Transcript

Yemen, Saudi Arabia, and the Gulf States: Elite Politics, Street Protests and Regional Diplomacy

Ginny Hill
Associate Fellow, Middle East and North Africa Programme, Chatham House

Professor Gerd Nonneman
Associate Fellow, Middle East and North Africa Programme, Chatham House

Chair: Professor Stefan Wolff
International Security, University of Birmingham

12 May 2011

The views expressed in this document are the sole responsibility of the author(s) and do not necessarily reflect the view of Chatham House, its staff, associates or Council. Chatham House is independent and owes no allegiance to any government or to any political body. It does not take institutional positions on policy issues. This document is issued on the understanding that if any extract is used, the author(s)/speaker(s) and Chatham House should be credited, preferably with the date of the publication or details of the event. Where this document refers to or reports statements made by speakers at an event every effort has been made to provide a fair representation of their views and opinions, but the ultimate responsibility for accuracy lies with this document’s author(s). The published text of speeches and presentations may differ from delivery.
Stefan Wolff:

Ladies and gentlemen, welcome and good evening to this Chatham House event to mark the launch of a new briefing paper entitled Yemen, Saudi Arabia, and the Gulf States: Elite Politics, Street Protests, and Regional Diplomacy. My name is Stefan Wolff. I am Professor of International Security at the University of Birmingham. It's my great pleasure to chair this event. We have two excellent speakers, who at the same time of course are the authors of this briefing paper. Ginny Hill, who is an Associate Fellow at the Chatham House Middle East and North Africa Programme, and also convenes the Yemen forum here, and Gerd Nonneman, who is a Professor of Gulf studies at the University of Exeter, and also an Associate Fellow at the MENA Programme here at Chatham House. Each of the speakers will now take 15 minutes to highlight a number of key points from the briefing paper, and afterwards we'll have 30 minutes time for discussion, and without any further ado, I hand over to Ginny.

Ginny Hill:

Thank you very much. Thank you very much for coming. I should start by saying that this report that's been published today was actually planned last year, and the writing started last year, and the bulk of the writing was really done by February, and we spent much of March and April updating the text on a daily, weekly basis. So as a result, this paper doesn't cover the detail of the transition. It doesn't cover the detail of the GCC mediation, although it seeks to set recent events in the context of a broader regional and international framework and set the events of the last few months in the context of the last few years, and indeed, even the processes of state formation over the course of the last few decades.

I'm sure we will end up talking about the detail of the GCC mediation in the question and answer session, and in fact, we're also planning a paper on Yemen's political transition, which will look at the details of this deal and the likely scenarios going forward, but apologies for those who are looking for that detail in today's paper. Today's paper argues that there are two parallel processes taking place in Yemen at the moment, both a popular revolution at the grassroots, but also an elite power struggle. Most of you will know that the protest camp in Sana'a, the grassroots revolution, has been in place for over three and a half months now, and that there are hundreds of thousands of people involved in this protest, not just in Sana'a, but in major cities right across the country.
This movement was sparked, obviously, by the events in Tunisia and Egypt, but has sustained itself, and it's a peaceful, nonviolent protest. Among the protestors are a number of independent youths, non-aligned youths, who are going through a process of political awakening, and we can talk more about how that process is organising itself, but the goals that this movement have articulated are the creation of a civic state in Yemen, a positive vision for Yemen going forward. They are demanding the fall of the president, but they're also demanding the fall of the regime, so they have a vision for political change which goes beyond a single transition of power. Now, these demands are putting the established structures under great strain, and we're attempting to look in this report at the way that regional powers are responding to that challenge.

As I said, we started writing this maybe six months ago, and we were looking at the Friends of Yemen process, which was started here in London in January, 2010. It was an attempt to create a comprehensive approach to Yemen's problems, and a pre-emptive approach to Yemen's problems, but essentially – and the reason we chose to look at that in this paper – was this notion of strategic partnership between the Western donors and the members of the Gulf Cooperation Council, and the logic for that grew out of a perception that the Gulf states had greater resources, stronger cultural ties, and in certain places, stronger political leverage in Yemen.

The Friends of Yemen is too unwieldy to function as an effective transition mechanism in this current process, and the last meeting, which was supposed to take place in Riyadh in March, was cancelled, so that whole framework is on hold, but that partnership between Western donors and the Gulf states continues to play an important role in the current mediation process. There's a smaller international contact group now working with the Gulf states, and the UN is beginning to take a more strategic political role in Yemen. To date, the GCC states have shown that they have limited leverage to enforce the current deal, and Yemen is drifting in a state of limbo. Yesterday we saw violence for the first time between different divisions of the military stationed in Sana'a. Now, I have to say that conversations with contacts in Yemen going back over a year were envisioning this prospect of urban violence between different elite factions before the Arab Spring. Nobody knew what the trigger might be.

So this is something which has been there in the minds of political actors for a while, and that leads me into the three key findings of our report about the current political crisis. The first one is that it follows a widespread loss of faith in the legitimacy of Yemen's governing institutions, not just the Parliament,
but also the party political structure and the role of Parliament, and that has implications for the GCC deal, which is being mediated through the ruling party and the opposition coalition. Power is not effectively structured through these institutions, and it has not effectively been structured through government ministries, and we talk in the paper about the role of informal networks in Yemen and the extent to which a lot of power has been structured through these informal networks.

And we talk about the challenge that that poses for international diplomacy, which is obviously conducted on a state-to-state basis and through the process of dialogue with ministers, and particularly the Friends of Yemen agenda, really trying to promote reform in Yemen by working through the established structures. We argue that the Gulf elites have had much better access to Yemen's informal networks than the Western donors, both at the elite level, where the current competition is taking place, but also at the subnational level, not just tribal sheikhs but religious leaders, a number of actors at the subnational level. We highlight the dominance of Saudi influence in this process, and we articulate – we try to articulate – the extent and diversity of transnational patronage, and Gerd is going to talk a lot more about the way Saudi approached its structure and how that's been changing over the last few months and years.

We talk about the competition between elite factions in Yemen, and we talk about the way that that competition interacts with the interest of external powers, and we look back at a number of incidents, really, over the last few years. General Ali Mohsen, most of you will know, is a prominent commander in the northwest army division. He's a very close relative of Ali Abdullah Saleh; he comes from the same village. These two men have been very important power points inside the modern republic, really right back since the late 1970s. General Ali Mohsen split.

He moved out to protect the street protesters in March, following a sniper attack on the pro-democracy camp, and we say that this really was the moment when this gap between the regime and the state came into open view, and we look at the way President Saleh tried to, or provided the location for General Ali Mohsen's headquarters to the Saudi military when they were involved in a broader war in 2009 and they were conducting bombing raids inside Yemeni territory, close to Yemeni border, as an example of the way that one faction tries to harness the interest and resources of an external power. We talk about the way that the Yemenis have viewed American military aid, which has gone exclusively into units under the control of the
president's son and his nephews as another example of the resources of external players being used in this internal competition.

And finally, we talk about the role of the al-Ahmar family. Sheik Abdullah al-Ahmar died in 2007, but he was a very powerful figure within the tribal structure and within the political structure in Yemen. His influence and power has passed to his sons, and many of his sons, there's a group of his sons that are seeking to divide their father's portfolio among them, but the view that has been expressed to me by many in Yemen is that money is coming from the al-Ahmar brothers, and it's supporting the protestors in the pro-democracy camp, and at least some of that money is assumed or believed to be coming from outside the country, and we cite this as another example of the way in which competing elements in Yemen are trying to leverage the concern and resources of people outside the state.

There is a widespread perception in Yemen that Saudi Arabia is trying to influence the outcome of political change, and there's also a belief that succession dynamics and factional interests in Riyadh are affecting the calculations of political actors in Yemen. There's a lack of reliable information about how Saudi is approaching the problem, which invites speculation, and still a perception in Yemen that the Saudis are looking for a weak and divided country. Gerd again will talk more about that view, but from our recent research trips to Riyadh to write this paper, we heard a very consistent message, and that's, security concerns are paramount, and that there is a fear of Al-Qaeda in the Arabian Peninsula operating in a failing state.

On the terms of the GCC deal, there's a great deal of frustration and disillusionment within the protest movement about the promise for immunity for President Saleh and his relatives, and a sense that this is a dialogue between elites, elites in Sana'a and elites in the Gulf states. There is a line in a supporting text to the statement that says, we support the change that is happening in Yemen. The agreement will meet the aspirations of the Yemeni people for change and reform.

So there is a statement of commitment there to change and reform, and a number of the protest leaders were offered a place as observers at the negotiation talks in the middle of April, but the protest movement at that stage was still establishing its own processes of coordination and establishing its own mechanisms for nominating representatives, and that process had not got far enough by the end of April for them to be able to send anybody to these talks, partly because the protesters are so disillusioned at the limbo, the
state of stalemate, with the GCC negotiation drifting and there being no clear direction.

They have decided to escalate their own demonstrations, and in the last few days, we’ve seen the protestors marching. We’ve seen a number of incidents of violence, and I should just remind you all that we’re heading towards the May 22 anniversary of unification, ten days away, and there is a stated commitment there from the protestors to escalate their demands, and we’re heading towards a very symbolic date in the Yemeni calendar. The longer this goes on, the more the risk of tension is rising. We’ve already seen an example now of conflict between different military factions. The risk of that repeating is going to rise.

At the same time, the economy, which was already in a bad shape in December, is facing even more strain. Commodity prices are rising, food prices, fuel prices. There’s a blockade on gas; gas is struggling to get through to the markets. Yemen’s oil output has been affected by the unrest, and I’ve received some information the last few days to suggest about a third of the country’s oil production is currently offline, and that, valuable foreign exchange reserves are rapidly diminishing.

So I’ll just briefly talk about the two security issues that we cover in this paper. We look at the threat from Al-Qaeda in the Arabian Peninsula, and we look at the history of the Houthi conflict. We really chose to look at those to highlight some key issues around the Gulf states' perceptions of transnational threats from Yemen, and crucially, the transnational nature of this response to both of these threats, involving state-to-state relations, but also involving extremely complex networks of transnational patronage, and the way that these two conflicts play into narratives about authority and legitimacy on both sides of the border.

Al-Qaeda in the Arabian Peninsula, I’ll just finish by making a distinction, I think, between the role of Anwar al-Awlaki, the Yemeni-American cleric who's producing an effective volume of English-language propaganda, and the Yemeni-Saudi control and command unit of Al-Qaeda in the Arabian Peninsula, and I think they are using different networks, different audiences. They're speaking in different languages, and they have different priorities, and I think Saudi Arabia potentially sees the command and control unit of Al-Qaeda in the Arabian Peninsula to be more of a direct threat to its own internal interests, whereas I think Western democratic states are more concerned about the impact that Anwar al-Awlaki can have on nationals here in the UK and the US and other European countries. We finish the report by
highlighting the different CT models that are used by Saudi Arabia and the US, and we recommend exploring these two different approaches, and we ask the question about which approach is least politically sensitive and least likely to drive fragility in Yemen and end with a conclusion that there is still this tension between longer-term interest around stability and reform and a comprehensive solution for Yemen and the immediate, short-term primacy of security interest for Yemen's friends and neighbours. Thank you.

Stefan Wolff:
Thank you very much, Ginny; also, thank you very much for keeping exactly with your allotted 15 minutes, and having set such a great example, no pressure on you, Gerd.

Gerd Nonneman:
Thank you. In fact, I suppose I could do with saying, well, and now read the footnotes, but what I'll do is, I will briefly throw in a few observations that we came up with about the nature of the changes in and some of the variations between the various GCC states' approach to Yemen. As Ginny's already indicated, there's clearly a concern with security, like for anybody else, but the way in which that has translated into policy has differed from most of the West's approach, particularly the American approach – Ginny's referred to different kind of approach to counterterrorism, for instance – partly because of some of those differential abilities or capabilities that some of those states, particularly Saudi Arabia, have compared to Western states, that's to say knowledge of, interaction with, intertwining with, local kinship networks, elites at the top and intermediate levels, and so on.

So that's part of the explanation for that, but the most obvious thing that strikes us all, I suppose, today, is, yes, there is this GCC initiative, and that's striking for many people who've been following GCC foreign policies for a while, because, A, it shows one of the few cases where they've clearly come together as GCC and done something of significant import, but it also shows them as more proactive, politically, in risky areas, than they've often been portrayed as being in the past.

So just a few comments about that. The GCC says generally, I suppose, that there's a number of common features in their foreign policies, which, some of which comes through in policy towards Yemen, and this has included bilateralism as opposed to collective action. Towards Yemen, that was also
very much the case until very recently. The GCC as a whole, of course, is part of the explanation for this. There hasn't been much of a truly coherent collective foreign policy traditionally before then, with a few exceptions, and one of the most obvious ones is their common negotiation with the EU over free trade agreements.

More recently, even before the Friends of Yemen process, you began to see them, at least in certain sectors, getting back together in terms of discussing aid to Yemen, discussing together arriving at some kind of common understanding, at least trying to achieve some kind of common framework for discussion about aid to Yemen, but nothing like this current initiative. So I suppose what the argument is that the shift you've seen in the GCC's attitudes, including toward Yemen, is in part as a result of the catalyst of current events, but in part it fits into something that was tentatively beginning to develop before.

The other thing that is striking, a common for GCC foreign policy is, I suppose, the lack of institutional capability. Now, these bureaucracies have been professionalising, have been expanding, but it has remained very much a personal thing, personal diplomacy. Limited institutional backing, limited capability comparatively, for follow up, for implementation. In some cases, also limited coordination, not just among GCC states but within certain GCC states. Particularly I'm thinking of Saudi Arabia, and I'll come back to that in a couple of minutes. Anyway, what we're having today is, there is more clarity in policy – certainly over Yemen, but also, if you look at the reaction to Libya, for instance – and there is more coherence, apparent coherence, in GCC policy, particularly again on those two issues.

Having said that, there are still these significant limitations, even with this apparent sea change, partly rooted in tentative developments earlier, partly catalysed by current events, nevertheless, very significant limitations remain. First of all, bilateralism really still rules the roost. It's still individual states, ultimately, that are most important, and that bilateralism continues to cut across some of the commonality of GCC policy.

Second, policy towards Yemen in particular is limited by intent and by fears. That is to say, going back to what Ginny was talking about, a difference between state-to-state relations and dealings in formal relationships between top elites, and on the other hand, some of these street protests that we're now seeing, these unknown groups or actors, at least unknown to GCC states. That difference has a policy implication for these GCC states. There is a certain reluctance, at least on the part of players like Saudi Arabia and the
UAE, for instance, to quite put their trust in what might emerge if things aren't somehow managed. And of course, on the Yemeni side, there's very much a perception that that is exactly what's going, that society maybe, for instance, wants to control exactly what happens. In part, that reflects something that is true.

So, going back to this limitation, there's a limitation to how far they may be willing to go, although there's a difference between different GCC states. My sense is that Qatar, for instance, has taken a decision that this is something you just have to go with now. There's a statement the last couple of days that, as well, these revolutions in the Arab world, this is not something you can escape. This is something you have to accept, that you have to get on side with, effectively, because it reflects people's frustrations, will to freedom, etcetera, so it looks as if Qatar, for whatever reasons, has then taken a decision that this is the kind of thing you can't go and stand against.

Saudi Arabia, on the other hand, to the extent that there is a concerted policy, a concerted strategy about this, is still far more reluctant, and that kind of reluctance to let go, the reluctance to do anything except for managing a transition amongst elites to which they already have very well-established links, that reluctance explains, of course, the lack of a forceful statement so far, at least a statement forceful enough for the taste of the protestors in Yemen.

I've already indicated there are some variations between the different GCC states. We spent quite a bit of time in the report going into those. Perhaps we can deal further with that in question time. One obvious one is between Qatar on the one hand, Saudi Arabia and UAE on the other, with the latter two much more concerned about security questions and control. On the other, there's also a difference between Saudi Arabia and the UAE, Saudi Arabia having very long-established networks inside Yemen and a sense of a legitimate role in Yemen, much stronger than those of the UAE. Clearly, Qatar also was in there first, and it's most proactively engaged in mediation.

The others followed later on. So, with that exception, one of the things that's striking is that all of them have looked at Yemen and the emerging difficulties in Yemen well before the current crisis. Going back a number of years when it was clear that Yemen was heading for a crash economically, if nothing else, there was a common sense that this was a major security problem right on their doorstep, particularly, of course, for Saudi Arabia, Oman, UAE, but also Qatar, but what there wasn't was a clear idea about how to deal with it. Our only sustained effort at trying to come to grips with it, even in Saudi Arabia,
with its long history of engagement, after the border agreement was reached in 2000, there was some withdrawal, really, and indeed some people in the Saudi royal family, had a sense until a few months ago, they had unjustifiably left some of their contacts to wither.

Clearly that's now been revived. The problem is, for some of the old players of the game, that there's been a generational shift in place, and the key lynchpin for Saudi patronage in Saudi Arabia, Sheikh Abdullah al-Ahmar, of course, died in 2007. Nevertheless, these links, these patronage networks, are being, and have begun to be revived, reactivated, but what you now get is that on the one hand, some of those have shifted, and some of those have disappeared.

On the other hand, there's a whole new set of players, and there, the traditional Saudi players, various policy-makers, all those discussing these issues, and one gets a sense that they're simply not familiar with a lot of these new players. Let's continue with the Saudi theme, because Saudi Arabia, within the GCC, is clearly the heavyweight, also with regard to Yemen policy. The problem in Saudi Arabia – I alluded it very briefly earlier on – the additional problem in Saudi Arabia is that, internally, there's no cohesion. It's not just that they took their eye off the ball, to an extent, after 2000. It is that, as a reflection of more general diffusion or diffuseness of policy-making and lack of coordinated strategising and lack of coordinated implementation policy, also in Yemen policy you get this.

Now, for a good number of years, this was counteracted by the then Crown Prince Sultan - who really got hold of the, or had a grip on the Yemen file. There were other people involved, but he pretty much had a grip. Through his office, special office for Yemen, had ran most of the patronage funds, flows of funds, although other individuals also of course had had some of their own. As Prince Sultan's health declined, that control, that element of control, was reduced. At the same time, of course, when Abdullah first becomes regent, gets involved in negotiations over the border, puts his stamp on that, you already begin to see some diffusion happening.

As Crown Prince Sultan becomes effectively incapacitated and is now out of the policy scene, what is left is that the special office for Yemen doesn't seem to be operating any longer in the same way, even the assumption that the funds flowing from the special office, or through the special office, are being suspended, so who else runs a Yemen policy? And the answer is, nobody quite knows. Of course King Abdullah still has an interest. Of course he can he can insist on policies where he thinks it is important, and at times indeed
does so. For instance, about a year ago, insisted on giving President Saleh, and amid the context of the Houthi conflict, another $700 million. But that, at the same time, illustrates something else, because that gift was not seen as the right thing to do by others involved in Yemen policy inside Arabia, so there’s that lack of coordination.

Who are the other players? Clearly Prince Naif, Minister of Interior, and especially his son, Muhammed bin Naif. Muhammed bin Naif, of course, who, apart from being one of the numbers in the Ministry of Interior, runs the counterterrorism operation of Saudi Arabia, and has in that sense had a link to Yemen questions, but he seems to be the primus inter pares, really, of the group of princes who deal with Yemen, more or less coordinating, and sometimes less rather than more.

Another figure is Prince Muqrin, the youngest surviving son of Abdul-Aziz, King Abdul-Aziz, who, of course, is the head of the Intelligence Ministry, and in that sense, clearly has an interest in issues Yemeni, but and much less so, by the way, the Foreign Minister. As one of our interlocutors in Saudi Arabia said, Yemen is not about foreign policy; it's about security. That's a different kind of file. So, even if one has a primus inter pares here, who is Muhammed bin Naif, perhaps, with Naif, and even though Abdullah, of course, is always a powerful figure in this file, there is no clarity exactly who has the main voice.

Sometimes there are several voices coming out at the same time, and there is limited follow-up capacity. I know there's this old, whether it's true or a story or an apocryphal story, that King Abdul-Aziz is meant to have told his sons, keep Yemen weak. Now, in Yemen, everybody's convinced that that still holds. In Saudi Arabia, they don't. Very clear sense that, no, no, no, that the key concern is security, as Ginny was saying. We want to stop this place from falling apart, because that's what's going to let Al-Qaeda through. We want to stop things like the Houthi conflict, or contain it. We want to stop it from affecting us in Saudi Arabia, not necessarily because there is a great worry about the ideological thrust of the Houthis – yes, there is concern about some of the more radical elements in the Houthi leadership – but ultimately, it's really about this being a challenge to state control in Yemen, which lets through other actors. Plus, if the whole borderlands are uncontrolled, you get all kinds of other stuff happening, cross-border migration, etcetera. They want to get a grip on that.

There's a consensus about this. How you best deal with it, that is another question. Of course, Khaled bin Sultan, Prince Khaled bin Sultan, is the one who took the first step. He militarily got engaged in this conflict with the
Houthis, in the process being possibly tricked by Saleh into bombing Ali Mohsen's positions. We haven't come across any key Saudi players who like Ali Abdullah Saleh. They've recognised for a long time he's the problem, that a wonderful quote said WikiLeaks, including from Prince Naif, who told the Americans, look, if you give money to Saleh, it ends up in Swiss bank accounts, and so also there was no love lost for Saleh, but there was a concern that you don't simply behead the system, because then you risk chaos. Hence, a reluctance to pressure too publicly.

That's now gone, and now there's a realisation, events have overtaken that policy. The status quo is not tenable. Managed transition, with the stress on managed, is a necessity. Why haven't they pushed harder, when Saleh really slapped everybody in the face by not signing at the last minute the GCC deal that was on the table? Well, there are various possible explanations, but we're suggesting, that it is this inbuilt caution. The Saudis generally do not want to risk, do not want to trust what might appear from those players that they do not know yet.

There's been a lot of talk, of course, about the new GCC initiative inviting, or accepting, provisionally, the Moroccan and the Jordanian application for membership in the GCC, or whatever they're then going to call it. Global Council for Control or something like...? Anyway, effectively, what you're having is a group of monarchies. Now, this clearly lays out a key part of what the GCC was about. It's a like-minded set of monarchical systems, with similar threat perceptions, with similar international alignments, and to my mind, what it does it tells Yemen - and I think you may want to discuss this - you will not become a member. You may be part of our football council or whatever, but you will not become a full member. It doesn't, it simply doesn't fit.