⁵⁸¹ While this may be largely true, the above stories presented above

⁵⁸⁰ AF0, interview with the author, 27 September 2023, via Zoom.

⁵⁸¹ AB3, interview with the author, 21 September 2023, via Zoom.

strongly indicate that divisions and polarisation within Yemeni-British communities do exist, even if they are not always physically visible. While the majority of Yemenis describe themselves as Yemeni, British and Muslim first and appear more reluctant to acknowledge their regional identity, social class or political affiliations, these factors clearly have an influence over how individuals identify and form communities.

This begs the question of whether Yemeni Britons express themselves, their identity and their views of the conflict differently in the online space, away from the watching eyes of many in their physical locality, and how this is affecting their communities – both physical and virtual. The subsequent section of this chapter will delve deeper into this topic, exploring how the internet and social media are reshaping identity and community formation in the specific case of the UK.

Being Yemeni-British Online

Chapters 4, 5 and 6 of this thesis have explored the idea that the proliferation of the internet and social media is giving rise to more transnational and deterritorialised communities of Yemenis in the homeland and the diaspora by increasing opportunities for connection and bridging traditional physical and geographical divides. The following paragraphs explore this phenomenon through the lens of the UK diaspora, highlighting the ways in which the internet

and social media are reshaping how Yemeni British people identify and connect with other Yemenis elsewhere in the UK, in Yemen and internationally.

What is clear from the interview data is that the impact of the internet and social media on how Yemenis connect to one another, their culture and their homeland is significant across generations. One way in which this occurs is through the exchange of content and information, which increases the exposure of Yemenis in the diaspora to their homeland and its culture. This enables a deeper connection with Yemen, and means they are no longer reliant on their local communities as their main source of information about what it means to be Yemeni.

As outlined earlier in this thesis, the ability to connect through voice notes and video calls have been particularly transformative for Yemenis located thousands of miles away from their families. One interviewee spoke about how he uses FaceTime from his home in Sheffield to converse with elders in his remote village in Yemen, thus enabling him to remain connected to his community in Yemen in ways that would previously have been impossible.⁵⁸² Meanwhile, as established in previous chapters of this thesis, the use of instant messaging platforms like WhatsApp means that many Yemenis in the UK are in near constant contact with others in the UK, in Yemen, and other countries around the world, sharing and

⁵⁸² VZ7, interview with the author, 26 September 2023, via Zoom.

receiving information and news from Yemen and building connections with one another.

Platforms like Instagram, Twitter, and Facebook are also enabling diaspora Yemenis to connect more deeply to each other and their homeland. One participant lauded the ways in which social media is making it easier for Yemeni youth in Liverpool to access information and content from the ground in Yemen, granting them knowledge of local politics, culture and society that was previously held by gatekeepers in the Yemeni community – who were primarily older and Arabic speaking, which excluded some of younger Yemeni Britons who did not speak fluent Arabic.⁵⁸³ The highly visual and interactive nature of content on platforms like Instagram adds a new dimension to the exposure of Yemenis in the UK to the experience of those in their homeland, in comparison with the oral testimonies and passing of information that would have occurred in the past, thus facilitating a deeper connection with Yemenis in Yemen than would not have been possible before.

Meanwhile, Yemeni Britons are also using social media to connect with other Yemenis in the UK outside of their known, local communities. One interviewee, who migrated to London shortly before the outbreak of the war, explained that he was part of a private group on Instagram called the ‘Yemeni Society in London’ who gather semi-regularly to eat together. The group consists of

⁵⁸³ SV5, interview with the author, 12 October 2023, via Zoom.

Yemenis from a variety of regional backgrounds and political outlooks. Although, he says, he is aware of other people's political views because he follows them on social media, this does not stand in the way of them coming together, sharing food, and connecting as fellow Yemenis.⁵⁸⁴

Meanwhile, a second-generation Yemeni from Birmingham mentioned that it was relatively common for young Yemeni-British women to connect on social media without knowing each other in person, on the basis of their common identity as 'Yemeni Brits', thus creating a web of virtual connections between Yemenis across the UK.⁵⁸⁵ But this phenomenon is not confined to Yemenis in Britain: Another interviewee, based in Liverpool, elaborated that this practice had increased since the outbreak of the war among diaspora Yemenis located in different countries. She explained that she had little interest in connecting with Yemenis outside of the UK growing up, but that the war had increased her desire to connect with others in the global diaspora, and she had both sent and received many friend requests since the outbreak of the conflict. At the time of the interview, she had just returned from a trip to Paris for a Yemeni music concert, where she had met with Yemenis living all over Europe, many of whom were bilingual in other European languages as well as Arabic. She acknowledged the

⁵⁸⁴ SK3, interview with the author, 24 April 2023, via Zoom.

⁵⁸⁵ GH6, interview with the author, 6 October 2023, via Zoom.

inevitable ways in which such interactions will impact Yemeni identity in the diaspora over time.⁵⁸⁶

The impact of these virtual connections on identity formation processes is arguably profound. Identity is no longer being negotiated within the confines of the local, territorialised Yemeni community, as the virtual influence of Yemenis back in Yemen and elsewhere in the global diaspora is playing a heightened role. These stories also echo Koinova's concept of multi-site embeddedness, as the internet and social media are enabling Yemenis to ground themselves – both in physical and identity terms – in multiple places at once, crossing traditional social boundaries and geographical borders.⁵⁸⁷ They also show that, although virtual connections are increasing and the online world is playing a more prominent role in shaping what it means to be Yemeni, the importance of geography and physical, in-person connection remains. The Yemeni diaspora is not becoming entirely deterritorialised as a result of these unprecedented technological shifts; instead, both physical and imagined communities are coming together, overlapping and interweaving in ways that would have been impossible as recently as a decade ago.

One should not be tempted to assume, however, that the effects of these phenomena are exclusively positive. While inevitably increasing opportunities

⁵⁸⁶ SV5, interview with the author, 12 October 2023, via Zoom.

⁵⁸⁷ Koinova, 'Diaspora Mobilisation for Conflict', 1262.

for connection, the internet and social media are also contributing to the deepening of cleavages and divides across the diaspora, and catalysing polarisation processes within and between diaspora communities. Yemenis in the UK have not been immune to the broader political polarisation that has occurred in recent years as a result of social media algorithms and echo chambers.

One interviewee argued that, as well as further polarisation Yemenis along the lines of the conflict within Yemen, the internet and social media are also exposing Yemeni British people to other global trends such as the deepening of sectarian divisions amongst Muslims online. According to him, 'sectarianism didn't exist' among Yemenis in the past, yet today Yemenis are much more likely to identify themselves and find commonality along sectarian lines as a result of divisive content and hate speech.⁵⁸⁸ Another interviewee argues that such divisions are more prominent among Yemeni youth than among the older generation, who tend to put such differences aside in the name of maintaining relationships and community cohesiveness. This, he argues, is because young people are more vulnerable to polarisation as a result of exaggerations and misunderstandings that can occur on social media. 'Social media does not end in social media,' he contends. 'It changes the behaviour of people, and their stance and their relationships with their neighbours, family and their friends.' He references a specific example that occurred as a result of a pro-Southern Transitional Council

⁵⁸⁸ AB3, interview with the author, 21 September 2023, via Zoom.

(STC) social media campaign, which led to a physical fight between Yemenis in Sheffield who supported and opposed the STC.⁵⁸⁹

He also argued that one of the reasons why social media has been so influential over real-life community dynamics is because people are more vocal on social media than they would be in real life. Misunderstandings can arise online, he argued, because people are more likely to express and interpret views in black and white terms, without the benefit of things like body language and facial expression to help them understand one another's points of view.⁵⁹⁰ Another interviewee echoed this, saying that Yemenis in the diaspora tend to make quick judgements about others' political stances online, quickly labelling others Houthi or Hirak (STC) on the basis of content they have shared – that may or may not be explicitly supportive of either.⁵⁹¹ This alludes to the ways in which the internet and social media are complicating – or perhaps expediting – processes of conflict transportation.

While this chapter has articulated the ways in which social media and the internet are 'bridging the gap' and 'blurring the lines' between the diaspora in the UK and the homeland, it is also worth considering the ways in which these technologies can simultaneously deepen these divides, and contribute towards keeping Yemenis in the diaspora 'out of touch' with Yemenis in the homeland.

⁵⁸⁹ VZ7, interview with the author, 26 September 2023, via Zoom.

⁵⁹⁰ Ibid.

⁵⁹¹ AF0, interview with the author, 27 September 2023, via Zoom.

While the above has demonstrated how social media and the internet have contributed towards Yemeni-British interviewees feeling closer to Yemen in a number of ways, one should not assume that Yemenis in Yemen feel increased closeness or commonality with the diaspora. No Yemenis living fully inside Yemen were interviewed for this study, therefore it is difficult to analyse the extent to which Yemenis in the homeland still perceive the diaspora to be 'out of touch' with their concerns.

However, the research has indicated that social media and the internet are raising awareness among Yemeni Britons of symbolic issues such as political identities and sectarianism – which are possibly less important to Yemenis dealing with the everyday consequences of war. Additionally, if it is true that Yemenis outside Yemen have increased exposure to the struggles of ordinary Yemenis in the homeland, it might also be assumed that Yemenis in Yemen – at least those with access to the internet – therefore also have increased exposure to the ways Yemenis outside of Yemen live their lives. For ordinary Yemenis living with daily violence and economic struggles resulting from the conflict, it is very possible that the comparatively safe and privileged diaspora might seem disconnected from their own reality. It is impossible to back up this assumption without conducting research into the views and perceptions of Yemenis on the ground. However, the purpose here is to highlight the implicit complexities of attempting to understand the influence and impact of the internet and social media on diaspora relations.

By exploring the unique dynamics of identity and community formation among Yemenis in the UK, the above has provided a foundation on which this chapter can now begin to grapple with the ways the UK diaspora are mobilising in the conflict in Yemen, and how the internet and social media are shaping and reshaping these processes. The following section uses the specific case of the UK as a lens through which to test the research and analysis presented in Chapters 4 and 5. It outlines the various ways in which Yemenis in the UK are mobilising in order to conclude whether this is representative of the broader trends identified in relation to the global diaspora. It additionally highlights any particular mobilisation dynamics that are unique to the Yemeni community in the UK, using the theoretical frameworks identified in Chapters 2 and 3 to understand the reasons and contextual factors behind this. It then highlights the ways in which Yemenis in the UK are using the internet and social media to mobilise, and how mobilisation patterns are changing as a result.

Historical Mobilisation Among the Yemeni-British

Yemenis in the UK have historically mobilised politically around a number of issues, at times focusing their attention on local politics in Britain, while at others engaging from afar in the politics of their homeland. At times the two have been interlinked, one notable example being the formation of the Yemeni Workers Union in the 1970s, which constituted a link between the workers in Britain and their home country and had a membership of around 1,900 at its peak. Yemenis in Britain were inspired by the development of the nationalist movement in

Yemen, their awareness of it no doubt heightened by the fact that it was their host country the movement was fighting against.⁵⁹² In the case of Yemenis in Liverpool, Harrison attributes their active mobilisation around such causes to a 'continued awareness of and attachments to people and places in Yemen as well as a diasporic consciousness which invokes imaginaries of Yemen's past into the present'.⁵⁹³

However, such activism largely ceased during the years since the 1970s. Al-Deen attributes this to the 'shift in the nature of immigration from single men as non-permanent workers to families seeking more permanent resettlement', which led to 'significant changes within the Yemeni diaspora's concerns and priorities'.⁵⁹⁴

She argues that the Yemeni community in Britain during this time became less concerned with politics and more concerned with issues such as maintaining their identity and customs. She also cites funding constraints for initiatives not focused on the UK, as well as a decline in attachment to Yemen among Yemenis in the diaspora as reasons for the decline in political mobilisation.⁵⁹⁵

But according to Al-Deen's research, the political energy of Yemenis in the UK was renewed in 2011 during the protest movement that unseated President Saleh. 'The Yemeni diaspora became active in an unprecedented way', she argues,

⁵⁹² Halliday, *Britain's First Muslims*, 47-8.

⁵⁹³ Harrison, 'Yemeni, Muslim, and Scouse', 282.

⁵⁹⁴ Al-Deen, 'The Houthi-Tribal Conflict in Yemen', 3.

⁵⁹⁵ Ibid.

leading to tensions and divisions within the Yemeni-British community.⁵⁹⁶ Some northern Yemenis organised demonstrations and pressure campaigns in support of the protest movement, while other northerners declined to partake on the basis of their support for the Saleh regime. Meanwhile many southerners, although sympathetic to the political uprising and its goals, were disillusioned by the perceived disenfranchisement of the south under the banner of a unified Yemen and also declined to mobilise, dubious of the possibility of meaningful reform.⁵⁹⁷ The outbreak of war in 2015 and the subsequent years of fighting further entrenched these divisions, she argues. While the war seemed to be increasingly polarising Yemenis along political lines (reflecting the stories told earlier in this chapter), those in favour of peace were wary of mobilising in any way that might strengthen either side. This paralysis, coupled with the British government and media's lack of interest in the ongoing situation in Yemen, led to what Al-Deen refers to as 'political apathy' among Yemenis in the UK.⁵⁹⁸ Shiban echoes this conclusion, elaborating that those Yemenis who were born in the UK are 'haunted by their past'. While they feel their Yemeni identity strongly, he argues that they have failed to capitalise on education and development opportunities in the UK, and that their influence over UK policymakers is limited.⁵⁹⁹

⁵⁹⁶ Ibid., 4.

⁵⁹⁷ Ibid.

⁵⁹⁸ Ibid.

⁵⁹⁹ Shiban, 'Over the mountains, across the oceans'.

Political mobilisation among Yemeni Britons throughout the conflict has therefore remained limited to particular groups. Southern Yemenis in the UK, for example, have mobilised more than northerners as a result of the establishment of the STC in 2017. Mobilisation activities have included demonstrations and the spreading of pro-STC propaganda online, actively encouraged by the STC and its leadership. The STC established an office in London in 2019 after a visit to the UK from the Council's leader, Aydarous Al-Zubaidi, who made a direct call to the Yemeni community in Sheffield to mobilise in support of its efforts in Yemen. Its success has been limited, however, as divisions later emerged among southern Yemenis in Britain as a result of the emergence of an increasing number of anti-STC factions in Yemen and the perceived failure of the Council to push back against the Internationally Recognised Government.⁶⁰⁰

First generation Yemeni migrants have also mobilised considerably more actively than previous generations. Shuja Al-Deen suggests that one reason for this is because of the way in which the conflict has restricted travel to Yemen, thus weakening the ties of the second and third generation to the political realities on the ground in a way that is not the case for those who were born Yemen and displaced by the conflict. She suggests that there is a view of Yemen among those in the diaspora in the UK as being a 'helpless country', thus stemming interest and political mobilisation efforts.⁶⁰¹ This echoes the

⁶⁰⁰ Al-Deen, 'The Houthi-Tribal Conflict in Yemen', 4.

⁶⁰¹ Ibid., 2.

interviewee cited above who described the post-2011 migrants as the ‘dreamers’, engaged and intent on changing Yemen’s political reality in ways that the second and third generations in the UK are not.⁶⁰² However, as the remainder of this chapter shows, second and third generation Yemenis – particularly the youth – are actively mobilising in other, less outwardly political ways, such as through arts and culture initiatives and by organising fundraisers and humanitarian campaigns to support communities in Yemen. This echoes Al-Deen’s assertion that the earlier Yemeni communities are more interested in issues of identity than in politics. The interviewees add nuance to the issues discussed above.

Nada grew up in Yemen, moving from Taizz to Sana’a with her family at the age of ten. Her father passed away from a health condition when Nada was eighteen years old, sparking an irrepressible desire in her to use her life and career to improve health conditions in her country. She began her work with international NGOs in Yemen and later accepted a scholarship to study in Jordan. She went on to work all over the region, specialising in protection issues. In 2019, Nada accepted a Chevening scholarship to complete her Master’s degree in the north of the UK. She claimed asylum in the UK in 2021 and is now pursuing her PhD, researching transitional justice and peacebuilding in Yemen.⁶⁰³

⁶⁰² LE0, interview with the author, 21 May 2023, via Zoom.

⁶⁰³ ID5, interview with the author, 19 May 2023, via Zoom.

Nada suggested that the older generations of Yemenis in the UK have a limited understanding of the real-life impact of their mobilisation efforts and activities due to not having been physically on the ground, experiencing the conflict themselves. This, she argued, created potential for these generations to do more harm than good if their efforts were misguided.⁶⁰⁴ This is reflected in their own perceived absence of legitimacy, based on their lack of first-hand experience of the war politically. One interviewee, a second-generation Yemeni from Birmingham, explained that she had always felt ‘a bit uncomfortable’ engaging politically on issues relating to Yemen, living in a state of constant awareness of her privilege, having not lived in Yemen during the war.⁶⁰⁵

Nada also reflected that the earlier generations of Yemenis she had met in the UK seemed more concerned with living their lives in the UK than with the realities of the war for Yemenis on the ground.⁶⁰⁶ Another interviewee echoed this, saying that although he believed the majority sympathise with what’s happening in Yemen, very few would actually take action and mobilise in response. ‘They sympathise with what's happening’, he said, ‘but are they going to go and contact their MPs? Maybe one in five, if I'm really optimistic’.⁶⁰⁷ A third interviewee expressed that the lack of mobilisation among earlier generations of Yemenis was a result of the Yemeni community in the UK being more ‘scattered’ than other

⁶⁰⁴ Ibid.

⁶⁰⁵ AF0, interview with the author, 27 September 2023, via Zoom.

⁶⁰⁶ ID5, interview with the author, 19 May 2023, via Zoom.

⁶⁰⁷ LE0, interview with the author, 21 May 2023, via Zoom.

diasporas, citing the Kurds as an example of a more unified and mobilised diaspora community.⁶⁰⁸

That is not to say that the newer generation of Yemeni migrants have not tried to encourage earlier generations to mobilise alongside them. On the contrary, multiple interviewees who migrated to the UK since 2011 specifically mentioned their personal attempts to garner support and action among Yemeni-British people for activities such as lobbying and advocacy work, particularly encouraging the UK government to end arms sales to Saudi Arabia and instead use its influence to support a peaceful resolution. They argue that second and third generation Yemenis are in a 'good place to raise their voices', but that many 'forget' the ability they have to influence their own policymakers.⁶⁰⁹ One interviewee cited an example of a Yemeni-British person asking for his support to organise activities in support of peace in Yemen after hearing him speak publicly about the conflict. The interviewee responded by asking who their MP was, and they said they did not know.⁶¹⁰

As well as offering a deeper understanding of why the earlier generations of Yemenis are less mobilised politically than those who migrated from 2011 onwards, these insights also highlight the differences in the way pre- and post-2011 Yemeni migrants perceive themselves and each other. They also highlight

⁶⁰⁸ SK3, interview with the author, 24 April 2023, via Zoom.

⁶⁰⁹ ID5, interview with the author, 19 May 2023; SK3, interview with the author, 24 April 2023, via Zoom.

⁶¹⁰ SK3, interview with the author, 24 April 2023, via Zoom.

the importance of the individual's experience of Yemen and the war in shaping how Yemenis identify and mobilise in the conflict.

Mobilisation Patterns in Britain

As articulated above, political mobilisation among the Yemeni community in the UK has been somewhat limited, with first generation migrants mobilising considerably more actively than earlier generations in activities such as lobbying and advocacy. However, that is not to say that their efforts and activities should be overlooked or deemed insignificant.

Those interviewed for this study have been mobilised politically in support of their homeland in a number of ways, including: sharing data and analysis of the conflict and its impact with parliament through lobby groups such as the Labour Friends of Yemen, and supporting the expansion of such groups across cities with major Yemeni populations;⁶¹¹ working with international NGOs such as Oxfam and Save the Children to organise awareness raising campaigns and generate public support for a resolution to the conflict; joining political parties and lobbying their individual MPs to support peacebuilding efforts and more sympathetic asylum policies for Yemeni refugees;⁶¹² lobbying parliament to reduce travel costs for Yemenis to visit their homeland after the conflict made travel to Yemen prohibitively expensive, thus dividing families and preventing

⁶¹¹ SK3, interview with the author, 24 April 2023; VZ7, interview with the author, 26 September 2023, via Zoom.

⁶¹² LE0, interview with the author, 21 May 2023, via Zoom.

them from visiting their loved ones;⁶¹³ consulting with government departments such as the Foreign, Commonwealth and Development Office (previously the Foreign and Commonwealth Office and the Department for International Development) on their humanitarian and development work in Yemen;⁶¹⁴ participating in peacebuilding initiatives and consultations led by multilateral organisations such as the UN that engage diaspora voices.⁶¹⁵

It is worth noting that the first ever MP of Yemeni origin was elected to parliament in the July 2024 general election for the Central Sheffield constituency. Labour candidate Abtisam Mohamed, whose father and grandfather both worked in Sheffield's steel mills, won over fifty percent of the vote.⁶¹⁶ It will be interesting to observe how this may affect the ways that Yemenis in the UK – particularly in Sheffield, but also elsewhere in the country – mobilise, both in British politics and on behalf of their ancestral homeland. It raises questions around whether having an MP of Yemeni origin will inspire and empower other Yemenis in the second and third generations to become more politically active on a local level, and whether Yemen's conflict might come to occupy a more prominent position in British politics and public debate.

In contrast to the limited political mobilisation and activity of the Yemeni community as a whole in the UK, many Yemeni Britons – including earlier

⁶¹³ SV5, interview with the author, 12 October 2023, via Zoom.

⁶¹⁴ LE0, interview with the author, 21 May 2023, via Zoom.

⁶¹⁵ VZ7, interview with the author, 26 September 2023, via Zoom.

⁶¹⁶ Rodrigues, 'Yemenis in Britain'.

generations – have engaged actively with local initiatives to welcome and support asylum seekers arriving from Yemen since the outbreak of the war. According to one interviewee in Liverpool, the community had rallied together to support the new arrivals, many of whom had been forced to leave Saudi Arabia when the government changed its policy and regulation surrounding the working rights of Yemenis in the Kingdom. Many of the new arrivals had found jobs – often, she presumed, illegal and cash-in-hand work – in local Yemeni restaurants and other Yemeni-owned businesses. As a result of this support system on arrival, many have gone on to learn English and succeed in business.⁶¹⁷

Others have engaged in development and humanitarian work which has created demonstrable impact for communities affected by the war on the ground in Yemen – although this has not necessarily always been positive. In the international development space, first generation Yemenis in the UK are often sought after by NGOs delivering donor-funded projects on the ground in Yemen thanks to their local access, networks, knowledge of the situation on the ground (relative to foreigners or Yemenis who have not lived in Yemen) and their Yemeni Arabic skills. This is advantageous for the organisation, but not necessarily for the Yemeni in question. Interviewees working in this space expressed frustration at working in this sector for a number of reasons. Firstly, their affiliations to international organisations can lead to suspicion within Yemen, thus discrediting them and affecting their legitimacy (‘Everybody thinks

⁶¹⁷ SV5, interview with the author, 12 October 2023, via Zoom.

I'm a spy', vented one interviewee). Secondly, they are often expected to have unrealistic levels of knowledge and expertise of any and every issue relating to Yemen purely based on the fact that they are Yemeni.

The subject matter of the work can also be traumatising, as can the specific tasks that tend to be allocated to Yemenis, such as engaging directly with beneficiaries on the ground who have suffered unimaginable horrors of war. One interviewee mentioned that the responsibility for communicating with families of abducted or assassinated individuals often falls to him because of his understanding of local culture and customs.⁶¹⁸ Another vented his frustration about the tough subject matter to which he is frequently exposed through his work:

Most of my work is actually focused on just poverty, conflict, and it's quite depressing ... You're expected to be an expert on everything. So in my work, for instance, you know, 'Get the CVs of these guys... You know, 'what's the poorest area in this area?' You're meant to know everything about Yemen.⁶¹⁹

The same interviewee expressed his disillusionment with the development space as a whole, raising ethical concerns about the power dynamics inherent in such work and the networks of funding and resources upon which the sector exists:

I'm very well integrated within the war economy ... Everybody talks about the Houthis and the Government's war economy, or economic

⁶¹⁸ SK3, interview with the author, 24 April 2023, via Zoom.

⁶¹⁹ AB3, interview with the author, 21 September 2023, via Zoom.

warfare I should say, but really you know, there's an economy [around] Yemen [that exists] so that aid organisations can succeed. And they throw money at projects that are actually just not sustainable whatsoever ... And you just feel guilty that you're making money, and you're profiting from this conflict.⁶²⁰

His account demonstrates the problematic quagmire development organisations often find themselves in when it comes to Yemen, whereby they are often – inadvertently or otherwise – perpetuating the conflict on the ground through their work. On the one hand, they must demonstrate their commitment to impact and sustainability in order to access funding. On the other hand, that funding will only remain accessible as long as the conflict continues. Thus, it is often not in the economic interest of development organisations working on Yemen – nor the individuals in the diaspora whom they employ – for the conflict to end. This demonstrates how first-generation diaspora actors in the UK, who are strategically well placed with access to development job opportunities and donor funding, can easily become integrated into the transnational networks of patronage that sustain Yemen's political marketplace.

Leveraging local support for humanitarian initiatives

Chapter 5 outlined the ways in which Yemenis are engaging with their communities – both local and online – to fundraise for and deliver humanitarian interventions to support individuals, families and communities in Yemen, often

⁶²⁰ Ibid.

systematically but informally, without the support of a larger charity or NGO. The dataset and interviews for this thesis indicated that this is a common practice in the UK that appears to be distinct from more political mobilisation activities in that such initiatives are frequently led by that second and third generation Yemeni Britons within existing Yemeni communities – not just first-generation Yemenis who migrated since 2011. The research indicates that what often starts as a small community fundraiser for a specific purpose of campaign can grow organically through support from the community into a larger campaign or organisation.

Yemenis of all generations indicated that it is common for most Yemeni families in the UK to send a portion of their salaries back to their families in Yemen, particularly since the onset of the conflict has made life in Yemen increasingly difficult. One interviewee's account demonstrated how common and systematic these processes can be.

Khaled was born in London to Yemeni parents, who moved their family to Birmingham when Khaled was a teenager in order to be closer to the Yemeni community. Khaled moved to Yemen in 2010, where he stayed for five years before being evacuated to the UK a few months into the conflict. He was motivated by the violence and destruction he witnessed in 2015 to start a charity, which delivers food aid, water, emergency supplies, construction projects and medical operations for victims of the conflict in Yemen. He is currently based in

Birmingham but travels frequently to Yemen and Egypt to coordinate humanitarian operations. He has built a large following on his personal Instagram, which he uses to fundraise and share the beneficiaries' stories. He explained this:

For example, [in] a family, you know, there'd be three to four people working in that family, they'll chip in every month, every couple of weeks - fifty pounds each, a hundred pounds each - whatever they can afford that month. [They] put it together [and] send it to the head of the family over there, [and] the head of the family will feed the family. They'll pay their rent and medication and whatever they need over there. And because, you know, they don't have electricity in Yemen, sometimes families in the UK have to buy them a generator and try and sort them out, and try and give [them] the services that they lack. You know Yemenis, they can't do everything, but they're doing something. They're trying.⁶²¹

Two of those interviewed run larger scale campaigns - though not necessarily registered charities or NGOs - supporting entire communities in Sana'a and Taizz respectively through food packages, water tanks, medical and emergency humanitarian support. One interviewee, based in Birmingham, explained that what had started as a small fundraiser using the GoFundMe platform with a target of £1,000, had now grown into an organisation that had raised over £16,000

⁶²¹ ZO2, interview with the author, 13 September 2023, via Zoom.

and served Yemenis affected by the conflict through numerous interventions and projects.

Maryam was born and raised in Birmingham to Yemeni parents. One summer, on a trip to visit family in Taizz, she fell in love and married one of her second cousins, later giving birth to a baby girl. She would spend months at a time in Yemen with her husband and his family, and was in Taizz when the Saudi-led coalition began their bombing campaign in March 2015. After being stranded for some months in Taizz with her then three-year-old daughter, she managed to escape on a flight from Sana'a and returned to the UK. She now runs a community organisation that fundraises in the UK for humanitarian projects in Yemen, which she delivers in coordination with her cousin in Taizz. Since its inception, she has raised thousands of pounds and delivered food packages, medical supplies and water tanks to vulnerable communities in Yemen.⁶²² She describes the process:

I put a target of a grand, I think it was one thousand, and I remember it hit like two [thousand] ... And I was just like, 'Oh, my God! This is brilliant!' So I remember, we fed over a hundred families with rice, flour, oil, and pasta.⁶²³

⁶²² GH6, interview with the author, 6 October 2023, via Zoom.

⁶²³ Ibid.

She went on to explain that she was motivated to continue fundraising because of the impact created by this first campaign, along with her mistrust for larger charities and NGOs:

I don't trust charities, to be honest ... I really don't, because they make like over £50,000 or £100,000, and I don't see no projects. I don't see anything being done. I don't see things being posted a lot ... They gain about £20,000, and they show a few pieces of videos that don't look like £20,000 worth of work. You know, 'We're going to fix this building', and nothing's done ... So I had my cousin in Yemen, my husband's brother. He was like, 'We'll work together, you just send me the money and I'll do everything' ... So he did that, and it just blew up. And then it was only when, after a couple of weeks, people were like, 'Are you going to send money to Yemen?', and I was like, 'No, it was just a one off'. And then I thought, well actually, let me continue it. And then we started to, like every time there was something like a Ramadan or Eid, would think of projects to do - whether it was to feed the poor, to clothe the poor and to go into hospitals and give dialysis, help patients with their, you know, treatments, cancer, kids [with cancer]... So then it just started to be a thing where we'd be doing about five or six projects a year - different things.⁶²⁴

A few things stand out as interesting in this case. Firstly, the grassroots, community-led nature of the project is remarkable, highlighting that, even in the age of GoFundMe, local communities can still play a fundamental role for diasporas mobilising in humanitarian affairs in the homeland. Secondly, this

⁶²⁴ Ibid.

example highlights the importance of the trust and accountability that often exists at the level of local communities, while it may be lacking at the level of international NGOs and large-scale humanitarian interventions in Yemen. Despite the absence of a registered charity, donations have flowed freely for Maryam's work from Yemenis in her local community, who are eager to help their fellow Yemenis in the homeland. This trust appears to emanate in many ways from Maryam herself and the way that she shares individual stories of the people and communities she has helped. This stands in stark contrast to the glitzy PR campaigns and videos of INGOs delivering humanitarian interventions at scale, without the same personal touch or known individual connection. Another interviewee located in Birmingham echoed this, saying:

With Yemenis it's almost [like], 'I know so and so, I will transfer to your account' ... You don't have to see that website, you don't have to see stuff like that. It's almost [like], 'I know that you've told me about it [so] I will just transfer you the money' ... Even if you don't personally know this Yemeni ... when it comes to money ... whether it's for donations in Yemen or someone's collecting, then you will hand it over. You wouldn't really ask much about how it's going to get there, or anything like that - you will transfer, or you will give cash, it's not really a problem ... You even hear people say, 'Oh, if it gets there, or if it doesn't' ... you just hand over the money ... There's a trust there.⁶²⁵

⁶²⁵ AF0, interview with the author, 27 September 2023, via Zoom.

Finally, the unofficial nature of such activities is interesting, highlighting the ways in which Yemenis in the diaspora are engaging in the informal economy of the homeland. First generation Yemenis in London like Ahmed and Hamid are engaged in patronage networks in Yemen through official channels in ways that many second and third generation Yemenis appear not to be, by way of their engagement with international NGOs and development organisations. But at the same time, these older communities and earlier generations are equally embedded in the transnational networks of patronage sustaining Yemen's conflict and political marketplace through informal fundraising activities at the family and community levels, with direct impact on the lives of Yemenis on the ground in the homeland.

Identity Politics in Arts and Culture initiatives

Another area where Yemenis in the UK appear to be highly active is the arts and culture space, with Yemeni Britons engaging in a wide array of activities through which they explore and express their Yemeni heritage, including visual arts, fashion, literature and food. At an organisational level, platforms like the British Yemeni Society, Liverpool Arab Arts Festival and the Tamadon Foundation sponsor cultural activities across the UK, such as film, literature and poetry

projects, as well as other educational initiatives aimed at introducing Arab arts and culture in schools in cities with large Yemeni communities such.⁶²⁶

Such activities could be understood to reflect arguments discussed earlier in this chapter, that Yemenis in the UK are more interested in questions of identity and culture than politics. However, arts and culture can also be a space where Yemenis can engage politically in a less overtly contentious manner than through activities such as lobbying or advocacy, using artistic expression and questions of identity as a doorway for engaging with issues such as the ongoing conflict, the UK's role in sustaining it, and the community divisions that have emerged as a result. One interviewee mentioned a project he had been involved with through the Liverpool Arab Arts Festival (LAAF) called 'Yemen in Conflict', the aim of which was to use literature, art and poetry to bring the Yemeni community together across regional and political lines:

Ali is the son of a well-known Yemeni author. He was born in Ibb, although his family originates from northern Yemen. Ali studied in the UK in the 1990s, returning to Sana'a in the early 2000s and working for a prominent Yemeni newspaper. He left Yemen again in 2016, moving his wife and children to the UK due to fears for their safety amid the ongoing civil war. Having already lived in the UK, it was not a difficult process for him to return. He settled in Sheffield and

⁶²⁶ Al-Deen, 'The Houthi-Tribal Conflict in Yemen', 5; Tamadon for Media and Cultural Development, 'Projects' [online] accessed 24 July 2024, https://tamadon.co.uk/?page_id=608.

is actively involved with the Yemeni community across the UK, playing a prominent role in organisations lobbying and advocating for peace, as well as arts and culture initiatives focused on preserving Yemeni cultural heritage. He explained his role organising events:

I took charge of organising this workshop and I invited people from all different divisions: women, men; old, young; North, South; pro-Houthi, anti-Houthi. all these kinds of things. So I made a good collection of everyone, and the idea was for us to have one day of Yemeni poetry, speaking about our feelings of the conflict, our desires ... And the experience was amazing. First of all, I never thought they would actually attend because, you know, I didn't know whether they were really interested in poetry. Or of course, when they know also other people might attend, they might just think, 'no, I don't want to go there'. But people came - all those I invited, they came. And of course I made sure they didn't sit on separate tables, so I mixed them together and they just blended so easily and nicely ... it was like they forgot all about the problems. I know some people [who hadn't] talked to each other for like a year, and they came to the workshop. They are old friends, and ... I don't know whether it was the poetry or actually the challenge itself to put them together which made this. But eventually it was a very big success. We thought poetry can actually get people together. And they produced very nice poetry - even those who don't like poetry! We told them to just write. And at the end of this project we actually published a book ... which has all this poetry of all the workshops in different cities. And you can see how people actually express their feelings towards the war, but then how they

became more unified into, 'Let's stop this, let's go back to what we used to be'.⁶²⁷

This example highlights the unifying power of arts and culture in bridging political divides in the diaspora, echoing the aforementioned idea that people put their differences aside and reconnect as Yemenis when they meet in person. It also highlights the subtle ways that arts and culture can be used for political means, drawing on their unique ability to create a safe, non-contentious space for individuals to express themselves politically .

Meanwhile, Yemeni youth are finding new, creative ways to express their identity and their political views, such as Yemeni-British fashion designer Kazna Asker, who fuses fashion and digital art to encompass values of community, activism, and charity. Her work weaves traditional Yemeni styles into modern streetwear pieces, inspired by her multicultural community in Sheffield.⁶²⁸ 'My main fashion inspiration is my family,' she says, 'I'd see my grandma in a traditional hijab and abaya and my cousin sat next to her in a roadman tracksuit.'⁶²⁹ She has been featured on the BBC and in Vogue, and has

⁶²⁷ VZ7, interview with the author, 26 September 2023, via Zoom.

⁶²⁸ Kazna Asker, 'About' [online], accessed 24 July 2024, <https://kaznaasker.com/pages/about>

⁶²⁹ Jonelle Awomoyi and Jessica Sherwood, 'London Fashion Week: The British Muslim designer trying to be the future', *BBC News* [online], 22 September 2023, accessed 24 July 2024, <https://www.bbc.co.uk/news/newsbeat-66821139>.

collaborated with Kurt Geiger in 2023 for the designer's 'People Empowered' campaign – bringing Yemeni heritage into the British fashion mainstream.⁶³⁰

In 2023, Kazna participated in London Fashion week with a performative fashion show entitled 'What are we fighting for?', which seeks to question the impact individuals are capable of having in their communities and the world. 'The fight in me comes from my Yemeni heritage', she said. 'My parents fought for everything they have now. That rebellious side of me comes out in my fashion.'⁶³¹ As well as mobilising her own community in Sheffield around their Yemeni heritage, Kazna's success in the mainstream British fashion scene is also increasing the visibility of the Yemeni community in the UK, as well as the broader Arab and Muslim. Her work is also contributing towards promoting diversity and inclusion in creative spaces in Britain.

⁶³⁰ Kurt Geiger, 'PEOPLE EMPOWERED: KAZNA ASKER', *LinkedIn* [online] 2023, accessed 24 July 2024, https://www.linkedin.com/posts/kurt-geiger_kurtgeigerlondon-peopleempowered-activity-7045112286734118912-Axme/.

⁶³¹ TJ Sidhu, 'Kazna Asker: the radical designer putting protest first'. *The Face* [online], 14 February 2024, accessed 24 July 2024, <https://theface.com/style/kazna-asker-london-fashion-week-politics-sheffield-british-yemeni-northern-designer>.



Figure 2: Photograph of designer Kazna Asker's street fashion, inspired by Yemeni cultural heritage⁶³²

Yemeni youth in Liverpool are also using arts and culture initiatives to express themselves and their political views. In 2016, a group of Yemeni youth collaborated with filmmakers as part of the Liverpool Arab Arts Festival for a participatory video project entitled 'Anadeek Ya Yemen' (I call You Yemen), the purpose of which was to record the thoughts, experiences and memories of the Yemeni diaspora and to draw attention to the ongoing war.⁶³³ The project aimed to engage diaspora Yemenis from across the divides of the conflict, with a focus

⁶³² Kazna Asker (@kaznaasker). 'One of my favourite images, Burngreave Sheffield By @simonwheatleyphoto'. *Instagram*. 19 June 2024. Accessed 25 June 2024. <https://www.instagram.com/p/C8Zijcet3t/>.

⁶³³ Saferworld, 'Young filmmakers document experiences of Yemeni diaspora in Liverpool', *Saferworld Global* [online], accessed 24 July 2024, <https://www.saferworld-global.org/en-stories-of-change/young-filmmakers-document-experiences-of-yemeni-diaspora-in-liverpool>.

on Yemeni youth. The film was screened at a sports academy in the heart of Liverpool's Arab community. As well as capturing the ways in which the conflict was affecting the Yemeni community in the UK, the project also consisted of workshops that brought together and up-skilled emerging documentary makers and community groups in both Liverpool and Yemen.⁶³⁴

The power of arts and culture for identity and political expression was particularly apparent in the experience of one interviewee for this study, a British Yemeni poet, Fatima.

Fatima is a Scouse-Yemeni whose grandfather migrated to the UK in the 1960s. Fatima was born in southern Yemen, after her father returned to his family's homeland to marry – a traditionally common custom for many Yemeni men in Liverpool. She lived in Yemen until the age of four, something she believes distinguishes her from her younger siblings, who were all born in the UK, in the way she understands and experiences her Yemeni identity. Fatima's pride in both her Yemeni and Scouse identities are apparent in her work as a poet and freelance creative producer and educator. Through her creative work, she engages with issues such as diversity and anti-racism, as well as advocacy campaigns relating to Yemen and Palestine.

⁶³⁴ Liverpool Arab Arts Festival, 'Anadeek Ya Yemen: I Call You Yemen', 2016, accessed 24 July 2024, <https://www.arabartsfestival.com/anadeek-ya-yemen-i-call-you-yemen/>.

Despite her conviction that poetry can be a powerful force for impact and activism, Fatima explains that she did not immediately begin writing about Yemen when the war started, feeling that she was 'not qualified' to speak on behalf of Yemenis because she was not experiencing the conflict first-hand on the ground and could not read Arabic. However, as one of a small number of young Yemeni women in the UK with a public platform for her work, she found herself being invited to speak at panels, protests and rallies on behalf of the Yemeni community. Interestingly, she expressed that in the past she had not had a problem merging poetry with activism on behalf of other political causes, such as the Palestinian cause. Yemen, however, was 'more personal', and it took her some time to find her voice on the subject and allow herself to occupy space as a creative Yemeni activist. Her experiences have led her to firmly believe the power of bringing poetry and politics together for a cause, inspiring her own research on creative writing as a methodology for academic research:

I became part of the Labour Friends of Yemen. I became part of the Parliamentary Group on Yemen in Parliament. So I would go to these very political spaces, and that's when people would then say, 'Oh, let's bring poetry in'. So then I would start reciting poetry in these political gatherings, and I guess that's where like, you know, I started to find my voice a little bit. And that's where I think my activism and poetry started to really make sense. It was interesting because when I performed in Parliament, especially about Yemen, a cause that I really care about ... I don't know, [it was] just an interesting feeling. And I

think now I look at a lot in my work at creative research methods. I look at how poetry can be used as a form of academic outlet.⁶³⁵

Another recent initiative by diaspora Yemenis that uses arts and culture as a medium for identity exploration and political expression is Al Yamaniah, 'a digital community and platform that champions the creativity of women with Yemeni heritage'. Founded by Yemeni-British musician Noha Al Maghafi, Al Yemaniah seeks to push back against dominant narratives of Yemeni women, which have traditionally 'focused on undermining their position, and push[ed] aside the fact that despite the difficulties faced from the war in Yemen, as well as other issues, they continue to rise and contribute greatly to wider fields including music, politics, science, and development'.⁶³⁶

In 2024, Al Yamaniah released its first ever print magazine, an impressive collection of almost three hundred pages of creative contributions from Yemeni women across the global diaspora, including art, photography, stories, poetry and digital art. Of the seven women listed as constituting the Editorial Team, five are based in the UK, where the magazine was printed and distributed. Other members of the team are located in Canada and Saudi Arabia, while the many

⁶³⁵ SV5, interview with the author, 12 October 2023, via Zoom.

⁶³⁶ Sahar Esfandiari, 'Online platform Al Yamaniah seeks to change the narrative surrounding Yemeni women', *The New Arab* [online], 29 May 2020, accessed 24 July 2024, <https://www.newarab.com/features/al-yamaniah-subverting-stereotypes-about-yemeni-women>.

contributors come from an even wider array of countries across Europe, North America, the Middle East, Asia, and Yemen itself.

The theme of the issue is 'Al Dar', which means 'home' in Arabic. UK-based Asma Ibrahim, explains the concept and the process of bringing it from ideation to publication in her Editor's Letter:

Those of us in the diaspora can indulge in romanticism and nostalgia when it comes to our homeland, Yemen. This magazine does this unabashedly. Our daily reality as part of the diaspora is different, but I can promise that Yemen is not forgotten. Yemen is etched deep into our bones.⁶³⁷

While the magazine is nominally centred on sharing aspects of Yemeni history, heritage and popular culture, the impact of the war on its contributors is etched across its beautiful pages. From the poetry highlighting the heartbreak of displacement ('My friends are now scattered like pigeons in search of crumbs')⁶³⁸ to photo collages of Yemeni textiles aimed at preserving cultural heritage in wartime,⁶³⁹ for many in the diaspora, the conflict has become inseparable from expressions of what it means to be Yemeni. As well as being a powerful representation of the cross-section of creativity and political mobilisation, the *Al Yamaniah* magazine also highlights the ways in which Yemenis in the UK are

⁶³⁷ Asma Ibrahim, 'Editor's Letter', *Al Yamaniah*, February 2024, 1.

⁶³⁸ Bara'a Qirbi, 'My Dar', *Al Yamaniah*, February 2024, 36.

⁶³⁹ Asma Ibrahim, 'YENOF: Changing lives through art and charity', *Al Yamaniah*, February 2024, 162.

collaborating transnationally with other Yemenis, both in the homeland and elsewhere in the diaspora.

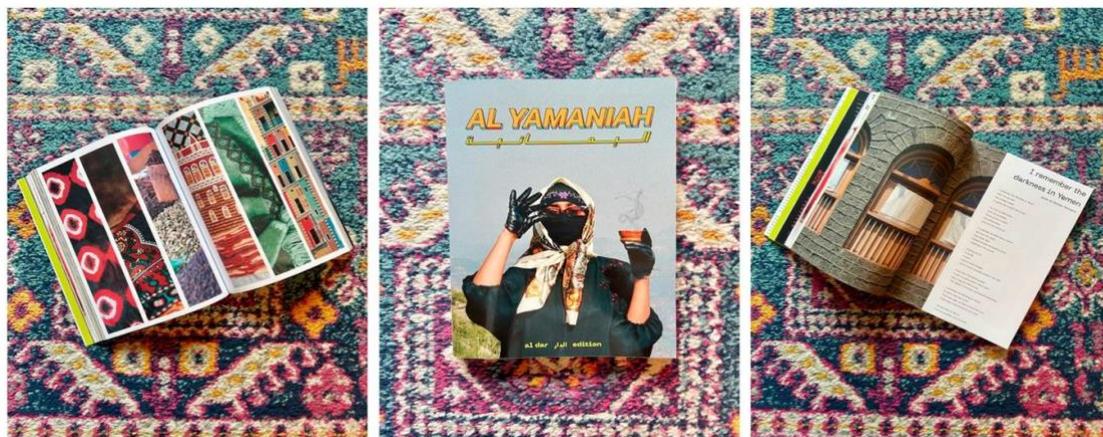


Figure 3: Author's own photograph of the cover and various page spreads from the February 2024 edition of *Al Yamaniah* magazine.⁶⁴⁰

The stories shared above clearly demonstrate how intertwined politics and identity are for Yemenis in the diaspora. They also show how, for Yemeni-British people who are hesitant to mobilise politically due to their own perceived lack of legitimacy, arts and culture can offer a less contentious space for them to explore the politics of their homeland, as well as their own positionality as Yemenis in the diaspora. Moreover, they shed light on the potential of artistic and cultural expression to unify different generations of migrants, as second and third generation Yemenis (shown earlier to be less likely to mobilise in overtly political activities) have found commonality with those who migrated since 2011, uniting and mobilising together through creativity.

Digital Mobilisation in the UK

⁶⁴⁰ *Al Yamaniah*, February 2024.

The stories above have alluded to the role the internet and social media are increasingly playing in diaspora mobilisation among Yemenis in the UK, from the GoFundMe pages being used to raise money for community campaigns, to the virtual, transnational cooperation between Yemeni women resulting in the publication of a previously digital platform's first print magazine. This section delves deeper into the specific ways in which the internet and social media are being used for mobilisation, and how mobilisation processes are shifting as a result, with profound implications for our understanding of the role of diasporas in homeland politics and conflict.

Yemenis in the UK are harnessing the power of the internet and social media, using a wide variety of platforms and tools to support the activities outlined in the previous section including political advocacy and lobbying, fundraising and humanitarian interventions, and arts and culture initiatives. The insights shared by the interviewees for this study indicate that their use of platforms such as WhatsApp, Twitter, Instagram and Signal largely reflect the broader trends identified in Chapter 5.

WhatsApp messages and groups are used daily by Yemeni Britons to connect with family and friends in Yemen, the UK and around the world, as well as for coordinating professional projects.⁶⁴¹ WhatsApp groups have become

⁶⁴¹ ID5, interview with the author, 19 May 2023, via Zoom; VZ7, interview with the author, 26 September 2023, via Zoom.

particularly useful tools for specific communities of Yemenis in the UK, such as the Chevening scholars. One such scholar who was interviewed explained that she is part of a Chevening group on WhatsApp in which members share news and events and maintain contact with the community.⁶⁴² This echoes the broader trend identified in Chapter 5, whereby Yemenis in the diaspora are using WhatsApp daily to communicate with loved ones, share news and information, and connect with communities – both physical and virtual, local and transnational.

The Yemenis in the UK also echoed the assertion in Chapter 5 that Twitter is largely used for more political or professional purposes, including following news and updates from journalists, think tanks and policymakers, as well as gauging public opinion on aspects relating to Yemen and the conflict.⁶⁴³ Echoing the research in Chapter 5, one Yemeni-British interviewee working in the development space noted that they use Twitter to share their work, including distributing research on Yemen on behalf of think tanks they work with.⁶⁴⁴ Meanwhile, another mentioned that she would use Twitter for the purpose of holding MPs or other actors accountable for their position towards, or role in the conflict.⁶⁴⁵ Email is also used among the Yemeni-British interviewees for official

⁶⁴² AB3, interview with the author, 21 September 2023, via Zoom.

⁶⁴³ AB3, interview with the author, 21 September 2023; AF0, interview with the author, 27 September 2023, via Zoom.

⁶⁴⁴ AB3, interview with the author, 21 September 2023, via Zoom.

⁶⁴⁵ AF0, interview with the author, 27 September 2023, via Zoom.

purposes such as contacting policymakers, while Signal remains useful for more sensitive activities that require an extra layer of security.⁶⁴⁶

More visual and video-based platforms like Instagram, however, are used for less political purposes. One participant indicated that she saw Instagram as a non-political space where she could ‘breathe’, away from the highly politicised and heavy subject matter of her advocacy and human rights work.⁶⁴⁷ Others, however, very much see the platform’s utility and centrality for their mobilisation activities and are actively using it to disseminate and build support for their work as it relates to Yemen. One participant, based in Birmingham, suggested when interviewed that Instagram is becoming increasingly important for fundraising within the Yemeni community in the UK.⁶⁴⁸ Meanwhile cultural platforms and projects have maximised the visual nature of Instagram to share their work. Al Yamaniah has a following of over twelve thousand people on Instagram, and was using the platform to share arts and culture content – including their podcast, interviewing Yemeni women across the global diaspora – for years before the publication of its print magazine. They subsequently also used their Instagram platform to promote and sell the magazine once it was published.⁶⁴⁹ At an individual level as well, some Yemenis in the UK are using

⁶⁴⁶ ID5, interview with the author, 19 May 2023, via Zoom.

⁶⁴⁷ Ibid.

⁶⁴⁸ AF0, interview with the author, 27 September 2023, via Zoom.

⁶⁴⁹ Al Yamaniah, @al.yamaniah, *Instagram*, accessed 24 July 2024, https://www.instagram.com/al.yamaniah?utm_source=ig_web_button_share_sheet&igsh=ZDNIZDc0MzIxNw== 2024.

Instagram to post content that asserts their Yemeni identity and raise awareness of the situation in Yemen, particularly around special occasions or moments of crisis in their homeland:

[There are] occasions when [Yemeni women on Instagram] would upload themselves in traditional Yemeni attire – attire that we wouldn't even wear out here. We wouldn't wear the *thawb* [long white robe], but they would wear it to upload. So, it's almost like, 'Hey ... you know, I'm Yemeni' ... I know that when things are getting a bit tough on the ground in Yemen that they do that.⁶⁵⁰

Others use Facebook to express their views of the conflict – a phenomenon that the interviewees indicate could be generational. While the interviewee above mentioned that Yemeni women and 'influencers' of her own use their Instagram accounts to express their Yemeni identity visually, her father instead takes to Facebook to vent his individual frustrations about Yemen's conflict.⁶⁵¹ It is unclear whether or not he realises that his online activity is a form of political activism. This highlights the different ways in which Yemenis in the UK are using such platforms across generations, but politically nonetheless. Another interviewee who fundraises for and delivers humanitarian projects for Yemenis in Sana'a and Egypt shed further light on this, explaining how many among the

⁶⁵⁰ AF0, interview with the author, 27 September 2023, via Zoom.

⁶⁵¹ ID5, interview with the author, 19 May 2023, via Zoom.

older generation in his community in Birmingham only hear about his work through their young relatives, who see his content on social media:

You know the elderly don't even have social media, so not a lot of people know. Elderly people tend to learn about our work and Yemen through their children. You know, they go and tell their parents, 'Oh Dad, look what's going on. There's a guy helping Yemen... blah blah blah!' So it's mainly from the young generation, because it's a young world now, isn't it, like all this internet and stuff and social media and technology. And the elderly have a bit of trouble with that, I think that's their barrier.⁶⁵²

It is interesting to consider the ways in which social media is therefore empowering Yemeni youth in the UK to mobilise in the affairs of their homeland in new ways, while the older generation face technological barriers that can impact their ability to engage with such activities.

Transnational, Hybridised Mobilisation

As well as echoing the broader trends identified in Chapter 5 that focus on the ways in which the Yemeni diaspora are using new technologies to mobilise, exploring the UK as a case study also adds nuance and empirical colour to broader academic debates surrounding patterns of mobilisation. Notably, the research conducted into the mobilisation of Yemenis in the UK serves to reinforce the conclusions and analysis presented in Chapters 5 and 6 relating to the

⁶⁵² SK3, interview with the author, 24 April 2023, via Zoom.

increasingly transnational nature of mobilisation, as well as the shift towards a hybridisation of online and offline activities as a result of the proliferation of the internet and social media.

Every area of mobilisation explored in this chapter – from political lobbying and advocacy to local fundraising and arts and culture initiatives – contains an element of transnational cooperation between Yemenis facilitated by these technologies, even if such activities are nominally being conducted out of the UK. At the level of political advocacy, Yemeni-British interviewees mentioned using WhatsApp, Twitter, Zoom and Microsoft teams to collaborate with Yemenis around the world. One explained that ‘the internet is playing a very, very strong role’, as his work relies on Yemenis on the ground in Yemen collecting data and uploading it online via the Cloud, enabling him to then process the data and conduct further research and analysis.⁶⁵³ Another agreed with this, explaining how he uses platforms like Zoom regularly in his peacebuilding work to connect with Yemeni colleagues around the world.⁶⁵⁴ A third interviewee, Hamid, spoke about Twitter as an important tool for connecting with other Yemenis in the UK and overseas, emphasising how such transnational cooperation, facilitated by social media, can make his mobilisation efforts more effective and efficient.

⁶⁵³ AB3, interview with the author, 21 September 2023, via Zoom.

⁶⁵⁴ VZ7, interview with the author, 26 September 2023, via Zoom.

Hamid was born in Sana'a, but spent part of his childhood in Cardiff before returning to Yemen and completing his secondary education. He was actively engaged in political advocacy work in Yemen during the years of the Arab Spring and National Dialogue, however he was forced to leave Yemen after the Houthi takeover in 2014 due to fears for his safety. He now lives in London and continues to work in advocacy and human rights, regularly collaborating with other Yemenis to work on projects exposing injustices and defending survivors of human rights abuses and war crimes in Yemen. He maintains contact with other Yemenis in London and has developed friendships with others who migrated since the outbreak of the war – although he has struggled to connect with and relate to the more traditional Yemeni communities elsewhere in the UK. He says:

There are many people that I didn't know from Yemen [that] I only met after 2015. For example ... if they saw me on TV and they want to find me, how can they search? How can they reach out? They would search [and] the first thing that would pop up is my Twitter page, and that's when they can send you a message ... For example, I remember there was this woman who ... had another woman who had been imprisoned in Yemen, and she wanted our help to get her friend out. And she was able to do that best by using social media platforms. [She thinks], 'I know this person, [and] I know that person the other day spoke, for example, on this issue about detainees ... Can I contact them all together?' And then they can. They can help. So, it makes the form of work we are trying to do easier, faster.⁶⁵⁵

⁶⁵⁵ Ibid.

Yemeni-British people engaged in fundraising and humanitarian initiatives are also working increasingly transnationally to deliver relief to communities in Yemen. One interviewee mentioned that he uses Instagram to share his fundraisers, and has received donations from individuals located around the world in countries as far flung as the United States, Russia and Brazil for his work.⁶⁵⁶ Meanwhile, getting the funds to those who need them in Yemen in the form of food, water, medicines and relief projects is also becoming an increasingly transnational process. He explains that he coordinates with partners and fixers in Yemen and Egypt to deliver aid and schedule surgeries for beneficiaries using tools like WhatsApp.⁶⁵⁷ Similarly, another interviewee who fundraises informally from her home in Birmingham using Instagram, explains how she will then transfer the money to her cousin in Yemen, coordinating with him continuously through WhatsApp to manage the delivery of aid to communities on the ground. Her cousin will conduct due diligence on the ground into the beneficiaries, as well as liaising with local communities to facilitate delivery of water tanks, food parcels and other emergency supplies. He will then send her photos and videos of the results and the beneficiaries for her to share online as evidence of impact, building trust and accountability with donors in her local and online communities.⁶⁵⁸

⁶⁵⁶ ZO2, interview with the author, 13 September 2023, via Zoom.

⁶⁵⁷ Ibid.

⁶⁵⁸ GH6, interview with the author, 6 October 2023, via Zoom.

In the arts and culture space as well, Yemenis in the UK are engaging in transnational collaborative processes to deliver initiatives aimed at exploring Yemeni identity, preserving cultural heritage, and using artistic mediums to engage in politics and conflict in the homeland. *Al Yamaniah* magazine is a perfect example. While the majority of the Editorial Team are located in the UK, where the magazine was printed, in her Editors Letter, Asma Ibrahim explains that 'The *Al Yamaniah* team is scattered across the world connecting over Zoom calls and WhatsApp messages attempting to figure out how to do our part'.⁶⁵⁹

All of the examples cited above highlight the increasingly transnational nature of mobilisation activities, as Yemenis in the UK rely on teams dispersed around the world, both inside Yemen and in the global diaspora, to mobilise successfully. Additionally, these examples allude to the increasingly hybridised nature of mobilisation processes, which increasingly consist of a combination of online and offline activities, both of which are in many cases essential for the success of the activity: the Yemeni Britons using Instagram to fundraise for physical interventions on the ground; the magazine edited and printed in Britain, sold through social media, and consisting of creative contributions submitted virtually (many of which were also digitally created) by Yemenis around the world; the advocacy worker lobbying MPs in London to stop arms sales with the

⁶⁵⁹ Asma Ibrahim, 'Editor's Letter', 1.

support of Yemeni-British people he has connected with via Twitter, using data and evidence collected by Yemenis in Sana'a and Aden.

In each of these examples, online and offline elements – both essential – alternate and intertwine in complex processes shaped by factors both physical and virtual such as audience, reach, internet connectivity and positionality. While technical barriers such as internet connectivity and the inability of activists to control algorithms inevitably impact their work, online elements remain central to every mode and process of mobilisation identified through this research. Meanwhile, the opportunity structures shaping mobilisation have been fundamentally transformed by the internet and social media. While elders in communities in Birmingham and Liverpool are losing their monopoly over information flowing from Yemen and becoming increasingly reliant on youth to engage them in mobilisation processes, a group of female Yemeni youth have compiled an impressively professional three-hundred-page cultural publication, engaging Yemenis from at least fourteen countries through WhatsApp and Zoom. It is becoming increasingly impossible to pinpoint processes of mobilisation to particular localities or spaces, as they ebb and flow across geographical and social divides, via remote border crossings and far-flung data centres.

Being Yemeni-British in the Political Marketplace

This chapter has used the case of the UK to add nuance to the analysis and conclusions drawn earlier in this thesis. Building on the literature identified in

Chapters 1-2, it has given a more detailed overview of the Yemeni community in the UK and the academic literature on this subject. It has explored the process by which Yemenis in Britain navigate processes of identity formation, noting the various identity sources and 'belongings' that inform this process. It has also outlined the multitude of ways that Yemenis in the UK mobilise in the politics and conflict of their homeland and host state. It has investigated the ways in which social media and the internet are reshaping processes of identity and community formation, as well as mobilisation among the diaspora in the UK, highlighting the implications for the way we understand diasporas and their role in homeland conflict.

The UK case study has reinforced conclusions drawn in chapters 4-6 of this thesis, that diasporas cannot be considered separate or distinct actors within or outside of a political marketplace, but are in fact intricately embedded in the marketplaces of their homeland at the level of political circuitry and the public sphere - more so than ever as a result of the internet and social media. This chapter has demonstrated how narrative formation and polarisation along identity or political lines within Yemen can also influence Yemenis in the diaspora. The diaspora, at the same time, can influence such processes in their homeland thanks to the ways in which they are embedded in patronage networks in the homeland - whether through their financial dependence on donors and political or development organisations, their attempts to influence the policy of

their host state, or through their own fundraising for humanitarian and relief initiatives on the ground in Yemen.

The ways in which diasporas mobilise and are embedded in the patronage networks that sustain Yemen's political marketplace vary, with some identifiable trends: For example, many first generation Yemenis are actively mobilised in political activities such as lobbying, advocacy, peacebuilding and human rights work funded by international donors and organisations that often play a role in the marketplace in Yemen. Second and third generation Yemenis may not be as actively involved in such overtly political activities, but they are equally embedded and important to the continuation of patronage networks in Yemen in the ways that they engage in remittance transfers and community fundraising initiatives – often informally and unofficially, thus complicating the ability of policymakers and researchers to understand the full scale and influence of their mobilisation.

Ultimately, the diaspora in the UK – like the global diaspora, as argued in Chapter 6 – play fluid at times contradictory roles within Yemen's political marketplace, simultaneously pushing back against and perpetuating the dynamics that sustain it. For example, diaspora actors can simultaneously be engaged in activities that promote narratives of civility and morality – such as arts and culture work, peacebuilding, and humanitarian initiatives – while at the same time sustaining the patronage networks that sustain Yemen's war economy

by participating in flows of donor funding and making financial transfers to communities on the ground. The role of the Yemeni diaspora – both in the UK, and globally – over narratives and war economies in Yemen’s political marketplace is undeniable. Understanding this role better can help policymakers, peacebuilders, humanitarian organisations and development practitioners to engage Yemen’s diaspora more constructively towards peace and stability in Yemen.

Chapter 7 will draw together the analysis and conclusions drawn over the course of the last three chapters, using the research findings to answer the research questions relating to the way in which we understand diasporas and their role in homeland political marketplaces in the digital age.

Chapter 7: The Diaspora and the Political Marketplace

The explosion of the internet and communications technologies that has occurred in recent decades has fundamentally shaken the very foundations of many fields of academic research and scholarly discourse. As the chapters of this thesis have clearly shown, the conflict studies and diaspora studies fields have not been spared the fallout of these fundamental shifts.

This chapter seeks to situate these shifts within the framework of De Waal's political marketplace, highlighting the fluid, and sometimes contradictory roles that Yemenis in the diaspora are playing in the political marketplace in Yemen. It demonstrates how the role of diasporas in political marketplaces, while already previously relatively understudied, has taken on entirely new dimensions thanks to the opportunities and challenges created by the internet and social media in particular, which affect the ways in which diaspora actors and individuals identify, form communities, and mobilise in homeland conflict. This chapter seeks to articulate a new understanding of the role diasporas play in the political marketplaces of their homelands, drawing conclusions around the extent to which they can both perpetuate and prohibit the onset of marketplace dynamics.

The chapter explores the implications of this for our understanding of some of the central themes in the field of diaspora studies, from the very definition of diaspora to diasporic processes like community formation and mobilisation in homeland conflict. It also critically analyses the extent to which the traditionally

understood lines between Yemenis in the diaspora and Yemenis in Yemen are becoming blurred, as well as the online-offline hybridisation of mobilisation processes (as opposed to deterritorialisation, which is one concept discussed in the literature outlined in Chapter 2). Finally – and most crucially – it considers what this means in practical terms for scholars, policymakers and programmers working in the diaspora engagement and peacebuilding fields.

Yemen's Diaspora and The Political Marketplace: Help or Hindrance?

The research outlined in the previous chapters has shown that it is impossible to conceptualise diasporas as stand-alone actors or as somehow external to the political marketplaces of their homelands, now more so than ever in the digital age. It has demonstrated some of the ways in which diasporas are intricately and intrinsically engaged with the marketplace of the homeland at both the level of political circuitry and the public sphere. It has also highlighted how diaspora actors, individuals and communities are woven into networks of patronage in the political marketplace of the homeland as both patrons and clients, sometimes simultaneously, thus at times reinforcing patrimonial and neopatrimonial systems. Moreover, it has also alluded to the roles, both positive and negative, that diasporas play in relation to the marketplaces of their homelands, and the ways in which diasporas can both exacerbate and impede the dynamics that sustain a political marketplace like Yemen. Understanding these dynamics can help those working with diasporas to do so more impactfully, leveraging their

unique role to support peacebuilding and sustainable development in Yemen and beyond.

As outlined in Chapter 3 of this thesis, there are a number of dynamics that contribute to the emergence of, and sustenance of a political marketplace, including integration into the global marketplace and the presence of violence or 'turbulence'.⁶⁶⁰ However, at the closing of his book, *The Real Politics of the Horn of Africa*, De Waal also mentions the following two types of measures that might halt the onset of a political marketplace: 1) Taking the money out of politics by increasing transparency and making politics less conducive for rent seekers and better structured to provide public goods; and 2) Pursuing an agenda of human morality amongst violence and turbulence by acknowledging civility and integrity, and rewarding those who show these qualities.⁶⁶¹ This presents a useful framework for analysing the role of Yemen's diaspora as either contributors to, and/or spoilers of the political marketplace in their homeland. The empirical research presented in the previous chapters clearly demonstrates that Yemeni diaspora individuals, entities and communities have played both roles at various points since the outbreak of conflict in 2015 (and earlier, although this goes beyond the scope of the research). Not only that, but some have actually played

⁶⁶⁰ De Waal, *The Real Politics of the Horn of Africa*, 17 and 28.

⁶⁶¹ *Ibid.*, 217.

both - seemingly contradictory - roles themselves, some at different points during the conflict, and others simultaneously.

Firstly, the diaspora has perpetuated Yemen's political marketplace by facilitating its integration into the global marketplace and the international political and economic order. On a political level, they have done this through the formation of narratives about Yemen's war that situate it within its regional and international context, as well as influencing foreign policy on Yemen by lobbying host countries and international policymakers. On an economic level, diaspora actors, individuals and communities are intrinsic to the transnational networks of patronage that underpin Yemen's war economy. At times they have played the role of patrons, providing direct remittances and transfers to communities 'back home', and fundraising for emergency humanitarian campaigns as well as more organised development initiatives. Examples include the ways in which diaspora organisations have mobilised to deliver humanitarian aid on the ground, and individuals who have used their personal networks to crowdfund for specific cases or communities in need of relief - as articulated in Chapters 5 and 6. At other times, diaspora elements have played the role of client - such as, where individuals and organisations have received funding and/or salaries from parties to the conflict and their allies. Examples include the individuals and entities referenced in Chapters 5 and 6 in receipt of funding from think tanks funded by conflict parties, or programmatic funding from international donors.

Moreover, elements within the diaspora have also contributed to the state of turbulence that sustains Yemen's political marketplace. As Chapters 5 and 6 have shown, certain actors in the diaspora have participated in self-perpetuating cycles of division and polarisation that transfer almost cyclically from the homeland to the diaspora and back again. Diaspora narrative formation and lobbying efforts, meanwhile, have also been shown to have a very real impact on international policymaking that can, in turn, further destabilise the situation on the ground in Yemen and perpetuate cycles of violence. The role of diasporic elements as perpetrators of Yemen's political marketplace therefore cannot be ignored, although the nature of their efforts – both political and economic – suggest that this is usually not the intended consequence. In each of the instances mentioned here (and outlined in more detail in previous chapters), the focus is on the prevention of violence and provision of support for its victims.

Despite the often unintentional role the diaspora has played in sustaining Yemen's political marketplace, the previous chapters have also highlighted the numerous ways that the diaspora is actively pushing back against the onset of marketplace dynamics. Some diasporic elements have played an important role in taking the money out of Yemeni politics at the local level, creating alternative employment opportunities for would-be fighters through humanitarian and development activities. One interviewee who funds and runs such an initiative in Yemen cited that, as well as providing emergency relief for conflict-affected communities, her organisation is also providing dignified employment and a

sense of purpose for the Yemenis that work for them.⁶⁶² This is especially important in the case of young Yemeni men, who would otherwise likely be incentivised to take up arms and join local militias in the chronic absence of salaried work that has been a hallmark of Yemen's war economy.⁶⁶³ The diaspora also contributes to taking the money out of Yemeni politics and making the political marketplace more transparent through activities that expose corruption and illicit funding flows to actors on the ground, as well as their efforts to hold foreign governments and donors accountable for their funding of, and support for parties to the conflict. Examples include the Yemeni British interviewees mentioned in Chapter 6, who work in the advocacy space to hold the UK government responsible for its arms sales to Saudi Arabia and its coalition partners.

Moreover, the previous chapters of this thesis show how the opportunity structures facing many diaspora actors and individuals mean they are uniquely positioned to promote agendas of human morality, civility and integrity in resistance to the turbulence of the marketplace. When diasporas use their platforms and positionality to engage in cultural activities focused on issues such as youth and peace, as well as human rights, transitional justice and peacebuilding activities, they present an alternative future for Yemen to the ongoing reality where violence is rewarded and injustice continues without

⁶⁶² KR3, interview with the author, 26 June 2023, via Zoom.

⁶⁶³ Sana'a Center for Strategic Studies, 'Inflated Beyond Fiscal Capacity: The need to reform the public sector wage bill', *Rethinking Yemen's Economy: Policy Brief 16* (2019): 4.

accountability. One example is the Karama Film Festival, organised by US-based Director Nasser Al-Manj in collaboration with his non-profit, Youth of the World Together. The festival received significant attention on Instagram from Yemenis around the world, thanks to its catchy theme song and music video showing scenes from daily life in Yemen and singing about freedom and the dreams of Yemen's youth.⁶⁶⁴ Such initiatives highlight the efforts of those Yemenis – both inside and outside of Yemen – who uphold the values of humanity, civility, integrity and non-violence that, according to De Waal, run counter to the turbulent foundations of the marketplace.

The Political Marketplace Fights Back

While undoubtedly significant, the efforts highlighted above have not ultimately been successful in halting the dynamics that sustain the political marketplace in Yemen, which has ultimately prevailed for a number of reasons. The opportunity structures and barriers that shape diaspora mobilisation are part of this story. By creating new opportunities for cultural production, political dialogue and debate, and day-to-day communications, the internet and social media have reshaped the ways in which diaspora actors are able to use what De Waal refers to as 'the mechanisms of convening and communication' that political CEOs in political marketplaces have traditionally sought to dominate.⁶⁶⁵ The activities of

⁶⁶⁴ Karama Yemen Film Festival, @ywtorg, 'ثلاثة اصحاب: The official song of @karamayemen film festival powered by @ywtorg', Instagram [online], 8 June 2023, accessed 21 January 2024, <https://www.instagram.com/p/CtPPO-xJwNy/>.

⁶⁶⁵ De Waal, *The Real Politics of the Horn of Africa*, 27.

the diaspora in these areas have served to loosen the monopoly of political CEOs and business managers in Yemen over access to the information that is central to the functioning of the market. Thus, by pushing back against the forces that sustain Yemen's political marketplace, the diaspora has emerged as a threat to those same political CEOs and businessmen, making diasporic elements targets for co-optation and elimination.

There are various ways in which those seeking to preserve the status quo might seek to neutralise the challenge posed by the diaspora, often actively leveraging their position outside of the homeland to do so. For example, Yemenis in the diaspora working in areas such as human rights and political advocacy are keenly aware of the risk their work can pose to their relatives and communities back in Yemen.

[There's a] protection risk. You ... still have a family in Yemen, and they are ... more vulnerable than you. Here [in the host country], you will be fine I think, you will be safe. Nothing will happen to you. But then you always think about your family in Taizz, in Aden, or whatever, because this kind of connection will always be there ... So you carry this guilt, that I need to take care also ... of the people who are still there, who are left behind.⁶⁶⁶

⁶⁶⁶ ID5, interview with the author, 19 May 2023, via Zoom.

This risk of jeopardising the safety of loved ones back in Yemen places a limit on many diaspora actors and individuals' willingness to challenge those who hold a monopoly over the mechanisms of convening and communication.

Aside from their willingness, their logistical capability to do so is also challenged by barriers explored in previous chapters relating to funding flows and the strategic objectives of international donors. One peacebuilding activist interviewed for this study emphasised that much of her organisation's work has been done without money and without recognition from international donors and institutions supposedly working in the interest of peace in Yemen – although the same donors and institutions have been all too happy to reap the benefits of her work and rely on her network and her insights to support their own projects⁶⁶⁷. Thus, diaspora or diasporic elements without financial resources would struggle to participate in such activities that challenge the onset and continuation of political marketplace dynamics in Yemen.

The aforementioned activist went a step further to say that the involvement of some multilateral institutions in Yemeni women's networks actually served to divide the women politically, in what she believes were deliberate efforts to undermine a network that challenged that institution's narrative of what peace should look like in Yemen. These efforts, she claims, succeeded in dividing the women, thus limiting the potential of an initiative that sought to highlight and

⁶⁶⁷ KR3, interview with the author, 26 June 2023, via Zoom.

empower Yemeni women who represented agendas of civility, peace and morality. This demonstrates how the strategic objectives and efforts of donors and policymakers can directly impact the ability of the diaspora to challenge the status quo and push back against the political marketplace in Yemen.

Aside from logistical and financial barriers, diasporas can also face threats to their own physical and psychological safety when they engage in activities that push back against the status quo sustaining Yemen's political marketplace. This is particularly the case for pro-peace activists (i.e., those who are not aligned politically with a particular side in the conflict), and especially women. A number of the women interviewed for this study mentioned that they had personally been targeted or threatened for conducting work in spaces such as peacebuilding and advocacy. Some were harassed and bullied online by anonymous trolls, sent abusive tweets and pornographic images, and/or their phones hacked with personal photos stolen and shared humiliatingly online. Others had their salaries or sources of funding cut for daring to challenge dominant narratives of the conflict. Others still faced social exclusion, blackmail, verbal abuse, stalking and death threats:

They attack using technology. We had so many cases of women who went into the public space, and because of their existence in the public space, they were attacked through articles and yellow papers, through accounts defaming them. And all social media tools ... There were

deep fake videos ... They used so many tools to scare the women and to make them isolated.⁶⁶⁸

The threats and attacks, most interviewees contend, emanated from actors aligned with parties to the conflict, or those who sought to gain politically or economically from the continuation of turbulence and violence in Yemen. The threats frequently came online, and often from unknown sources. Sometimes they emanated from individuals in Yemen, while others came from their local communities in the host state. Others still came from actors and individuals based in other countries around the world – sometimes working alongside one another. One woman referred to an attack on her organisation that came through a pro-Houthi social media account. She conducted a forensic analysis to determine the source of the attack, and found that it had been coordinated between three individuals – one in New York, one in Sheffield, and one inside Yemen.⁶⁶⁹ Thus, the very same opportunities created by technology for collaboration between Yemenis in Yemen and those in the diaspora (as explored in detail in Chapter 5), are being exploited by those seeking to discredit the voices of diaspora Yemenis pushing back against the dynamics that sustain Yemen's political marketplace.

The very fact that diasporic elements have been targeted in this way emphasises their potential to challenge the status quo and push back against the forces

⁶⁶⁸ KR3, interview with the author, 26 June 2023, via Zoom; PO8, interview with the author, 17 April 2023, via Zoom; WJ3, interview with the author, 21 May 2023, via Zoom.

⁶⁶⁹ MS2, interview with the author, 3 May 2023, via Zoom.

sustaining the political marketplace in Yemen. However, the nature of the threats, many of which were enabled by the internet and social media, highlights the ways in which these technologies are reshaping the opportunity structures that determine whether and how diasporas mobilise in homeland conflict, and their potential to act as forces for peace, stability and prosperity. Conversely, they are also creating new opportunities for the political marketplace to sustain itself, and for those who are actively embedded in its patronage networks to stamp out challenges and increase their ability to profit from it.

The gender dynamics of this phenomenon are particularly important to note here: women from socially conservative societies like Yemen are at a heightened risk of such attacks and living in a less socially conservative host state does not necessarily make them feel any safer. One interviewee who had received multiple online threats to her safety for her peacebuilding work stated that she feels more secure when she is in Yemen, citing the heightened security situation and sense of community justice that means that she would be able to take her security into her own hands. In the event that something were to happen to her, she would likely have protection from an armed driver or security guard and could rely on her community to protect her in the event of future threats to her safety. In her current home in Canada, however, she is reliant on a police service

and justice system that she has little faith in, living in a wooden house that gives little comfort without high walls or a security gate to protect her.⁶⁷⁰

These factors make it more difficult for Yemeni women in the diaspora to engage politically, and therefore less likely that many will do so, particularly those from more socially conservative communities. Thus, while the constantly evolving opportunity structures shaping diaspora mobilisation create new ways for diasporas to resist the dynamics of the homeland political marketplace, those same opportunity structures can also limit their ability to do so successfully. This also indicates that diaspora mobilisation in Yemen's conflict, and diaspora participation in the political marketplace is inherently gendered. On the one hand, the internet is creating new spaces for women to engage in ways they might not otherwise, were they dependent on their inclusion or access to physical spaces that have traditionally been occupied or dominated by men. Women have represented extremely visible and prominent voices in this research - both at the level of the dataset and the interviewees. However, at the same time, the above clearly shows that women in the diaspora face challenges and threats - both at the level of their physical safety and their logistical ability to mobilise - not faced by their male counterparts.

Further research should therefore be conducted into this phenomenon, which could focus in greater depth on the roles women in the diaspora play in the

⁶⁷⁰ Ibid.

political marketplaces of their homeland, particularly in socially and religiously conservative contexts such as Yemen. For example, if one of the major threats for women – as highlighted above – is that of public shaming for their visibility and behaviour, one might assume that the women who are willing and able to engage in mobilisation activities – at least publicly – are those emanating from less conservative backgrounds. Likewise, in the face of threats to their physical security, women from families or backgrounds with the resources or connections to protect them could be more willing and able to engage politically than those from less privileged backgrounds. Such insights would generate key learnings around the role of diaspora women in homeland conflict and women’s participation in peace processes, potentially supporting the development of more inclusive policy and programming in the conflict transformation space.

The Complexities of Diaspora Resistance to Marketplace Dynamics

The above has highlighted the importance of the internet and social media vis-à-vis the role of diasporas in both perpetuating and pushing back against political marketplace dynamics – as well as the ways in which political CEOs and business managers attempt to sustain the status quo of the marketplace in order to maintain their positions of power and privilege within it. It is important to note, however, that the role these technologies play is by no means static. Platforms such as Facebook and Instagram are constantly evolving, going through cycles of being used to create change, and to resist it. This cyclical evolution is a common theme in the literature on the use of social media for revolution and

repression in the Arab World since 2011. As quickly as pro-democracy activists harnessed new social media platforms to organise and promote their narratives of freedom and anti-authoritarianism, the authoritarians themselves harnessed the same tools to polarise, repress and discredit activist voices⁶⁷¹. The same can be seen in the case of Yemen's diaspora, as has been shown in Chapters 4 and 5, and as one interviewee clearly articulates:

The Internet's role has changed over time based on what was happening in Yemen. For me personally and for a lot of independent voices, I would say that social media was extremely important ... I think, for non-independent voices, it remains very important. I think a lot of the discourses that happen now are backed and supported by larger agendas that are no longer associated with Yemen. And people still thrive in the social media space, but I think that a lot of the independent voices have exited that space a long time ago, because it has become toxic and no longer what it was like. It's almost like a veil was removed off of these tools.⁶⁷²

Just as diaspora actors have leveraged the internet and social media to promote transparency and agendas of civility, thus pushing back against turbulence and threatening political finance, the same tools have been used to intimidate, undermine and discredit them in order to sustain the dynamics of the political

⁶⁷¹ Marc Lynch, 'How the Media Trashed Transitions', *Journal of Democracy*, 26 no. 4 (2015): 97; Owen Jones, 'How digital authoritarianism has permeated the Middle East', *Middle East Eye* [online] 11 August 2022, accessed 22 January 2024, <https://www.middleeasteye.net/opinion/middle-east-digital-authoritarianism-permeated-how>.

⁶⁷² PO8, interview with the author, 17 April 2023.

marketplace – highlighting the new ways in which technologies are being harnessed as a tool of transnational repression. This happens on an ongoing basis in a dynamic and fluid process that is at times cyclical – as exemplified by the case of Clubhouse mentioned in Chapter 5: a new platform or medium is identified and leveraged by anti-marketplace diaspora actors promoting civility, morality and an end to corrupt and patronage; that platform is flooded, hacked or co-opted by political entrepreneurs or forces wishing to preserve the status quo; the activists fight back and/or retreat, and eventually identify a new platform or online (and sometimes hybridised, online/offline) space in which to conduct their efforts; the cycle repeats and evolves with the constant evolution of these technologies.

The above has provided an insight into the ways that diasporas can both perpetuate and push back against political marketplace dynamics, and the roles of the internet and social media in these processes. But these processes should not be understood one dimensionally. One might assume, based on the above, that diaspora elements either play a positive or a negative role, helping to sustain the marketplace of the homeland or pushing back against it. The reality, however, is far more complex.

Firstly, the mobilisation activities outlined in Chapter 5 suggest that the intentions of the majority of Yemeni diaspora actors and individuals are more often than not to promote peace and prosperity in their homeland, and thus push

back against the political marketplace. But, as highlighted throughout the chapter, the outcome of their efforts does not always match the intent. For example, as one interviewee argued (as outlined in Chapter 5), while CSOs and humanitarian organisations in the diaspora applied pressure on the international community to prevent an assault by the Government of Yemen and its international allies on the port city of Hodeidah in 2018 with the aim of protecting civilians, this arguably enabled the Houthis to consolidate their power and expand their presence throughout the country.⁶⁷³ Therefore, while civilian casualties might have been avoided in the short term thanks to the efforts of diaspora actors to pursue agendas of civility and non-violence, their efforts can also be understood to have enabled the continuation of the violence and patronage that have sustained Yemen's political marketplace until today.

Secondly, this research has demonstrated that it is possible for diaspora actors to both push back against and perpetuate the dynamics of Yemen's political marketplace at the same time. For example, one interviewee based in the US has mobilised in Yemen's conflict in two ways: through advocacy and activism, lobbying her host government to stop selling arms to parties to the conflict, and distributing aid to communities on the ground, thus participating in the patronage networks that sustain the political marketplace. Her efforts are

⁶⁷³ BG7, interview with the author, 28 March 2023, via Zoom; Ibrahim Jalal, 'U.S. Military Actions in Yemen Won't Work', *Carnegie Middle East Center* [online], 19 January 2024, accessed 23 January 2024, <https://carnegie-mec.org/2024/01/19/u.s.-military-actions-in-yemen-won-t-work-pub-91422>.

detailed in Chapters 4 and 5. Similarly, another UK-based interviewee whose story was shared in Chapter 6 is simultaneously involved with lobbying efforts to hold the British government accountable for complicity in war crimes in Yemen through the sale of weapons to Saudi Arabia, and transferring economic remittances to families and communities in need inside Yemen as a patron within Yemen's political marketplace. It is therefore impossible to categorise diasporas as playing a single, clearly defined role in Yemen's political marketplace, as either perpetuating or pushing back against marketplace dynamics.

Both of these individuals are simultaneously engaged in activities that promote an agenda of civility and non-violence on the one hand, often at the level of the public sphere (therefore pushing back against political marketplace dynamics as articulated by De Waal) and participating at the level of political circuitry in the networks of patronage and cycles of dependence that are fundamental to the sustenance of the political marketplace. Thus, the role of diasporas in Yemen's political marketplace should be treated with the same level of nuance and complexity awarded to actors geographically located within Yemen.

The Diaspora: The Locale Where Political Marketplaces Meet

An additional dynamic of diasporas that should not be overlooked by those seeking to understand how political marketplaces function is the way in which they can bring different marketplaces into contact with one another. An in-depth study of the interactions between different countries' diasporas is beyond the

scope of this research, however it is useful to briefly explore the idea of the diaspora as the locale where the patronage networks and entrepreneurial ecosystems of different marketplaces can, at times, collide with and intertwine with one another.

At times, diaspora elements mobilising in homeland conflicts compete with one another for attention and resources for their cause from host states and the international community. One interviewee, located in the UK, explains the dilemmas faced by local MPs in constituencies that are home to a number of actively mobilised diaspora groups from conflict-affected countries (and often political marketplaces) that are competing with one another for funding and prioritisation from the British government. Political representatives must balance their limited political capital with the need to satisfy their constituents and their various political causes, asking themselves questions like, 'should I send that email to the Prime Minister on behalf of the Syrians, or on behalf of the Sudanese, or on behalf of the Yemenis?'⁶⁷⁴

As explored in previous chapters, the foreign policy of host states and funding flows from international donors are important factors shaping the landscape of a political marketplace like that of Yemen. Therefore, the presence and activity of other diaspora groups with agendas relating to their homelands can have real implications for market dynamics. In the Yemeni case, multiple interviewees

⁶⁷⁴ LEO, interview with the author, 21 May 2023, via Zoom.

explained how they have often found support and solidarity among other mobilised diasporas – particularly those from the Middle East and North Africa and the Global South. At times this comes in the form of knowledge exchange and capacity building. For example, Yemeni women peace activists have worked with members of the Syrian, Libyan and Sudanese diasporas to share information and experiences.

We belong to many networks that are mixed from different countries – in the Global South, mainly. And we had so many exchanges ... with the Syrians and now, very recently, the Sudanese ... We're learning from each other, and I think this gives us leverage and an advantage compared to the men, because we learn about the geopolitics, we learn about how specific thematic issues are being addressed in one country, and we can guess how it's going to be addressed in our country. So I think it helps us with influencing and it helps us with basically understanding the dynamics and mobilising better on different issues.⁶⁷⁵

Activists and advocates have also learned informally from the experiences of other diasporas including the Palestinians, observing their mobilisation and advocacy efforts online and using this to inspire their own campaigns.

For me, [it's] the Palestinians, because I've been working in terms of advocacy [and] they have decades of experience. I've learned from Palestinian advocates a lot [and] I'm really close friends with them on

⁶⁷⁵ KR3, interview with the author, 26 June 2023, via Zoom; MS2, interview with the author, 3 May 2023, via Zoom.

a personal and a work level. And whenever something is happening, I was learning how they're doing this strategy, how they are really good at mobilising people on Twitter, how they do more mobilisation [through] Instagram. So for me, the Palestinian diaspora is always something to admire, and I've learned a lot from them.⁶⁷⁶

Meanwhile, human rights defenders have observed the efforts of the Syrian diaspora to document human rights abuses and pursue accountability in Syria, learning from their experiences and incorporating these lessons into their own work⁶⁷⁷. Exchanging knowledge and experience with other diasporas in these areas - peacebuilding, advocacy and transitional justice - has therefore helped the Yemeni diaspora to promote agendas of civility that push back against marketplace dynamics.

In other instances, solidarity and support between the Yemeni diaspora and other mobilised diaspora communities has come in the form of support for lobbying efforts and activities such as protests and fundraising campaigns. However, this support appears to be ad hoc and only occurs to the extent that it is not affecting their ability to fight for their own homeland or cause:

It's a tight spot ... I think a lot of Arab diaspora who are politically involved are so exhausted and already so focused on their own issues. Like we support Palestine - I'll make the post about Palestine, I'll show up to a protest. But can I actually, realistically also mobilise for

⁶⁷⁶ ID5, interview with the author, 19 May 2023, via Zoom.

⁶⁷⁷ ID5, interview with the author, 19 May 2023, via Zoom.

Palestine? No, and I know vice versa. I know the Palestinian will show up to my protest, will like my post... But can they realistically also meet with their politicians? We all have too much on our plate already ... We're all doing our own work [and] we support and uplift each other by sharing articles, liking, tweeting, being like, 'Hey, follow this person'. But we're not embedded in each other's movements. Just because, as human beings, we have limited capacity.⁶⁷⁸

This highlights some of the ways in which diasporas are able to influence the dynamics of other political marketplaces aside from that of their own homeland, particularly today in the digital age.

This phenomenon is particularly interesting in the current moment in light of the ongoing conflict in Gaza and the solidarity that has emerged between Palestinians and Yemenis in response, culminating in the Houthis attacking global shipping in the Red Sea. Fascinatingly, the Houthis have risen to global prominence since the attacks began, after years of limited global recognition and legitimacy. They have emerged as heroic defenders of the Palestinians in the eyes (and the social media posts) of Palestinians around the world and those sympathetic to their cause.⁶⁷⁹ After the Houthis began launching missiles and drones at Israeli and Israeli-linked ships, pro-Palestine social media was flooded

⁶⁷⁸ WJ3, interview with the author, 21 May 2023, via Zoom.

⁶⁷⁹ Osamah Abdulrahman, 'Why US strikes will only embolden the Houthis, not stop their attacks on ships in the Red Sea', *The Conversation* [online] accessed 22 January 2024, <https://theconversation.com/why-us-strikes-will-only-embolden-the-houthis-not-stop-their-attacks-on-ships-in-the-red-sea-221588>.

with posts declaring that ‘Yemen’ (notably not ‘the Houthis’ or ‘Ansar Allah’ or even ‘Yemenis’) was the only Arab state standing up to Israeli aggression.⁶⁸⁰



Figure 4: Instagram post by Khaled Beydoun.⁶⁸¹

Many political analysts have subsequently argued that the attention, legitimacy and global support the Houthis have gained from these attacks have tangibly strengthened their position in Yemen, bolstering their position domestically and granting them leverage in the ongoing ceasefire negotiations with Saudi Arabia.

The role of the Palestinian diaspora in shaping narratives around Palestine is well

⁶⁸⁰ Khaled Beydoun, @khaledbeydoun, ‘The UN World Food Program cut food distribution in Yemen while child famine is on the rise. Yemen stood by Gaza. Now, stand with Yemen’, *Instagram* [online], 2 January 2024, accessed 22 January 2024, https://www.instagram.com/p/C1xkYvDyl0a/?img_index=1.

⁶⁸¹ Ibid.

documented. It is therefore fascinating to consider how the Palestinian diaspora, in their attempts to stand up for the people of Gaza, are also shaping narratives around the parties to the conflict in Yemen, with very real implications for their future role in Yemen and thus Yemen's political marketplace.

The above has highlighted the importance and complexity of the role of the diaspora in shaping market dynamics on the ground in Yemen. It has argued that the Yemeni diaspora can both perpetuate and push back against the dynamics that sustain Yemen's political marketplace, sometimes simultaneously. While most of the diaspora actors and individuals captured by this study at least appear to be intent on pushing back against the dynamics of the marketplace by either increasing transparency around political finance or promoting agendas of morality and civility (or both), they are not always successful in doing so and sometimes their efforts can have the opposite of their intended effect in the longer term. These processes are further complicated by the constant evolution of the internet and social media, which are fundamentally changing the ways in which the diaspora engages with Yemen's political marketplace and often leading to cyclical battles for control of the public sphere by those who want to dismantle the political marketplace, and those invested in sustaining it. Finally, it has highlighted the potential for the diaspora (and notably the online space) to act as the locale through which Yemen's political marketplace comes into contact with both the international system and other political marketplaces, through interactions with other diaspora communities.

Implications for the Study of Diaspora and Mobilisation

The previous chapters highlighted a number of key insights into the ways in which Yemenis in the diaspora identify, form communities and have mobilised in the ongoing conflict in their homeland, and the complex ways that the internet and social media are influencing these processes. As well as providing empirical information on Yemen's diaspora, the findings have also provided new insights into some of the central tenets of the academic literature on diaspora and diaspora mobilisation. These include the concept of territorialisation, the importance of geographical location in shaping mobilisation, the hybridisation of online and offline activities, and the very definition of the concept of diaspora itself. The following sections analyse the implications of the research findings for how we understand these concepts and how the role of diaspora in homeland conflict is evolving as a result, with important implications for donors, policymakers and practitioners in the conflict transformation space.

Are Diasporas in The Digital Age Still 'Out of Touch'?

Chapter 2 of this thesis provided a review of the existing literature on diaspora studies, including dominant academic theories around why diasporas mobilise in homeland conflict. One of the premises discussed by scholars is the idea of 'long distance nationalism', whereby diasporas can become disproportionately attached to abstract and symbolic issues such as identity and independence over the struggles of daily life faced by people living on the ground in the

homeland⁶⁸². This premise is based on the idea that diasporas experience and exhibit a level of separation from the realities on the ground due to their geographical distance from the homeland. However, as this thesis has shown, diasporas are becoming increasingly connected and less 'out of touch' with the issues of the homeland as a result of various factors.

Firstly, the increasing ease of global travel (excluding the period of the Covid-19 pandemic) combined with the rise of remote working has meant that many individuals in the diaspora are increasingly able to travel frequently between the homeland and their host state, some living between two or more places. For example, one interviewee explained that he lives between three places: Doha, Salalah and Sana'a.⁶⁸³ This challenges the very concept of what it means to be in the diaspora, posing questions such as whether individuals who live between the homeland and a second (or third) country constitute diaspora actors at all. While concepts like 'multi-site embeddedness' (discussed in Chapter 2) go some way towards conceptualising this phenomenon, they fail to capture the nuance of the full experience of those who spend part of their time in the diaspora and part of it in the homeland, experiencing the benefits and limitations of both.⁶⁸⁴ Such individuals would be assumed to have a greater understanding of the realities on the ground in Yemen, witnessing them first-hand alongside residents of

⁶⁸² Adamson, 'Mobilizing for the transformation of home', 165; Lyons, 'Diasporas and homeland conflict', 128; Roth, 'The Role of Diasporas in Conflict', 293.

⁶⁸³ HS9, interview with the author, 29 May 2023, via Zoom.

⁶⁸⁴ Koinova, 'Diaspora Mobilisation for Conflict and Post-Conflict Reconstruction', 1262.

Yemen. Therefore, one would expect that symbolic and abstract issues might resonate with them less than those who spend the majority, if not all of their time outside of the homeland - and particularly those who grew up outside of Yemen.

Secondly, the internet and social media have increased both the frequency and intensity of the connection between the Yemeni diaspora and their communities within Yemen, as well providing exposure to the realities on the ground across other regions of the country that they might not previously have been exposed to. It is therefore natural to conclude that this increased connectivity and exposure allows diasporas greater insight into the daily struggles faced by those in the homeland, arguably undermining this fundamental idea that diasporas are inherently 'out of touch'.

This research indicates that the reality is far more nuanced than this. Even within the diaspora, as Chapters 4 and 5 have shown, there are divisions over what matters more - the political future of Yemen or the immediate humanitarian needs of Yemenis on the ground. This is demonstrated in the stern critique by one interviewee working in the humanitarian space of a Yemeni political lobbyist based in the same host country, who has called publicly for the continuation of the war in order to militarily defeat the Houthis. She argues that, since that individual had criticised the Houthis from an early stage in the conflict and was no longer able to safely return to Sana'a, their insights must be biased against the Houthis and therefore out of touch with the realities on the ground. She goes

as far as to call this individual a 'traitor' who is 'hurting our country'.⁶⁸⁵ Another participant echoed this view, challenging the narratives of pro-war Yemenis in the diaspora:

I think that the majority of the voices dominating conversations, especially the war-mongering conversations, are people outside of Yemen ... Which is why a lot of times my response would be to people, 'Okay, why don't you go back to Yemen and tweet this inside? Why, don't you tweet that it's okay for this fighting or this kind of aggression to continue while you're there on the ground?'⁶⁸⁶

Another interviewee seconded this, highlighting the limits of virtual connections in exposing people to the realities on the ground:

A lot of people would say, 'We condemn what is happening with the Houthis because it's an armed group', but they wouldn't see the violations that are happening with the Coalition unless you've been there and you've heard the airstrikes, you've seen the casualties. I feel like with social media, I'm not really [supportive of] the idea of posting videos and photos of casualties. But then, unless you've been there and experienced things, you wouldn't really understand how the suffering is and how they've been [committing] alleged violations against civilians. And this is part of the division: A lot of activists will be saying, 'No, no, no! Let's go for military success, and let's end the war this way', but then you have the other people who have experienced

⁶⁸⁵ WJ3, interview with the author, 21 May 2023, via Zoom.

⁶⁸⁶ PO8, interview with the author, 17 April 2023, via Zoom.

this and have seen this, and they've lost people, and they'd say 'No, let's be cautious'.⁶⁸⁷

This indicates that there may be a correlation between diaspora individuals' experiences on the ground in Yemen and their political stance towards the conflict and its resolution. Namely, individuals working in the humanitarian space or who visit Yemen frequently might be expected to take a more pro-peace stance in the interest of preventing the continuation of the humanitarian crisis caused by the conflict. Others, meanwhile, who are less directly connected and exposed to the realities on the ground, might be more likely to push for a continuation of the war in order to reach a settlement that aligns with their vision for the political future of the country.

Therefore, while the increase in connectivity and exposure to the realities on the ground afforded by the internet and social media have undoubtedly gone some way towards bridging the gap between diasporas and their homeland, it is impossible to refute the arguments associated with the concept of 'long distance nationalism' altogether. In fact, diaspora individuals themselves were often all too aware of the potential for bias created by their being geographically outside of the homeland and detached from the daily realities of life in Yemen. For some, this has stemmed from feelings of detachedness and guilt that they are able to live safe and privileged lives in their host country while their families and

⁶⁸⁷ ID5, interview with the author, 19 May 2023, via Zoom.

communities in Yemen are suffering the direct consequences of the war and its disastrous humanitarian fallout. For others, this has come from personal experiences of being discriminated against by Yemenis in Yemen, who considered them to be privileged and safe and their views therefore illegitimate.⁶⁸⁸

When the war happened, there was always a negative narrative towards the people in the diaspora - that we are elites, that we don't feel what is happening in Yemen.⁶⁸⁹

One participant explained that the prominence of diaspora Yemenis in the Track II peace negotiations had discredited these efforts in the eyes of Yemenis in Yemen, who perceive their voices to be irrelevant and unrepresentative of their concerns and interests:

For the Track II, most of them are in the diaspora and this is one of the things that people feel a bit disappointed about because they feel like, once you are outside, you're not going through the everyday struggles that we're going through - the social, economic challenges, physical security challenges and so on. And the things you might be advocating for might not even reflect the realities. And this is something that you will hear, for example, from people in the rural areas, urban areas, from Ta'izz and other regions, in the [frontline] regions where so many feel like they're more victimised because they've been under siege.⁶⁹⁰

⁶⁸⁸ KR3, interview with the author, 26 June 2023, via Zoom.

⁶⁸⁹ MS2, interview with the author, 3 May 2023, via Zoom.

⁶⁹⁰ KR3, interview with the author, 26 June 2023, via Zoom.

In some cases, diaspora individuals described instances where they had self-censored as a result of this heightened awareness – although, interestingly, only female interviewees specifically mentioned doing this. One participant who had worked as a pro-peace activist in the diaspora explained that she had no ambitions to lead a movement within Yemen on the basis that she did not feel she represented Yemeni women, and legitimacy for such movements should come from the inside out. Such a decision, although clearly understandable, is not necessarily helpful for the conflict transformation process, which research shows benefits from inclusivity and a wide array of voices.⁶⁹¹ While their intentions may be positive, when imposter syndrome leads to self-censorship and self-imposed limitations in this way, diaspora activists are also blocking their own potential to play a positive role in the future of their country.

Blurring the Lines Between the Diaspora and the Homeland

As Chapter 5 demonstrated, the internet and social media are bridging gaps between the diaspora and the homeland not just in terms of their understanding of their identity and the conflict, but also at the level of mobilisation. These tools are enabling increased frequency and depth of cooperation between Yemenis inside and outside of Yemen in areas such as advocacy, arts and culture, humanitarian response and development programming. This trend towards increased cross-border collaboration is clearly evident in the dataset, in which 10

⁶⁹¹ World Bank, 2018, xvii.

actors appear to have key personnel located both inside and outside of Yemen, working alongside one another. Similarly, a number of the diaspora actors identified in the dataset appear to be headquartered outside of Yemen but work directly with or target Yemenis on the ground in Yemen, while the opposite also appears true – various actors identified appear to be headquartered in Yemen, but have key personnel located in the diaspora. This is the case to the extent that it is becoming difficult at times to distinguish between mobilisation activities happening within Yemen’s borders and those being conducted from the diaspora, as these efforts are becoming increasingly blended.

The interviewees shed further light on this phenomenon. Multiple interviewees mentioned that they use tools such as email, WhatsApp, Slack, Zoom and Google Meets to collaborate directly on work projects with Yemenis inside Yemen.⁶⁹² These processes have increased further still since the Covid-19 pandemic, which normalised remote working and led to an explosion of online tools and platforms for virtual collaboration. One interviewee working on advocacy for international NGOs estimated that ninety percent of his work is now conducted remotely and that he collaborates directly with Yemenis in Yemen ‘almost every day’.⁶⁹³ Another, based in the UK, said that he works directly with three NGOs on the ground in Yemen on a daily basis, supporting with strategy and operations.⁶⁹⁴ A

⁶⁹² DF1, interview with the author, 4 April 2023, via Zoom; HS9, interview with the author, 29 May 2023, via Zoom; ID5, interview with the author, 19 May 2023, via Zoom; SK3, interview with the author, 24 April 2023, via Zoom.

⁶⁹³ SK3, interview with the author, 24 April 2023, via Zoom.

⁶⁹⁴ LE0, interview with the author, 21 May 2023, via Zoom.

third participant said that the women's activism networks that she is part of have reached their peak strength due to the 'complementarity between inside and outside' Yemen, arguing that the women inside Yemen rely on the diaspora for their work nowadays, and vice versa.⁶⁹⁵

Yemenis inside and outside Yemen are able to leverage their geographical locations and positionalities to play distinct roles that often complement one another and support the collaborative process as a whole. In the arts and culture space for example, Yemenis on the ground often play the role of capturing photographic and video content on the ground, which is then sent to Yemenis in the diaspora who edit and disseminate it through their international networks⁶⁹⁶. In the researcher's own experience working in the policy research field, is often conducted by Yemenis on the ground who have the networks and access to collect reliable and accurate data, while Yemenis in the diaspora receive the data and conduct analysis of it based on their knowledge of the policy and donor communities' needs. Similarly, in the advocacy and human rights space, Yemenis on the ground are often relied upon to collect data and evidence, coordinated by Yemenis in the diaspora who process the evidence and present it using their online platforms and access to international NGOs and institutions (as exemplified by the stories shared in Chapters 5 and 6).⁶⁹⁷

⁶⁹⁵ MS2, interview with the author, 3 May 2023, via Zoom.

⁶⁹⁶ HS9, interview with the author, 29 May 2023, via Zoom.

⁶⁹⁷ ID5, interview with the author, 19 May 2023, via Zoom.

The lines of diaspora mobilisation are becoming increasingly blurred thanks to the potential for direct collaboration between Yemenis inside and outside of Yemen created by the explosion of digital tools. This fundamentally challenges our understanding of the concept of 'diaspora mobilisation' in the first place, as most diaspora mobilisation activities these days appears to occur with at least an element of collaboration with Yemenis on the ground, in a way that just a decade ago would have been much more difficult to orchestrate. This echoes the concept of 'deterritorialisation' discussed by scholars such Adamson, Koinova and Roth, as well as the idea that geographical location is becoming less important for the ways in which diasporas identify and mobilise in our globalised, connected world.⁶⁹⁸

However, the findings outlined throughout this thesis show that it is not that simple: while the line between activities that occur inside Yemen and in the diaspora is no longer so distinct, geographical location clearly still matters. As highlighted above, geographical location is increasingly being leveraged by mixed teams of Yemenis on the ground and in the diaspora to increase the effectiveness of mobilisation activities. The international donor and policy community should take note of the ways in which these processes are changing and creating new potential for diasporas as agents of change in the homeland.

The Hybridisation of Diaspora Mobilisation

⁶⁹⁸ Adamson, 'Constructing the diaspora', 29; Koinova, 'Diaspora Mobilisation for Conflict and Post-Conflict Reconstruction', 1258; Roth, 'The Role of Diasporas in Conflict', 292.

Similar to the overlaps between mobilisation efforts by Yemenis inside and outside of Yemen, the increasing overlaps between online and offline activities should also be explored in order to support our understanding of diaspora mobilisation in homeland conflict in the digital age. The opportunities created by the proliferation of tools such as WhatsApp, Zoom and other communications and social media tools, coupled with the normalisation of remote working created by the global pandemic, have clearly increased the potential for online working. However, one ought not to conclude that the online space has eclipsed the physical space altogether as the locale for diaspora mobilisation.

The insights and experiences of the interviewees highlighted the relative significance of the online space for diaspora mobilisation. All participants stressed the importance of the online spaces and opportunities created by the internet and social media for their work, with some emphasising that their importance had increased during the years since Covid-19.⁶⁹⁹ For example:

I would say the online space is much larger, much bigger, much more influential, much [better] established than the physical space. The digital space is the prime, it's the main space for Yemenis to interact and network and collaborate, and especially since Covid – Covid has actually reinforced that pattern.⁷⁰⁰

⁶⁹⁹ BG7, interview with the author, 28 March 2023, via Zoom.

⁷⁰⁰ Ibid.

Another participant mentioned the four-day internet blackout in Yemen in 2022 as evidence of the importance of the online space, highlighting the chaos this caused Yemenis in the diaspora who lost connectivity to their families, communities and colleagues as a result. 'Yemen was trending on Twitter', she said, 'everyone was posting about Yemen on Instagram, Twitter, Facebook'.⁷⁰¹

Multiple interviewees went as far as to suggest that the increasing importance of online connections among the diaspora has come at the expense of physical interaction and activity, at times with negative implications for both Yemenis in the diaspora and those in the homeland. For example, one interviewee shared that since Covid-19 had facilitated and normalised the delivery of activities such as workshops and trainings online, many have been unwilling to return to physical, in-person activity. 'Seven or eight hours on Zoom,' she lamented, 'that's just torture!'⁷⁰²

Another interviewee working in the advocacy space echoed this assertion, stressing that just because some things could now be done online, doesn't mean they should. In his experience, when INGOs conduct cases and investigations with survivors of war crimes and human rights abuses virtually, it depersonalises the process and means they sometimes miss aspects of the human impact on individuals and communities. He believes that the decrease, and often

⁷⁰¹ ID5, interview with the author, 19 May 2023, via Zoom.

⁷⁰² BG7, interview with the author, 28 March 2023, via Zoom.

complete lack of face-to-face interaction with the affected communities ultimately has a negative impact on the final outcomes of their investigations. He also argued that the increased ability of such organisations to conduct work virtually has decreased their reliance on Yemenis on the ground, thus reducing the work opportunities available to people who desperately relied on them.⁷⁰³

Despite the obvious importance of the online space, however, the research findings strongly indicate that the online and offline spaces cannot be completely separated with regard to Yemeni diaspora mobilisation, and that the internet and social media have not eclipsed physical interaction entirely as the locale for mobilisation efforts. Rather, the two often mutually support one another in complex, hybridised processes. To evidence this notion, the dataset captured 37 diaspora or diasporic actors that appear to engage in both online and offline activities, compared with just 18 operating exclusively online.⁷⁰⁴ The interviewees shed further light on this, explaining how their relationships with other Yemenis, as well as their work and mobilisation efforts, often occur through a hybridised, sometimes cyclical process of online and offline interactions (as evidenced in greater detail in Chapter 5).

Multiple interviewees explained that they are often introduced to other Yemenis working in their field or who share similar outlooks on the situation in Yemen

⁷⁰³ SK3, interview with the author, 24 April 2023, via Zoom.

⁷⁰⁴ As the data was collected via online, desk-based research, no actors were identified that could be considered to operate exclusively offline (i.e. without any kind of an online presence).

through their online activity. Sometimes they go on to meet in person, often coincidentally at events taking place in different host states in the diaspora including conferences and workshops. This physical interaction enables them to form and deepen relationships, which are then sustained virtually when they return home. The opposite also occurs when diaspora Yemenis meet for the first time face-to-face and then take their relationships online, connecting via social media and remaining in touch via platforms such as WhatsApp or Instagram until the next time they meet again in person. Such interactions often lead to friendships and sometimes even collaboration on professional and/or mobilisation activities.⁷⁰⁵ An example of this hybridised process in action was shared by one of the interviewees, who described attending an in-person book launch held in Cairo, which he had heard about online. It was attended by Yemenis coming from an array of different host states in the diaspora. 'It literally felt like I was in the cultural centre in Sana'a when we all used to meet', he said, nostalgically.⁷⁰⁶

In such cases, the internet and social media have forged, facilitated and deepened both personal and professional relationships across the diaspora – particularly between those who might not otherwise meet organically offline – but have not replaced in-person interactions altogether. Thus, while undoubtedly important, the online space has by no means replaced physical spaces as the locale of

⁷⁰⁵ BG7, interview with the author, 28 March 2023, via Zoom; CY4, interview with the author, 24 March 2023, via Zoom.

⁷⁰⁶ SK3, interview with the author, 24 April 2023, via Zoom.

diaspora interactions and mobilisation efforts. These insights thus highlight the need to re-examine the way in which we understand the changing roles and importance of geography and borders in diasporic processes such as identity formation, community building and mobilisation.

Is Geography Still Important?

The dataset provides a number of useful insights into the geography of diaspora mobilisation. The dataset captured a total of 55 diaspora or diasporic actors headquartered across at least 15 different countries.⁷⁰⁷ 30 were headquartered in Europe, the UK, the United States and Canada, while 9 were headquartered in the Middle East (excluding Yemen), 3 in the rest of the world and 5 in Yemen itself. The geographical base of 8 actors in the dataset was unclear. 36 actors appeared to have key personnel located in Europe, the UK, the United States and Canada, 13 actors had key personnel in the Middle East, 3 in the rest of the world, and 10 in Yemen.

The prevalence of actors and individuals located in 'western' countries is worth noting, as it echoes contentions from the literature on diaspora relating to the dynamics of the host state and the barriers and opportunity structures affecting mobilisation. The dataset appears, at least superficially, to support the notion that diasporas based in more politically open societies such as Europe and the United

⁷⁰⁷ Three actors appeared to be headquartered in Yemen, but were still included on the basis that they exhibit diasporic elements (in these cases, one or more of their key personnel appear to be located in the diaspora).

States are more likely to mobilise in homeland conflict. However, it is also worth noting that the languages used for this research (English and Arabic) might also have contributed to the prevalence of actors identified in the West as opposed to other areas of the world where English is not as widely spoken or used professionally.

In order to draw further conclusions on this, it is worth exploring the nature of the activities of these actors in an attempt to identify patterns such as whether particular activities occur more frequently in certain countries, as well as exploring the reasons why this might be the case. Over half of the actors identified working in the advocacy field appear to be located in either the US or UK and use English as the primary language. In contrast, almost all of the actors identified in the Middle East (excluding Turkey and Iran) were local community groups (mostly Facebook groups) for Yemeni migrants providing information and support around issues such as visas, community events and work opportunities. This supports the notion highlighted in Chapter 2 that actors in more politically liberal countries like the UK and US are more likely to be engaged in mobilisation activities centred on politics and human rights in the homeland, as the data indicates that those based in the less democratic host states of the Middle East appear to be more focused on practical issues facing the diaspora, such as housing, cultural activities and work opportunities.

This was explored in greater depth during the interviews, which shed light on some of the reasons for these differences. The interviewees overwhelmingly agreed that the relative political freedoms found in host states in the West play an enabling factor with regard to mobilisation activities. One interviewee perceived that, in many Middle East countries such as Oman, Saudi Arabia and Turkey, the diaspora voices aligned with the host state's policy vis-à-vis Yemen tended to be the ones that dominated public discussion of the conflict in that country. This, she explains, is partly because of patterns of migration whereby those who are in alignment with a particular side often migrate to the same countries in the region (the Yemeni diaspora in Turkey, for example, is heavily dominated by supporters of *Islah*). This, combined with the silencing of voices that contradict the host state's political stance on Yemen, has made activities such as advocacy, political lobbying and human rights work less prevalent in host states in the Middle East.⁷⁰⁸

Another interviewee located in the United States echoed this view, explaining that Yemenis in the West have greater freedom to mobilise politically than those in the Middle East and therefore, in her view, exhibit greater levels of objectivity:

In the US, people are free. They can speak their minds. They can bash the Saudis, they can bash the Emiratis, they can bash the Houthis, and they're not scared. I know some of my friends in Jordan who have been silenced by the Jordanian authorities ... If you're in an

⁷⁰⁸ CY4, interview with the author, 24 March 2023, via Zoom.

Arab country, you use a VPN ... You think twice about what you post on social media. And the Yemeni community in Saudi Arabia – terrified ... They were terrified [that if] the Saudi authorities found out that they're doing an interview about something, they might be deported. ... But in general, Yemenis living in the West have a lot more space and freedom to express and do things and advocate. Yemenis in the region ... if you're going to get deported, being active is not a choice.⁷⁰⁹

A third interviewee, based in one of the Gulf States, agreed with this sentiment:

It's a bit annoying sometimes, because [the government] are very close to Saudi Arabia. It's not like Europe where you have your rights ... to speak, to talk, to act. Even if you didn't get the passport, if you are legally resident at least you have some rights there. [Here] you always feel that you are guests of the government ... In the Gulf, it's very difficult to express your opinions publicly, except for me and maybe a few people. But most of the people prefer not to speak [about] politics ... Maybe they will have fake accounts on Facebook where they can express their opinions, but it's very difficult for them to make it clear that they are, for example, anti-Saudi Arabia, anti-Houthi [etc.] ... It doesn't mean that they are not interested in politics or they don't care, but they don't have the space, the free space. They definitely prefer to protect their interests and their presence in this country, because they don't have other options ... They prefer to be quiet and protect their presence [here].⁷¹⁰

⁷⁰⁹ BG7, interview with the author, 28 March 2023, via Zoom.

⁷¹⁰ PA9, interview with the author, 15 April 2023, via Zoom.

Similarly, one of the interviewees who runs a humanitarian organisation in Yemen but is primarily based in Cairo stated that she keeps a low profile when she is in Egypt and tends to avoid working with other Yemenis in the country. 'No activism, no events', she said, going on to explain that the Egyptian authorities had once detained her at the airport for seventeen hours, questioning her about her work:

When you say humanitarian, they believe it's human rights, and human rights for them is a no-go. So I just keep a low profile, I work from home. I used to work from cafes, I used to go out, but now I don't because, you know, you just don't feel that safe to speak about these issues from outside ... I don't work a lot with the [Yemenis] in Cairo. I work with the ones who are [based] internationally mainly and sometimes the ones in Cairo, but I live very far away from the Yemenis here. I really try to keep a low profile because ... we've been threatened too much.⁷¹¹

This highlights the ways in which the host state can determine the vulnerability of diasporas to transnational repression, and how host states can even play a role in this repression by threatening and targeting those who mobilise politically in the affairs of their homeland. As indicated above, those based in less politically free host states can be more easily targeted by those who wish to silence them. That is not to say, however, that Yemenis in the West do not face limitations on their freedom to mobilise publicly about the situation in Yemen. One interviewee

⁷¹¹ KR3, interview with the author, 26 June 2023, via Zoom.

mentioned the rise of the far right and the associated increase in xenophobia in European countries such as France, arguing that this had a negative impact on Yemeni community's perceptions of personal safety, and thus their ability and willingness to organise publicly and engage policymakers on issues relating to the homeland⁷¹².

Aside from the politics of the host state, the interviewees also highlighted additional reasons why geography remains an important factor shaping diaspora mobilisation, including questions of privilege and access to funding and influencers. Freedom of movement was mentioned by multiple interviewees as a key factor shaping the very makeup of the Yemeni diaspora, as well as patterns of mobilisation. Yemen's geographical position at the corner of the Arabian Peninsula have rendered the migration and asylum options available to Yemenis affected by the conflict limited: On the one hand, Yemen is geographically difficult to leave compared with a country like Syria, where people have been able to cross the border into neighbouring Lebanon, Jordan or Turkey, with many making their way from there to European countries. The lack of functioning airports in Yemen (including the airport in the capital Sana'a, which was closed to passengers throughout the majority of the conflict), has exacerbated this challenge. Migration to neighbouring Saudi Arabia and Oman has been restricted and Yemenis have struggled to access visas to other countries, the major exception being Egypt, which has allowed entry to Yemenis without visas

⁷¹² SK3, interview with the author, 24 April 2023, via Zoom.

and allowed them to stay without residency permits.⁷¹³ The personal experiences of two Yemenis in different positions exhibit this phenomenon clearly:

I didn't really have anywhere to go ... They stopped visas, they stopped everything for the Yemenis. We're not like the Syrians, you know. The Syrians got more opportunities to go to Europe - for us it was difficult. We have Oman on one side, Saudi on one side, and they were all part of the coalition. So it was difficult to go anywhere.⁷¹⁴

The difference is the privilege that we in the diaspora have [in terms] of movement, that's huge. We - at least those that have papers and passports or residency - we can move freely, whereas people inside Yemen can't.⁷¹⁵

Aside from physically preventing the migration options of many Yemenis, except perhaps those with the financial resources and *wāṣṭa* (meaning access and influence derived from one's personal connections) to secure safe passage and visas, this also affects the calculations of those Yemenis who do manage to seek asylum overseas vis-à-vis mobilisation. Yemenis dependent on the host state for asylum and support are naturally going to be reluctant to engage politically in ways that might threaten their safety and their ability to remain. Meanwhile, Yemenis who were already living in the diaspora before the conflict with passports or at secure residency status have a higher degree of privilege and

⁷¹³ Al-Absi, *The Struggle Far from Home*, 6.

⁷¹⁴ KR3, interview with the author, 26 June 2023, via Zoom.

⁷¹⁵ CY4, interview with the author, 24 March 2023, via Zoom.

safety, making them more likely to mobilise politically and/or publicly in response to the conflict.

A further geographical dynamic mentioned by the interviewees as a factor shaping mobilisation was the proximity to, and therefore access to both funding and influencers. For example, in the art community, there are a number of 'hubs' for Yemeni artists in the diaspora in countries such as Germany, Sweden and the Netherlands. This, according to an interviewee involved in the international Yemeni art community, reflects the locations where key donors of arts and culture programming are based.⁷¹⁶ Therefore, despite the fact that many of these activities take place online or at least have a hybrid online/offline nature, geography clearly still matters in terms of shaping where and how these kinds of activities occur and how accessible they are to diaspora Yemenis.

This phenomenon is reflected at the level of political mobilisation activities, which often occur in, or originate from locations where diaspora Yemenis have easy access to influencers such as policymakers, journalists or the donor community. This is not only the case in the West. While being located in places like Europe, the US and the UK places Yemenis geographically closer to influencers such as international policymakers and donors, certain locations in the Middle East similarly afford better access to key Yemeni political figures. For example, mobilised Yemenis based in (or with the ability to travel to) places like

⁷¹⁶ Ibid.

Cairo, Istanbul and Oman can take advantage of the large Yemeni communities in these countries, as well as the frequent presence of Yemeni influencers and political figures who often move regularly between these nearby countries and Yemen itself. One interviewee engaged in political advocacy highlighted that Oman in particular was an easy place to meet important Yemeni political figures, given the geographical proximity and the frequency with which such individuals travel in and out from Yemen. 'They bring them to Oman', he said, referring to Yemeni tribal sheikhs from the mountains of North Yemen. 'They have the meetings, they spend a couple of days, and then they go back.'⁷¹⁷

These findings prompt reflection on the way we understand geography in relation to diaspora mobilisation. They indicate that, although the online space has become indisputably more significant as a locale for diaspora mobilisation over the years since the outbreak of Yemen's conflict in 2015, it has stopped short of rendering geography totally irrelevant. Rather, geography should be understood as just one of the complex opportunity structures influencing the motivations for diaspora mobilisation, as well as the kinds of activities – both online and offline – that diasporas engage in. They also highlight the difficulty in drawing clear lines between the online and offline spaces, which appear to operate in a complex, dynamic and at times cyclical interplay with one another.

⁷¹⁷ SK3, interview with the author, 24 April 2023, via Zoom.

Even in cases where geography can limit or prevent certain kinds of mobilisation for reasons relating to the dynamics of the host state, the internet can now facilitate different kinds of mobilisation among individuals and actors located in these places. For example, an activist in a Middle Eastern country where freedom of expression is limited might avoid working on mobilisation activities in that country, however they might use the internet to mobilise virtually alongside other activists internationally. They might be working online to lobby politicians in another country whilst simultaneously taking advantage of the access to information and influencers in their geographical proximity. Geography, it seems, cannot be extracted from the study of diaspora mobilisation in the age of the internet and social media – however it clearly plays a significantly different role in the digital age. The possibilities for mobilisation that such hybridised, transnational processes create are vast.

Conclusions

Drawing on the findings set out in Chapters 4, 5 and 6, this chapter has set out a new way of understanding the role of diasporas in the political marketplaces of their homelands, using Yemen as a case study. Chapter 4 established the ways in which digital engagement is reshaping the ways in which Yemenis both in Yemen and outside identify and engage with one another. Chapter 5 built on this research, outlining the various ways in which Yemenis in the diaspora are mobilising in the conflict in their homeland and how the online space is reshaping these mobilisation processes. Chapter 6 illustrated both of these

phenomena in the case of the Yemeni diaspora in the UK. This chapter, building on all of these, has contributed further analysis of the myriad ways the Yemeni diaspora – and particularly the digital diaspora – is influencing events on the ground in Yemen, and thus the dynamics of Yemen’s political marketplace.

At the level of political circuitry, the diaspora is contributing to the sustenance of the networks of patronage that characterise Yemen’s marketplace through flow of funding to communities on the ground. While this might often occur with the intention of supporting and providing relief for Yemenis in Yemen, diaspora actors are, often unwittingly, playing the role of international patrons in the marketplace, with the communities they support and/or the individuals they employ to deliver humanitarian aid and development programmes on the ground occupy the role of clients. Diasporas are also engaged in political finance where they are engaged in lobbying or advocacy for international organisations that are in receipt of funding from parties to the conflict - such as the western-based think tanks sponsored by the likes of the UAE and Saudi Arabia. Meanwhile, those engaged in development programming are also embedded in networks of patronage insofar as their work is funded by western donors, and therefore beholden to their political agendas.

At the level of the public sphere, diasporas are also playing a key role in the formation and dissemination of narratives surrounding the conflict, with implications for the trajectory of the conflict on the ground. Discussion and

debates taking place online in the diaspora are nowadays inseparable from those happening within Yemen, and the crossover between the two means that the 'bubbles' in which discourse happens look fundamentally different than they did just a decade ago. Today, echo chambers may form on Clubhouse or Facebook around specific outlooks, political beliefs or identity groups, while in the past they may have occurred physically at qat chews in Sana'a and Birmingham. Online narratives and discourses around the conflict are reaching policymakers, donors and parties to the conflict, and are thus influencing the ways in which these players behave and interact (although the degree of this influence is beyond the scope of this study). The aforementioned example of the online activism surrounding the siege of Hodeidah illustrates this, as does the discussion of the Palestinian diaspora's influence over narratives surrounding the Houthis, which has arguably bolstered the Houthis' position vis-a-vis the peace process in Yemen.

Building on these conclusions, this chapter has highlighted the ways in which diasporas can both push back against, and perpetuate the dynamics of the political marketplace, sometimes unintentionally and even simultaneously. It has demonstrated how the proliferation of the internet and social media are fundamentally reshaping the role of diasporas vis-à-vis the political marketplaces of their homelands, embedding them more intricately and intrinsically than ever into the networks of patronage that underpin and sustain the political marketplace on the ground.

The exploration of the role of the diaspora in the political marketplace provided an opportunity to explore the ways in which broader themes of the literature on diaspora studies should be called into question and re-examined in the digital age. This chapter has analysed how the internet and social media are reshaping the ways in which diasporas identify, form community and mobilise in homeland conflict, challenging traditional literature and establishing new ways of understanding these processes. It has critically analysed the contention that diasporas are 'out of touch' with the day-to-day concerns of people in the homeland, explored the ways in which new technologies are blurring lines between the homeland and the diaspora, and established a new way of understanding the hybridised online/offline processes of mobilisation that occur in the digital age. Moreover, it has concluded that - in contrast to scholarly contentions that diaspora mobilisation has become 'deterritorialised', the implications of geographical location remain key for our understanding of diasporas and diaspora mobilisation in the age of the internet and social media.

Finally, it is worth considering the implications of these findings for how we understand the very concept of 'diaspora' across a variety of disciplines, from academia to policy making to development programming. By focusing on diasporic processes such as identity and community formation, and political mobilisation, this chapter - and this thesis more broadly - has highlighted that it is all but impossible to define diaspora as a static concept with one, fixed definition. While it is difficult to argue that diasporas, in all their manifestations,

are linked with at least an element of migration or dispersal - echoing essentialist definitions of the term - considering these factors alone as constituting a definition of diaspora is incomplete. Rather, diaspora as a concept can take on additional, more constructivist elements and meanings, some of which are territorialised and others deterritorialised at different points in time and across different contexts.

Conclusion

This thesis has critically examined the role diasporas play in political marketplaces in the twenty-first century. It has explored the ways the internet and social media are reshaping how diasporas identify, form communities and mobilise in homeland conflict, using the Yemeni diaspora as a case study. Through research of Yemeni diaspora actors and interviews with Yemenis in the diaspora, it has added to the theoretical literature on diaspora studies and conflict transformation, as well as building on existing empirical research towards the conflict in Yemen.

Adding nuance to traditional diaspora scholarship, the thesis used Alex De Waal's concept of the political marketplace as a theoretical framework to explore the ways in which diasporas engage with the political dynamics of the homeland, and how they mobilise in conflict management and resolution in political marketplaces like Yemen's. It studied the Yemeni diaspora in the UK in particular as a microcosm of diaspora activity, testing the conclusions drawn from the research by applying them to a host state which is home to longstanding and well-established Yemeni communities, as well as waves of migrants displaced by conflict and instability since 2011. It also considered the gendered nature of Yemeni diaspora mobilisation in the ongoing conflict, highlighting the ways in which women mobilise differently than men, and the distinct opportunities and challenges they face in doing so.

Chapter 1 undertook a comprehensive review of the academic literature on Yemen, laying the groundwork for understanding the conflict and the role of diaspora actors within the country's political marketplace. It critically examined Yemen's history, political economy, and societal dynamics before and after the 2011 uprising, analysing the historical and structural drivers of violence and barriers to peace. It explored how tribalism, regionalism, and sectarianism interact dynamically in shaping Yemeni identity and governance. Additionally, the chapter traced the historical and contemporary patterns of Yemeni migration, assessing how the diaspora had influenced Yemen's political economy and conflict dynamics.

The first chapter also highlighted significant gaps in the literature, particularly the limited exploration of the transnational aspects of Yemen's conflict, including the role of diaspora actors in shaping the homeland's political and economic landscapes. This critique underscored the need for reconceptualising Yemen's conflict through a framework that accounted for its complexity, fluidity, and international dimensions. By identifying these gaps, the chapter set the stage for the thesis's empirical and theoretical contributions, positioning diaspora as a critical yet underexplored element in Yemen's evolving political marketplace and its broader implications for conflict and peacebuilding studies.

Chapter 2 reviewed the academic literature on diaspora studies, focusing on how diasporas mobilise during homeland conflict and the implications of globalisation and technological advancements on these processes. It critiqued

existing definitions and categorisations of diasporas, emphasising their fluidity and heterogeneity, and explored the motivations and contextual factors driving mobilisation. The chapter highlighted the dual potential of diaspora engagement to either exacerbate conflict or support peacebuilding, depending on the circumstances. It also introduced De Waal's Political Marketplace Theory as a framework to conceptualise the role of diasporas in fragmented, conflict-affected states. The analysis set the stage for this thesis to argue that diasporas, as transnational actors, play multifaceted roles in shaping political and economic dynamics in their homelands, requiring more nuanced theoretical and empirical exploration.

Chapter 3 built on the theoretical foundation established in the second chapter by developing a framework to analyse the roles diasporas play in political marketplaces like Yemen's. Drawing on De Waal's Political Marketplace Theory, it argued that diasporas are not merely peripheral actors but integral participants who can influence transactional politics, patterns of violence, and governance. The chapter posited that diasporas can simultaneously perpetuate and challenge political marketplace dynamics, shaping their homelands' trajectories in complex and context-dependent ways. Yemen was presented as an advanced political marketplace characterised by external rents, fragmented control over violence, and decentralised political loyalties, making it an ideal case study for this research.

The chapter also outlined the thesis's central research questions:

1. How is the proliferation of the internet and social media reshaping diasporic processes of identity formation, community building, and mobilisation in homeland conflict?
2. What are the implications of this for our theoretical understanding of the concepts of diaspora and diaspora mobilisation?
3. What positions and roles do diasporas occupy in the political marketplaces of their homelands?

To address these questions, the chapter outlined a mixed-methods approach that combined online network mapping with surveys and semi-structured interviews. This methodology aimed to investigate how Yemeni diaspora actors, particularly in the UK, use technology to mobilise and form transnational communities while engaging in both online and offline activities. By combining theoretical innovation with empirical research, the third chapter of the thesis established a robust foundation for exploring how diasporas, leveraging their unique positionality, are reshaping twenty-first-century conflict dynamics and contributing to peacebuilding efforts.

Chapters 4 through 6 presented and analysed the findings of the research in order to address the research questions outlined above, within the framework of the political marketplace. Chapter 4 explored how the proliferation of the internet and social media are reshaping the processes of identity formation and community building among Yemenis in the diaspora. It demonstrated that the online environment offers Yemenis a platform to renegotiate and redefine their identity, independent of traditional sources and influencing factors such as their

local communities and state-imposed narratives. The chapter examined how social media are facilitating the formation of both local and transnational communities, highlighting the dynamic and fluid nature of diaspora identity in the digital age. The conclusions drawn indicate that digital technologies are allowing diaspora communities to transcend geographical and political boundaries, reshaping the roles they occupied within their homeland's political marketplace. Chapter 4 therefore directly addressed the research question relating to the ways digital tools are reshaping diaspora mobilisation, with significant implications for both identity and community-building processes in the context of homeland conflict.

Chapter 5 looked at the complex, dynamic role of the diaspora in Yemen's conflict and political marketplace, highlighting how Yemenis in the diaspora use collective action frames to shape social movements and influence the public sphere in Yemen. It demonstrated that diaspora actors are deeply embedded within Yemen's political marketplace, engaging in mobilisation activities such as humanitarian fundraising and donor-funded programming, and contributing to the formation and dissemination of narratives that impact the conflict's trajectory. The chapter also examined how the internet and social media reshape mobilisation processes, facilitating collaboration between diaspora actors and those inside Yemen, and hybridising online and offline activities. Overall, it emphasized that diaspora actors cannot be viewed as separate from Yemen's political marketplace, as they are intricately involved in both patronage networks

and the broader political dynamics shaped by new digital opportunities and challenges.

Chapter 6 delved into the specific dynamics of the Yemeni diaspora in the UK, focusing on how the community are engaging with the conflict in Yemen through the internet and social media. The chapter concluded that social media played a critical role in facilitating deeper connections, enhancing the effectiveness of diaspora mobilisation and reshaping the way Yemenis engaged with the political dynamics of their homeland. The findings also revealed that diaspora actors in the UK were deeply embedded in both local and international patronage networks, influencing political and social spheres. This chapter addressed the research questions by demonstrating how diaspora actors in the UK, although often geographically dispersed, are intricately involved in the political marketplace of Yemen, shaping both local and international political processes.

The final chapter of the thesis synthesised the findings of the dissertation, using the research conducted on the case of Yemen to draw broader conclusions on the evolving role of diasporas in the political marketplaces of their homelands. It highlights how, in the digital age, the diaspora's engagement in Yemen's political marketplace has become more complex and multi-dimensional, with diaspora actors both perpetuating and pushing back against the dynamics sustaining the conflict. This chapter demonstrated that, while diasporas are deeply embedded in patronage networks and political finance systems, they also contribute to the formation of alternative narratives and mobilise for peace and human rights,

albeit with mixed results. The proliferation of internet and social media has reshaped the ways in which diasporas identify, form communities, and mobilise, blurring the lines between the diaspora and the homeland. The chapter concludes that diaspora mobilisation today is increasingly hybridised, involving both online and offline activities, and challenges traditional understandings of diaspora as a static concept. It calls for a more nuanced approach to understanding diaspora in the digital era, recognising the importance of both geographical location and the digital tools that facilitate transnational engagement and mobilisation. Finally, it highlighted the ways in which diasporas can both push back against, and perpetuate the dynamics of the political marketplace, sometimes unintentionally and even simultaneously.

The implications of the findings of this research are significant for scholars of diaspora and conflict transformation as well as practitioners in the conflict and peacebuilding fields. On a theoretical level, this thesis has applied a unique and innovative approach, combining key elements of the diaspora studies and conflict transformation literatures to create a new theoretical framework for understanding diaspora mobilisation in homeland conflict. This framework has enabled the researcher to capture the complex and constantly evolving ways in which the Yemeni diaspora identifies, forms community, and engages with the politics of its homeland. However, it also offers a versatile model for future research seeking to understand the role of diasporas in other fragile, conflict-affected, or patrimonial states.

On an empirical level, this thesis has contributed new knowledge of how Yemeni diaspora communities have evolved globally – but particularly in the UK – since 2011, in the context of the ongoing conflict and the explosive proliferation of the internet and social media. It therefore provides valuable insights and evidence for diplomats, policymakers, journalists and programming professionals working to deliver peacebuilding, humanitarian and development agendas in Yemen.

This thesis has also laid the groundwork for future studies of diasporas and their role in homeland political marketplaces, and in conflict and conflict transformation. Future research could explore other Arab diasporas whose homelands have experienced political upheaval and conflict over the years since 2011, including the Syrian and Palestinian diasporas. This could also enable further exploration of the ways in which diasporas intersect with and influence one another in their mobilisation efforts, and how the internet and social media are influencing these processes. Such research could be used to support the development of new frameworks for diaspora engagement in conflict management and transformation that take into account their positionality and their roles in the digital age, and therefore more effectively leverage their potential as actors for peace.

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