ABSTRACT

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PAPER TITLE: Struggling for the Hearts and Minds of the Arab Street: Political and Social Attitudes of Yemeni University Students

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ABSTRACT:

In the struggle for the hearts and minds of the Arab street, Yemen finds itself at the forefront of the fight. Several different and salient identities insinuate themselves into the Yemeni political fabric. Competing identities such as tribalism, nationalism, pan-Arabism, and Islamism have turned Yemen into a unique case study for understanding how these identities interact, giving us a unique case within the Arab Middle East. In addition, Yemen also has strong political experiences with different sectarian religious traditions. Several different Sunni and Shi’a influences exist in Yemen, including Salafi, Wahhabi, Zaydi, and Shafi discourses. This paper then aims to explore the interaction of these different identities and see which indicators drive political and social attitudes in Yemen. Certain attitudes that we seek to understand are those involving the democratic process, political participation, political affiliations and ideologies, the role of religion in politics and perceptions of Western policies towards the Middle East and Muslims in general.

To complete our project, we will conduct surveys at a number of universities throughout the country. As university students will form the core of future civil service and private sectors in Yemen, it becomes important to know what their beliefs are. The cities to be included are: Sana’a; Taiz, Ibb, Aden, and Hudaydah. These cities represent either the largest metropolitan areas in Yemen or have universities with long-standing reputations. In each city we will visit 2 to 3 different universities. As universities in Yemen are not comprehensive, but discipline specific, we need variation within each city to make sure we include a broad cross-section of the Yemeni student population. In addition, there are both public and private universities, including Islamic universities. Our project aims to maximize the variance of higher educational institutions. Likewise, we take into account domestic geopolitical dynamics that incorporates Northern, Southern, and Coastal political experiences. As Yemen unified under one republic in 1990, there are still significant regional political traditions that need to be accounted for. Finally, our goal is to integrate a series of Yemeni student focus groups during our visit. The first set of focus groups will be pre-survey and will be used to fine-tune the survey instruments. The second set of focus groups will allow us to take an in-depth look into opinion formation and seek to understand some of the patterns that we see in the data.