Interview - Stacey Philbrick Yadav

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Stacey Philbrick Yadav is an Associate Professor of Political Science at Hobart and William Smith Colleges where she contributes to interdisciplinary programs in International Relations, Middle Eastern Studies, Developmental Studies, and Social Justice Studies. Her specialization is in the comparative politics of the Middle East. She currently serves on the board of the American Institute of Yemeni Studies, where she is involved in initiatives to link academic research to public policies. She has written widely on Yemeni and Lebanese politics over the past several years and published her book *Islamists and the State: Legitimacy and Institutions in Yemen and Lebanon* in 2013.

Where do you see the most significant research occurring in the political science of the Middle East?

I'm excited to see increasing attention to the intersection of the formal and the informal in analysis of Middle East politics. For a long time, it was rather "either/or," but more recently there has been some great mapping of the ways in which informal political practices and discourses shape and are shaped by formal institutions and international agreements. The role of unprecedented mass mobilization during and after the 2011 uprisings was taken by some as evidence of the "irrelevance" of formal institutions, but on the contrary, careful scholarship on specific uprisings has shown the iterative relationship between the informal and the formal in creative and theoretically significant ways. Even before the uprisings, some scholars were doing this in critical political economy, but I see early lessons developed in that literature carried into analysis of social movements and other research traditions and it's exciting.

How has the way you understand the world changed over time, and what (or who) has prompted the most significant shifts in your thinking?

If I had to characterize my own change broadly, I'd say that I care much more about relationships and networks, as opposed to bounded "units" than I did earlier on. I think "the state" once had a conceptual coherence for me that it no longer does. I don't mean to suggest that the state "doesn't exist" or anything like that, but what I've really come to be interested in is how people talk – and more specifically, how they talk to different audiences – about the state, and what they expect from it. At an intellectual level, there was a short essay by Joel Migdal that I read in maybe 2001 that was in a collection covering his thinking about the state over 20+ years. It was influential for me, not just because it shook my intellectual commitment to the state as an analytically separable object of analysis, but because he was making visible his own process of intellectual reevaluation. That's something that reasonably few people do "in public," and it was a great encouragement to be open to rethinking, just as I was about to begin my field research in Yemen. In practical terms, it was there that I learned to think about the state-as-discourse through my discussions with members of the political opposition, by paying attention to the ways in which they invoked state (as an ideal) against regime.

Can you give us a brief overview of the current situation in Yemen, particularly with respect to the Houthis position, where Al-Qaeda in the Arabian Peninsula (AQAP) stands, and the status of the Kuwait peace talks?

If I could successfully give a brief overview like that, I would probably be doing something else with my life. In seriousness, I would say this: the Houthi movement is one of several indigenous protest movements that developed in Yemen in the 2000s, in response to a series of authoritarian encroachments in the 1990s. The Houthis (like the

Southern Movement, with which they share some similarities) were effectively closed out of power after 2011 but still had a lot of popularity on the ground, which left them well-positioned to play spoiler to a poorly conceived transitional framework. Their relationship with Iran is shallow and tactical, and is only made more substantial by Saudi involvement in/leadership of the war that began in March 2015.

The Saudi-led coalition contends that it is working to reestablish the "legitimate government" of Yemen, but that government is itself externally brokered and lacking in any great source of domestic support, except as a counter to the Houthis. For better or for worse, it's clear that there will be no military victory for either side, and all parties have committed terrible crimes against civilian communities during more than a year of fighting. The Kuwait talks have not been successful to date, mainly because of misaligned incentives for good-faith negotiation.

With regard to AQAP: before the war, AQAP showed little desire to govern territory, but by April 2015 it was in full territorial control of the province of Hadramawt and its prominent port of al-Mukallah and was fulfilling many basic state functions more effectively than most parts of the country. This wasn't simply opportunistic, but also reflects a changing dynamic with regard to the Islamic State in Yemen and regionally. While IS has primarily restricted itself to a few dramatic suicide attacks in major cities, it has reportedly drawn up governance maps for the provinces to which the caliphate might ultimately extend. Given the competition between AQ affiliates and IS in Syria and Iraq, some analysts have suggested that the Hadramawt campaign was an effort by AQAP to hem in IS by preempting its territorialism, and thus constitutes a substantive transformation of AQAP.

Looking back, could you pinpoint the origin of this conflict to the deposition of former President Ali Abdullah Saleh in 2011?

I definitely put the origin of the conflict much earlier than that. The transitional agreement that led to Saleh's departure is deeply significant, but in large part because it didn't take seriously the grievances or popularity of the Southern Movement, or the Houthis, or the very real complaints of many independent activists (and even non-activists). It was crafted outside of Yemen, reflecting a combination of vested interests and lack of familiarity. Frustratingly, once the agreement was put in place, it was nearly impossible to find good media coverage of ongoing mobilization against the framework at a time when something might actually have been done to prevent the further deterioration of political order. In other words, if its terms had been open to renegotiation in, say, 2012-13, the framework might have been salvageable, but dissenters were simply treated as "spoilers" (if they had weapons), or otherwise ignored (if they didn't).

Can you explain why there seems to be little accountability for the crisis? The US, the UK, France, Saudi Arabia and its Gulf allies, and allegedly Iran, are all involved. What is at stake here that makes the international humanitarian investigation so slow?

In my view, we will all look back on this war as one of the great failures of international institutions. The UN peace building process has been captured by the Saudis – from the crafting and implementation of the transitional agreement in 2011 to its (successful) efforts to block accountability for the crimes the coalition has committed during the war. Yemen specialists who were advising the UN quit in frustration over the extent of political penetration at the UN. On the Iran side, there is evidence that Iran is supplying weapons to the Houthis, something that corresponds to increased Saudi engagement. There is definitely a regional geopolitical rivalry at work, and yet we should not treat this as a straightforward "proxy war" in a way that minimizes Yemeni grievances or agency.

Many Yemenis report feeling as though Yemen was "traded" to KSA in exchange for the Kingdom's grudging acquiescence to the Iran nuclear deal. I have no way of verifying that, of course, but it hardly matters whether it's true – it matters how openly and frequently Yemenis voice this feeling of disempowerment, and how much the UN's legitimacy has been undermined in the process. There will be no military solution to the war in Yemen, but the most likely peace broker is in no position to actually deliver a peace process in which rival factions will trust.

As for the US…well, I've been pretty open about this in other venues, so I'll be blunt: the US is a party to this war. I'm not talking about the Special Forces deployed to fight AQAP in Hadramawt. I mean that we have provided military

intelligence to the Saudi coalition that is used for targeting, we have provided the weapons (including cluster munitions), and we have reportedly even engaged in mid-flight refueling of coalition warplanes. We have abetted the Saudis' efforts to evade their responsibilities as a UN member state. It has been longstanding US practice to view Yemen's domestic politics through the narrow lens of counterterrorism, and presumably the US is more eager to continue working with (a delegitimized) President Hadi than to engage the many unknowns that would come with a more representative or accountable Yemeni government brokered through good-faith negotiations. As an academic, I can step back an understand some of this – even if I view it as short-sighted and unlikely to succeed. As an American citizen, I am horrified that my country is abetting the destruction of another, and I do what I can to speak out. I have been encouraged by efforts at the legislative level in the US and in several allied countries to limit munitions sales to KSA while the war continues, but even shifting the conversation a little has been a monumental struggle (and requires ongoing work, amid recent setbacks).

Looking at the humanitarian cost of the war, can you tell us how the Yemeni healthcare system is coping with the crisis, and to what extent external relief efforts are helping?

I can't say much on this, but note that medical personnel and infrastructure have been deliberately targeted by the Houthis and by the Saudi-led coalition in what appear to be instances of war crimes. Taiz, for example, which is Yemen's most populous city, spent months under siege conditions imposed by Houthi-aligned militias, with available supplies only kilometers outside of the city but unable to reach the stranded population. Several hospitals, including known MSF sites, have been bombed by Saudi-led coalition airstrikes. The targeting of humanitarian agencies, the theft of supplies – it's all an absolute moral outrage.

The numbers of internally displaced persons are in the millions. Those who are able to leave are mainly leaving for the Horn of Africa, which is itself deeply unstable. But given its geography and the partial blockade, most Yemenis are trapped, and food insecurity has reached near-famine levels in multiple parts of the country. Again, given the political cover and logistical assistance that the US has provided for the continuation of this war, as an American, I hang my head.

Why is it that the conflict in Yemen is not given greater attention or coverage in many countries, even those involved in the fighting?

For many members of the Saudi-led coalition, the war has been an embarrassing symbol of their own reliance on good ties with the Kingdom, so I imagine there is a desire to minimize discussion of it. But as I've also written about (with Jillian Schwedler), there's a lot of intra-regional bigotry against Yemenis that underwrites some real indifference to their suffering. They are the poor country cousins of cosmopolitan residents of Cairo, Beirut, Amman. Yemenis are portrayed as hopelessly "backward" and violent in the regional media. Yemen has already been framed as a "failed state" for more than a decade, and the Saudis have long positioned themselves as the most fit to interpret the byzantine politics of their neighbor for the rest of the region. So I don't find the amount or type of coverage to be surprising, at the regional level.

In North America and Europe, part of the indifference or underreporting stems from understandably divided attention – the Syrian crisis is more immediate, in its geography, in the way the refugee crisis is reshaping European politics, etc. But it's also hard to challenge the Saudi role and US and European support for that role. In this regard, I'm proud to have joined with the overwhelming majority of North American and European academics who work on Yemen in publishing several open letters addressing the humanitarian crisis and the role of our own governments in supporting the war, but we have found ourselves swimming against the stream.

Fortunately, Yemeni journalists and filmmakers are filling some of the media void; unfortunately, they struggle to distribute their work and to find audiences. I recommend checking out the #SupportYemen media collective for some powerful examples of Yemeni work representing the breakdown of the transition and life at war, and the Yemen Peace Project's International Yemeni Film and Arts Festival or Mafraj Radio podcast. Listening to the ways in which Yemenis narrate their own experience of this conflict should be our first, not last, resort.

Lastly, what is the most important advice you could give to young scholars of political science, particularly those focusing on the Middle East?

My main advice isn't region-specific. Be curious and open to surprise – lean into what doesn't seem to fit. That seems simple and obvious, but it's really not. It's a claim with epistemological and methodological implications, and it's different from saying "be open to being wrong," in the positivist/falsificationist sense. A corollary of this advice would be that students should seek out diverse methodological training and some exposure to philosophy of social science before they start doing any real amount of fieldwork. Maintaining a skeptical posture – toward your evidence, toward your interlocutors, and most importantly toward your own interpretations – is what will help you most in your sense-making process, wherever you work.

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This interview was conducted by Atrin Toussi. Atrin is an Associate Features Editor at E-IR.