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Full Length Paper

Constructing Authority in Yemen: State Fragility, Non-State Actors, and Identity Formation through a Constructivist Lens

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Abstract

Yemen's prolonged political crisis raises a central question for International Relations: how can state authority be understood when formal institutions coexist with competing political identities, armed organisations, and rival claims to legitimacy? This article examines Yemen's state fragility through a constructivist lens, focusing on historical division, identity formation, and non-state actors. Using qualitative documentary analysis of scholarly and policy literature, it traces the separate trajectories of North and South Yemen, unification in 1990, the 1994 civil war, the failed transition after 2011, and the rise of competing centres of authority after 2014. Four findings emerge: historical grievances remain available for political mobilisation; authority is fragmented rather than absent; informal networks interact with formal institutions; and identity narratives operate alongside material pressures and external intervention. The article argues that constructivism explains how identities and legitimacy are produced and contested, but it cannot replace explanations centred on coercive capacity, political economy, and institutional performance. A sustainable settlement requires inclusive bargaining, accountable institutions, and credible local governance that accommodate diversity without equating territorial control with popular legitimacy.

Keywords: Yemen; constructivism; state fragility; identity formation; non-state actors; political legitimacy; state formation

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1. Introduction

State fragility is commonly associated with limited institutional capacity, insecurity, contested territorial control, and the inability of public authorities to provide services or enforce decisions consistently. These conditions are important in Yemen, but they do not fully explain why rival actors claim the right to govern or why political authority remains fragmented. Constructivism offers a complementary perspective by examining how identities, norms, and historical narratives shape political interests and behaviour. Wendt (1992, 1999) argues that state interests and political structures are socially constituted rather than determined by material

capabilities alone, and Hopf (1998) stresses the explanatory weight of identity. Realism, by contrast, emphasises power, security, and material capabilities (Mearsheimer, 2001; Waltz, 1979).

Yemen is a revealing case because its contemporary political order emerged from distinct northern and southern trajectories that were joined in 1990. The 1994 civil war exposed unresolved tensions within the new state, and the 2011 uprising and subsequent transition failed to produce a durable, broadly accepted settlement. Since the Houthi movement's seizure of Sana'a in 2014, the strength of regional and tribal actors, the separatist

project of the Southern Transitional Council, and external involvement have further widened the gap between formal state institutions and effective authority. Studies of Yemen stress informal networks, patronage, regional interests, and competition over the state (Alley, 2010, 2013; Clausen, 2018; Dresch, 2000).

The research problem is that explanations centred on military power or institutional weakness can treat national identity and legitimacy as fixed background conditions, whereas in Yemen they are themselves contested and politically produced. Existing scholarship documents Yemen's historical divisions, patronage structures, armed movements, and external involvement, but it rarely integrates these strands into one account of how identity narratives interact with material and institutional conditions. The contribution of this article is such an integrated interpretation. It does not claim that earlier studies have ignored identity. The study is qualitative and based on secondary sources; it does not provide original interview or survey data.

The study is guided by three research questions, each paired with a parallel objective:

RQ1. How does constructivism explain the role of identity formation in shaping state and non-state actor behaviour in Yemen? *Objective 1:* to analyse how history, identity, and politics interact in Yemen's state formation.

RQ2. To what extent do historical, cultural, and ideological divisions challenge the assumption that Yemen functions as a unitary state? *Objective 2:* to assess how these divisions shape competing claims to national belonging and authority.

RQ3. How have non-state actors contributed to the reconfiguration of political authority and state legitimacy? *Objective 3:* to examine how non-state actors challenge or reshape state authority, and to assess the contribution and limits of constructivism in explaining fragmentation.

Section 2 reviews the literature and sets out the theoretical framework, Section 3 explains the methodology, Section 4 presents the findings, Section 5 discusses them, and Sections 6 and 7 offer recommendations and conclusions.

2. LITERATURE REVIEW AND THEORETICAL FRAMEWORK

2.1 Constructivism and political authority

Constructivism holds that political interests and identities are formed through social interaction, norms, and shared meanings. Wendt's (1992) proposition that anarchy is what states make of it challenges the assumption that material conditions produce one fixed pattern of behaviour, and his later work develops a fuller account of socially constituted identities and interests (Wendt, 1999). Hopf (1998) explains that identities help actors interpret their environment and judge what action is appropriate. Onuf (1989) and Kratochwil (1989) place rules, language, and norms at the centre of political

practice, while Katzenstein (1996) and Finnemore and Sikkink (1998) show how norms and identities shape security interests and political change.

This perspective suits Yemen because formal sovereignty and effective authority do not coincide. Political actors draw on competing accounts of national history, religion, region, revolution, and representation to justify claims to rule. These narratives shape alliances and expectations, but they operate alongside material resources and organisational capacity. Constructivism is therefore used here to explain how authority is interpreted and legitimised, not to deny the importance of force, resources, or institutional performance.

Realism remains relevant because it illuminates competition for power, security, and external influence (Mearsheimer, 2001; Waltz, 1979). Its state-centred premises, however, are less suitable where no actor holds uncontested domestic authority. The article therefore treats constructivism as its principal interpretive framework and treats realist and state-building arguments as complementary, a position assessed in Section 5.

2.2 Historical formation of the Yemeni state

The contemporary Yemeni state emerged from different political experiences in the north and south. North Yemen ended the imamate and established a republic in 1962, followed by prolonged conflict between republican and royalist forces. South Yemen gained independence from British rule in 1967 and developed a socialist system. These paths produced different institutions, political memories, and ideas about governance. Studies of Middle Eastern state formation caution against assuming that formal borders or institutions automatically generate a shared national identity (Anderson, 1987; Dresch, 2000; Halliday, 1990).

Unification in 1990 joined the two states formally but did not remove differences in institutional practice, elite interests, or perceptions of inclusion. The 1994 civil war deepened southern grievances, and the unsuccessful transition after 2011 and the Houthi expansion of 2014 further weakened prospects for an agreed national order. Historical research highlights the importance of tribal relationships, patronage, and the interaction between formal institutions and informal networks (Alley, 2010, 2013; Carapico, 1998; Lackner, 2019; Phillips, 2011). These divisions should not be treated as timeless or inherently violent. Their significance depends on how actors mobilise historical grievances, how institutions distribute power and resources, and how conflict alters incentives, which is consistent with a constructivist view of identity as an ongoing political process rather than a fixed cause.

2.3 State fragility, informal institutions, and non-state actors

State-formation scholarship links coercion, resource extraction, and institutional consolidation. Tilly (1990)

explains European state formation through war-making, extraction, and the growth of state organisations. This account cannot be transferred mechanically to Yemen, but it offers a comparative reference for the relationship between coercive capacity and institutional development.

In Yemen, formal institutions have coexisted with patronage networks, tribal authorities, local power brokers, and armed organisations. Alley (2010) analyses the informal rules shaping elite bargaining, and research on the transition points to obstacles to institutional consolidation (Alley, 2013; Phillips, 2011). The Houthi movement, the Southern Transitional Council, and tribal groups do not simply occupy a vacuum; they advance competing political projects and claim to represent communities. Brandt (2017) traces the Houthi conflict to tribal politics and local grievances, and Clausen (2018) argues that the conflict is better understood as competition for control of the state than as a confrontation between a state and a non-state challenger.

External powers also matter. Regional intervention alters the resources available to domestic actors and affects bargaining incentives. Work on Gulf politics and Saudi–Yemeni relations situates domestic structures within regional influence (Crystal, 1990; Gause, 1990, 2010), Juneau (2016) examines external support to the Houthis, and Buzan and Wæver (2003) show how local conflicts interact with regional security rivalries.

2.4 Identity and legitimacy

Identity matters here not because it independently explains conflict but because it shapes how actors define legitimate authority and interpret historical experience. Southern separatist narratives, Houthi claims, tribal affiliations, and competing visions of republicanism, socialism, and religiously informed governance cannot be reduced to a single national story. Wedeen (2008) shows how national unity in Yemen was produced and contested through everyday political practice, and Yadav (2013) shows that political claims in Yemen are embedded in particular social and institutional settings. Brehony (2011) and Burrowes (2010) provide the historical record on which this article draws. These sources differ in subject and approach and are not treated as making identical claims; together they support an analytical focus on the relationship between historical experience, political organisation, and competing accounts of authority.

3. METHODOLOGY

This study adopted a qualitative, interpretive design

based on documentary analysis of secondary sources. Sources were selected purposively if they addressed constructivist theory, state formation, or security studies, or if they analysed Yemeni political history, patronage, non-state actors, or regional involvement. Eligible sources were academic books, peer-reviewed journal articles, and, where scholarly coverage was limited, policy publications from recognised research institutions. The analysis covers the period from the 1962 northern revolution to approximately 2020, which corresponds to the span of the literature reviewed.

The analysis proceeded in three steps. First, each source was read for claims about identity, legitimacy, authority, and the role of material and external factors. Second, these claims were coded under three themes derived from the research questions: (1) historical divisions and national identity; (2) competing claims to authority and legitimacy; and (3) the interaction of domestic fragmentation with material and external factors. Third, coded claims were compared across sources to identify agreement, qualification, and disagreement, and historical analysis was used to relate key political transitions to contemporary claims about statehood.

Source triangulation was applied by cross-checking each major claim against at least two sources of different types or perspectives, for example a historical monograph and a policy study. Repetition across sources was not treated as proof of a claim. Where interpretations differed, the disagreement was identified, and claims resting on a single source were presented cautiously. The method does not involve interviews, surveys, direct observation, or original statistical data.

The approach has limitations. Secondary-source analysis depends on the quality, availability, and perspectives of published material. It cannot independently establish the degree of popular support enjoyed by a political actor or verify local experiences across all areas of Yemen. Claims about legitimacy were therefore treated as political claims unless supported by evidence of public perceptions or institutional practice. Future research could use interviews, local case studies, or systematic comparisons of governance across areas controlled by different actors.

4. RESULTS

This section presents four findings that answer the research questions. The historical background appears in Section

2.2; here each finding is stated, supported with evidence from the reviewed literature, and linked to the research question it addresses. Table 1 summarises the findings.

Table 1. Summary of findings, supporting evidence, and related research questions

Finding	Key supporting evidence in the literature	Research question
1. Historical division remains politically consequential	Separate northern and southern trajectories, the 1994 civil war, and southern grievances (Brehony, 2011; Halliday, 1990; Lackner, 2019; Salisbury, 2017)	RQ2
2. Authority is fragmented and contested, not absent	Competing claims by state and non-state actors; competition for control of the state (Brandt, 2017; Clausen, 2018)	RQ1, RQ3
3. Informal networks and formal institutions interact	Patronage, elite bargaining, and tribal relations mediate access to state resources (Alley, 2010, 2013; Carapico, 1998; Phillips, 2011)	RQ3
4. Identity narratives interact with material pressures and external intervention	Regional intervention and material conditions shape actors' incentives (Buzan & Wæver, 2003; Gause, 1990, 2010; Juneau, 2016)	RQ1, RQ3

4.1 Historical division remains politically consequential

Formal unification did not produce a fully shared understanding of national belonging or political inclusion. The separate histories of North and South Yemen shaped different institutional practices and narratives, and the 1994 civil war reinforced grievances that influenced later mobilisation (Brehony, 2011; Halliday, 1990; Lackner, 2019; Salisbury, 2017). The point is not that regional identity inevitably produces separatism, but that actors can draw on remembered exclusion and unequal representation to legitimise alternative projects. This finding qualifies the view that the crisis began only in 2011 or 2014: those events were critical turning points within a longer history of contested state formation. Regions and communities are not treated as homogeneous, since identities are activated in particular circumstances and coexist with other affiliations.

4.2 Political authority is fragmented and contested

Authority in Yemen is fragmented rather than absent. Formal institutions continue to matter, but they operate alongside the Houthi movement, the Southern Transitional Council, tribal authorities, and other armed groups, which exercise varying degrees of coercive, administrative, fiscal, or political power and make competing claims about representation (Brandt, 2017). Clausen's (2018) analysis of competition over the state is relevant because it avoids a rigid distinction between state actors and non-state challengers. Authority and legitimacy must be distinguished: an actor may control territory or provide selected services without broad, voluntary acceptance, and formal recognition of a government does not demonstrate that its authority is effective across the country. A constructivist analysis asks how actors justify their rule and which identities they

invoke, without assuming that such narratives are persuasive.

4.3 Informal networks and institutions shape state capacity

Patronage systems, tribal relationships, and elite bargaining mediate access to state resources and influence political behaviour. Alley's (2010) study shows why formal institutions alone cannot explain how power is distributed, and studies of the transition underline the difficulty of reform where competing elites remain influential (Alley, 2013; Phillips, 2011). These arrangements should not be described only as cultural obstacles to modern statehood. Informal networks may provide access, protection, or dispute resolution where formal institutions are weak, but they can also reproduce exclusion and limit accountability (Carapico, 1998). A constructivist interpretation adds that such arrangements are sustained partly by shared expectations about loyalty, authority, and political obligation.

4.4 Identity interacts with material pressures and external intervention

Economic deterioration, insecurity, limited public services, and competition over resources can intensify grievances, and actors may frame these conditions through narratives of regional marginalisation, religious identity, national restoration, or resistance. External assistance can alter the balance of resources and create incentives to maintain or intensify competition (Buzan & Wæver, 2003; Gause, 1990, 2010; Juneau, 2016). Identity therefore cannot be treated as an independent

cause: it does not determine military outcomes and does not fully explain institutional weakness, economic collapse, or the strategic choices of external actors. Its analytical value lies in showing how actors interpret conditions, construct constituencies, and define the boundaries of legitimate authority.

5. DISCUSSION

The findings show that Yemen's fragility is best understood as a process in which historical narratives, political identities, institutional weakness, armed competition, and external involvement reinforce or constrain one another. The state has not disappeared; its authority is uneven and contested, while rival actors define who should govern and on what basis. Constructivism contributes most in two places. First, it explains why north–south grievances remained politically usable decades after unification: actors reinterpreted past exclusion as a basis for present claims (Hopf, 1998; Wendt, 1999). Second, it explains why territorial control and legitimacy diverge: an actor's claim to represent a community is not evidence that the community accepts its authority, so the two must be distinguished empirically.

The framework also has limits. Identity narratives may follow interests as often as they shape them, and a purely constructivist reading risks circularity, since narratives that succeed are easily read as causes of success. Constructivism cannot account for military outcomes, economic collapse, or the strategic calculations of Saudi Arabia, the United Arab Emirates, and other external actors. Here realist perspectives add value by explaining external rivalry and the security incentives that sustain armed competition (Mearsheimer, 2001; Waltz, 1979), and state-formation literature explains the role of coercion and resource extraction in building or failing to build institutions (Tilly, 1990). Realism, however, assumes a unitary state with uncontested domestic authority, which does not hold in Yemen, and it says little about why rival claims to legitimacy attract followers. The two approaches therefore explain different parts of the problem. The strongest account is complementary, combining material capabilities with the meanings through which actors understand and legitimise their projects.

The main policy implication is that rebuilding formal institutions may be insufficient unless negotiations address grievances and competing claims to representation. Recognising social diversity must not, however, mean legitimising coercion or abandoning human-rights standards. These points are developed in the recommendations below.

6. CONCLUSION AND RECOMMENDATIONS

6.1. Conclusion

This article examined Yemen's state fragility through a

constructivist lens, focusing on historical divisions, identity formation, non-state actors, and competing claims to legitimacy. It found that the crisis cannot be explained by material weakness or institutional breakdown alone: historical experience and political narratives shape how actors define national belonging and legitimate rule, while patronage networks, coercive capacity, economic conditions, and external involvement shape their ability to pursue competing projects.

The central conclusion is that identity does not independently cause Yemen's conflict; rather, political authority is continuously contested and reconstructed through the interaction of social meanings, institutions, resources, and power. Constructivism helps explain how actors justify authority and mobilise communities, but its value is greatest when combined with analysis of political economy, state capacity, and regional intervention. A durable settlement requires inclusive bargaining, accountable governance, respect for rights, and institutions able to accommodate diversity without institutionalising coercive fragmentation.

6.2 Recommendations

Based on the analysis, the article makes five recommendations.

1. **Promote inclusive negotiations.** A sustainable settlement should address regional grievances and competing visions of statehood through meaningful participation, and should not be limited to elite bargains that leave affected communities unrepresented.

2. **Strengthen accountable institutions and local governance.** Transparency, access to justice, public services, and equitable resource allocation can help rebuild trust, and reform should be judged by its effects on citizens rather than by formal restructuring alone.

3. **Separate dialogue from recognition.** Negotiations should include actors capable of affecting the conflict, while keeping participation in dialogue distinct from automatic recognition of coercive control as legitimate authority. Civic initiatives should encourage a shared political community without suppressing regional, tribal, or religious identities.

4. **Encourage responsible external engagement.** Regional and international actors should support diplomacy, humanitarian assistance, and de-escalation, and avoid actions that deepen fragmentation or reward abuses.

5. **Expand evidence-based research.** Interviews, local case studies, and comparisons of governance across areas held by different actors would help test claims about public legitimacy and service delivery.

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