

# A comparative analysis of the Post-Arab Spring National Dialogues in Tunisia and Yemen

*Hannah Hamidi\**

## **Abstract**

Post-conflict societies are in a fragile state in which social cohesion needs to be gradually rebuilt. One of the tools employed to restore social cohesion in a fragile society is the organisation of a national dialogue which would allow most, if not all, of society's political and civil society actors to air their grievances and make concrete recommendations for the long-lasting resolution of conflict. In the MENA region, both Tunisia and Yemen have organised national dialogues after the Arab Spring with different results. This article uses Jane Jenson's model on social cohesion to determine why Tunisia's national dialogue has been more successful than Yemen's in bringing about social cohesion.

**Keywords:** Social cohesion, national dialogues, transitions, peacebuilding, Tunisia, Yemen

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\* Hannah Hamidi is an independent researcher on Middle Eastern and North African politics.

## Introduction

In the Middle East and North Africa (MENA) region, two countries, Tunisia and Yemen, have completed national dialogues in the wake of their Arab Spring revolutions. Although Tunisia and Yemen differ in terms of historical experience, socio-economic development and political structure, the two countries have in the past four years shared very similar experiences, having emerged from prolonged dictatorships quasi simultaneously by overthrowing their respective dictators through people-powered revolutions, and subsequently initiated national dialogues to unite their divided societies.

Tunisia and Yemen are the first countries in the region to undertake national dialogues, and this article is interested in comparing these two countries' experiences to draw lessons learned for other countries in the region and further afield. Although both countries spent a great deal of time and resources to ensure the success of their national dialogues, they have had very different outcomes, with Tunisia emerging from the process with a more cohesive society, and Yemen reaping only conflict and instability. Within the same greater region, how did one country's social cohesion efforts succeed while the other's are generally considered to have failed? To answer this question, this article will use the model on social cohesion developed by Jane Jenson (1998), one of the earliest and most widely cited works on social cohesion. In this model, Jenson identifies five key components of social cohesion: Belonging, Inclusion, Participation, Recognition and Legitimacy. Jenson argues that these components must exist in a society for it to be cohesive. This article will employ the theoretical framework of Jenson's model to ask: have Tunisia and Yemen's national dialogues created conducive environments for social cohesion? Framing the question within this theoretical framework will highlight why Tunisia's efforts were more successful than Yemen's, as systematically, the national dialogue in Tunisia fostered a sense of Belonging, Inclusion, Participation, Recognition and Legitimacy, while Yemen's did not. This article will firstly lay out its theoretical framework. It will then provide

background information on Tunisia and Yemen's post-Arab Spring political trajectories, and lastly, it will apply Jenson's model to both countries' social cohesion efforts through national dialogue.

### **Jenson's model on social cohesion**

Within policy and academic spheres, social cohesion is an increasingly recurring concept. Two traditions of study of the concept have emerged, the first within the social sciences, particularly sociology and social psychology. Some of the key texts that have emerged from this tradition have been written by Berger (1998), Gough and Olofsson (1999), Lockwood (1999) and Bollen and Hoyle (2001). The second tradition, from within the policy discourse on social cohesion, has yielded key studies commissioned by various government and non-governmental entities, from the Canadian government, to the World Bank, the Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development (OECD) and the African Union. However, the literature in English on social cohesion in the MENA region is practically non-existent, despite the fact that several of the region's states already have or will have to undertake social cohesion projects in the wake of the Arab Spring revolutions. This article therefore fills a gap in the literature on the concept of social cohesion.

In order to unpack the concept, Jane Jenson's paper (1998:16-17) on the topic, which followed a Canadian Policy Research Networks Roundtable on Mapping Social Cohesion in December 1997, is used in this article. Having reviewed literature on social cohesion produced by the governments of Canada and France as well as the OECD and the Club of Rome, Jenson extracted five key components which are generally considered to characterise cohesive societies. She also presented these in contrast to components which characterise societies which lack cohesion. Although Jenson's model is based on a limited snapshot of the literature available on social cohesion and includes analyses from countries such as France whose social cohesion efforts are imperfect and ongoing, it remains one of the most comprehensive studies on the subject and provides a useful summary of the conclusions reached by very serious studies.

The five dimensions of Jenson's model on social cohesion are: 1) Belonging v. Isolation, 2) Inclusion v. Exclusion, 3) Participation v. Non-Involvement, 4) Recognition v. Rejection and 5) Legitimacy v. Illegitimacy. The first dimension refers to the existence of shared values and a sense of common identity. According to the Canadian government's Policy Research Sub-Committee, a cohesive society is one in which citizens 'share values' (Jenson 1998:15). As for the OECD, it highlights the importance of a shared sense of identity for citizens to feel 'committed' to their society, and 'part of the same community' (Jenson 1998:15). On the other hand, threats to social cohesion are associated with feelings of isolation from the community. The second dimension refers to the economic inclusion of citizens within a society. This dimension highlights the importance of access to economic markets by all, as those who are economically marginalised might consequently feel excluded from society. The third dimension focuses on people's political participation at both the central and the local levels of government. Literature coming out of France has indeed highlighted the importance of political participation at all levels, including the local. On the other hand, non-involvement is considered a threat to social cohesion. The fourth dimension concerns the respect for difference and tolerance for diversity in a society. Recognition of difference is a core component of a cohesive society. The government of France highlighted the importance of citizens feeling that others within their country accepted them and recognised their contributions to society. By contrast, rejection of difference, or efforts to foster excessive unanimity, are likely to make societies less cohesive. The final dimension refers to the maintenance of legitimacy of major political institutions, the state in particular, as mediators among individuals of different interests. According to the Club of Rome, social cohesion depends on maintaining the legitimacy of those institutions so that they may continue to act as mediators in society.

## **Tunisia since the Arab Spring**

After Zine El Abidine Ben Ali's ousting, elections to determine the composition of the National Constituent Assembly took place in October 2011. The Islamist political party Ennahda won the elections, though only with 37 percent of the vote. This forced it to share power with two secular parties in what became known as 'the Troika' government. This power-sharing arrangement caused unending squabbles over a new Constitution inside the Constituent Assembly. Ennahda's 89 delegates (out of a total of 217) were felt to be pressing their religious agenda, and political wrangling ensued, which postponed the preparation of the Constitution (Ottaway 2013:2).

Soon after the assassination of the opposition figure Mohammed Brahmi on 25 July 2013, the tensions between opposition parties and the ruling Troika turned into a grave political crisis. Popular protests also followed, which strongly destabilised the Troika, and Ennahda in particular. In an attempt to smooth over the conflict, the Tunisian General Labour Union (UGTT), together with UTICA (the employers' union), the Tunisian League for Human Rights (LTDH), and the National Bar Association initiated a series of indirect shuttle negotiations between the opposition and the Troika to overcome the political crisis (Salah 2013).

The Tunisian national dialogue then began in earnest. Tunisian politicians were in agreement about what needed to be done in order to complete the stalled transition: approve the Constitution; form a new politically-neutral transitional government to lead the country until the elections; and set up a new independent body to supervise the parliamentary and presidential elections. However, the politicians disagreed profoundly about the sequencing and timing of the steps for reasons of political strategy (Ottaway 2013). Ennahda insisted that the Troika government would not resign until the Constitution was approved, the election commission and the election law were ready, and the election dates firmly set. The opposition parties, on the other hand, wanted to follow the roadmap proposed by the

quartet of mediators. The roadmap called for the formation of the election commission in two weeks and the writing of the election law within two weeks of the beginning of the final negotiations of the national dialogue, the resignation of the government within three weeks, and the completion of the Constitution and establishment of the elections' dates within four weeks. Ennahda feared that once the government had resigned, the opposition would stall on the Constitution and election dates. Indeed, members of the opposition were openly saying that elections should be postponed long enough to give time to the new government to get rid of Ennahda's appointees in bureaucratic positions (Ottaway 2013).

After many delays, and facing a 'final' deadline before mass protests, a bare majority (eleven out of twenty-one) of the dialogue's participating political parties chose Mehdi Jomaa as the new Prime Minister to lead a caretaker government to oversee a transition period until the adoption of a new Constitution and electoral law, and the holding of parliamentary and presidential elections. Ennahda was lauded as being the first Islamist party to willingly and peacefully step down from power. Tunisia also succeeded in adopting a new Constitution. On 26 January 2014, just over 92 percent of members of the National Constituent Assembly voted in favour of the Constitution. On 2 November, parliamentary elections took place peacefully, which Ennahda did not win (the Nidaa Tounes party won a majority of seats), and in December of the same year, Nidaa Tounes's candidate Beji Caid Essebsi was elected president, thereby cementing the country's transition to a non-Islamist-dominated government.

## **Yemen since the Arab Spring**

Following Tunisia and Egypt, Yemen was rocked by the Arab Spring in January 2011 and has not managed to transition to a democratic and peaceful state. Popular protests to topple President Ali Abdullah Saleh, who had been in power for thirty-three years, began in January 2011. Eventually, Saleh was forced to agree to a Gulf Cooperation Council (GCC)-brokered deal to hand over power in April 2011. However, he refused to sign it until November 2011.

## **A comparative analysis of the Post-Arab Spring National Dialogues**

The GCC deal specified that Saleh leave office in thirty days and make way for his Vice-President Abd Rabbuh Mansour Hadi in return for full immunity from prosecution for Saleh. Hadi was to form and preside over a Government of National Unity which would govern the country before presidential elections took place within ninety days. The deal also established a two-year transitional period during which the military and security institutions were to be restructured and a national dialogue would be convened to prepare the ground for new elections to be held by February 2014. According to the GCC agreement, the national dialogue was to provide an opportunity for representatives from all walks of Yemeni society to voice their concerns and stances, including women and youth groups, the Southern and Houthi movements and other political parties and civil society representatives. A Preparation Committee of twenty-five members, including women and youth, was formed in July 2012 and started working in August to prepare the national dialogue (Lackner 2012).

The National Dialogue Conference (NDC) began in March 2013 and after setbacks and delays, approved a draft containing nearly 1800 recommendations in January 2014. In February of the same year, a small presidential panel controversially decided that Yemen should be divided into a federation of six regions, causing concern among the northern Shi'a Houthi movement (Gaston 2014:3-4). President Hadi also controversially announced the passing of a fuel price rise, which led to anti-government protests. The Houthi movement rode this wave of protests to the capital and eventually applied such pressure on Hadi and his cabinet that he resigned (International Crisis Group 2014a). Although he later rescinded his resignation, the Houthi leadership seized power and chased Hadi out of the country. A Saudi-led coalition of states launched air strikes against the Shi'a Houthi movement in support of Hadi, and there is now concern over the internationalisation of the Yemen conflict along sectarian lines, with Saudi Arabia supporting the Sunni transitional government and Iran the Shi'a Houthi movement (BBC 2015).

## **Applying Jenson's model to Tunisia and Yemen**

Jenson's model is a useful tool to assess the level of social cohesion brought about by the national dialogues in Tunisia and Yemen. Although both countries have spent considerable resources and effort to ensure that their national dialogues led to more cohesive societies, Tunisia has seen greater success in bringing about that result. Yet Yemen's national dialogue was one of the most inclusive and democratic processes the country had ever seen. As it was under way, the UN's Special Envoy to Yemen Jamal Benomar reported to the Security Council that Yemen's National Dialogue was making 'extraordinary progress' (Kasinof 2015). The national dialogue was carried out over 10 months to ensure that a wide range of issues was covered to a satisfactory standard. Five hundred and sixty-five delegates took part in the dialogue, including an unprecedented number of youth, women and civil society activists (Gaston 2014:3). It also included representatives who had never been allowed to engage in the country's main political discussions, namely the Houthis and representatives from the southern separatist movement Al Hirak. The fact that these new actors were invited to engage on an equal footing with the main political parties and tribal leaders was very significant. Furthermore, the delegates were required to carry out significant public outreach efforts to seek input from their constituencies in Sana'a and beyond. In the end, the National Dialogue Conference issued nearly 1800 recommendations, ranging from maintaining a 30 per cent quota for women in all government positions to restructuring the military and security apparatus (Gaston 2014:8). These recommendations should have gone a long way towards meeting the popular demands of the Arab Spring revolutionaries; yet within months of the closing of the NDC, the Houthi movement had taken over Sana'a, leading to a Saudi-dominated military operation in the country. Yemen is now in the throes of a raging conflict, a grave humanitarian situation and a plummeting economy. How did its national dialogue fail to foster social cohesion, despite promising signs, and how did Tunisia's fair better?



**Box 1**

Jenson's Dimensions of Social Cohesion

Belonging ..... Isolation

Inclusion ..... Exclusion

Participation ..... Non-involvement

Recognition ..... Rejection

Legitimacy ..... Illegitimacy

**Belonging**

Jenson's first component 'Belonging', refers to the existence of a widely shared sense of commitment to a society. Did the national dialogues in Tunisia and Yemen foster this sense of common identity and commitment to the unity of their respective countries? In the case of Tunisia, although prior to the national dialogue the country was embroiled in a political quagmire, the issue of belonging was never a predominant one. The country was indeed split along political lines, where Islamists and Liberals clashed over political predominance in the country's local and national institutions, so that they might influence key moments in Tunisia's modern history, such as the drafting of the Constitution and elections. However, despite their political and ideological differences, particularly with regard to the role of religion in society, none of the opposing parties claimed a sense of isolation. Participants in the national dialogue, whether they represented Ennahda or Nidaa Tounes, shared a sense of belonging to their country and a feeling of commitment to their society. The national dialogue was, in fact, seen by all as an opportunity to peacefully re-establish order in a country which prided itself on being the original and most pacific of the Arab Spring countries.

In contrast, Yemen is a country that faces a secessionist threat from the South. The national dialogue did not stumble on issues pertaining to

the democratisation of the country in the wake of a long dictatorship. Participants involved in the discussions on, among others, State building, Good Governance, Rights and Freedoms and the Role of the Armed and Security Forces, did not face major roadblocks and were able to conclude their work promptly by the September 18<sup>th</sup> 2013 deadline. The topic which slowed down the dialogue was the southern issue, as the sessions on this issue were delayed by a boycott by southern delegates in August 2013 over the independence of southern Yemen.

The issue of southern Yemen's belonging to Yemen dates back several decades. From 1967 to 1990, the People's Democratic Republic of Yemen (or South Yemen) existed as an independent state. While South Yemen and its northern neighbour, the Yemen Arab Republic (or North Yemen), united to create the modern-day Republic of Yemen in 1990, tensions between the two regions continued to arise. As part of the new unity government, it was agreed that South Yemen's president, Ali Salim al-Beidh, would become the unified country's vice president, while North Yemen's president, Ali Abdullah Saleh, would become president of the new republic. Within two years of this new arrangement, al-Beidh returned to the former southern capital in protest over the perceived political and economic marginalisation of the south. This led into a civil war for independence in 1994 which the North won, and in which the North subsequently strengthened its grip over a bitter South. Grievances over the northern elites' access to southern land and natural resources, which contrasted with the rampant unemployment faced by southerners, nourished the rebirth of the southern secessionist movement in 2007 (Reardon 2014).

These tensions arose during the national dialogue and were not dealt with definitively in its sessions, leaving the southern issue unsettled and open to a relapse. It is in fact very likely that the only reason the southern issue has been pushed to the background is because the Houthi issue came to the forefront so explosively. During the national dialogue, the subcommittee investigating the structure of the state became an arena for disputes related to the southern issue. The southerners from the Al Hiraak movement participating in the national dialogue insisted that the state be a federal

## **A comparative analysis of the Post-Arab Spring National Dialogues**

one composed of two states formed from the territories of the former Yemen Arab Republic in the north and the People's Democratic Republic of Yemen in the south, while other southerners and northerners rejected this proposal on the basis that it would allow the former south to reconstitute itself, and instead proposed a five or six state federation.

Demonstrations in the south renouncing the dialogue and calling for secession drew large crowds. The UN tried to build support in the south for the dialogue. For instance, a committee was formed to address the issue of the pensions and employment of those in the southern bureaucracy and military who were dismissed after the 1994 war, and another committee was charged with resolving the issue of land and property in the south (Schmitz 2014a). In addition, Hadi announced the creation of a trust to compensate those hurt in the south during the last two decades of Saleh's rule (Schmitz 2014a). However, in August 2013, southern representatives within the NDC boycotted the remaining sessions unless their demands over the southern issue were met. In September, a sixteen-person subcommittee of representatives from the north and south, known as the North-South Committee, was formed. After months of negotiations, this committee brokered an agreement which avoided southern secession by agreeing that Yemen would become a federal state with greater local autonomy (Gaston 2014:3–4). The number of regions within the federation was not decided, as a proposal for a six-region solution was not accepted at the NDC level. However, a few weeks after the NDC wrapped up its work, a special committee hand-selected and led by President Hadi announced that it had agreed upon six regions, two in the south and four in the north (Gaston 2014:3–4). Hadi's heavy-handed solo approach to this complex issue fostered resentment and rejection among key southern as well as Houthi leaders. In wishing to tackle this pending issue, which could not be resolved without considerably more time and resources being injected into the already delayed National Dialogue Conference, Hadi opened the dialogue to failure, as the Houthis allegedly moved to Sana'a in reaction to the government's handling of the federal issue.

## **Inclusion**

The second dimension of Jenson's model refers to the economic inclusion of citizens within a society. Seeing that the Arab Spring revolutions were in equal parts driven by political and economic grievances, the economic inclusion of the revolutionaries was and remains an extremely important key to social cohesion. In Tunisia, economic factors pushed the dialogue participants to negotiate with each other to resolve the political quagmire. Indeed, the international community was able to apply economic pressures on the participants to ensure their active participation in resolving the country's political woes. The African Development Bank, International Monetary Fund and the World Bank froze their loans to the country, making the flow of funds conditional on economic reforms and on a resolution to the political crisis. Some Gulf countries such as Kuwait and the United Arab Emirates are also believed to have applied economic pressures on the country so that Ennahda would exit the government. The government of Algeria, which Tunisia depends on economically, also made it clear that it would stop its economic and security collaboration with Tunisia if a consensus was not reached among the political parties involved in the dialogue (International Crisis Group 2014b:6). Similarly, tourism is a pillar of the Tunisian economy, and the sector was heavily impacted upon by the revolution in 2011. The number of visitors to the country dropped from 6.9 to 4.8 million visitors between 2010 and 2011 (Tunisian Ministry of Tourism 2015), and the dialogue participants were keenly aware of the potential loss of revenue a prolonged political crisis could cost the country. As a small country with little in terms of natural resources, Tunisia is dependent on foreign investment and tourism. Its reputation as a peaceful and stable country is therefore very important to keeping its economy afloat, and the dialogue participants were aware that prolonging the political crisis was not an option for the country. The national dialogue was therefore undertaken in a fairly short period of time – six months – to avoid, among other things, dragging the economy down any further.

## A comparative analysis of the Post-Arab Spring National Dialogues

In Yemen, on the other hand, analysts have pointed out that one of the biggest flaws of the national dialogue was to overlook ‘bread and butter’ issues which regular citizens were facing while the dialogue was taking place. In the words of Charles Schmitz (2014b): ‘The National Dialogue Conference produced a document and vision of just government in Yemen, but while the intellectual elites were worried about the semantics of the document, Hadi’s government did not govern. The economy worsened (as expected due to the fall in oil production) and security worsened, and the government had no response. The international community urged good governance, which gave little solace to those facing increasingly dire material circumstances’. Rather than face the growing poverty, those who could emigrate, did so, to avoid the near 50% unemployment rate (Naylor 2015). For those who could not emigrate, as the 10-month long dialogue dragged on, resentment grew towards the dialogue participants, who earned a rumoured 125 to 200 dollars in per diems (Gaston 2014:8). This discrepancy between the economic troubles of regular citizens and the position of privilege of dialogue participants created a disconnection with the national dialogue. According to the United States Institute of Peace: ‘to its worst critics, the NDC has been a costly political sideshow that has distracted political energy and attention at a critical period in Yemen’s transition’ (Gaston 2014:8) towards secondary issues which do not put food on the table.

Additionally, in the wake of the national dialogue, the government decided to lift fuel subsidies in July 2014, and this proved too much for the system to bear. Having spent about 3 billion dollars on fuel subsidies, nearly a third of the state’s revenues, the previous year, and with bankruptcy looming, the Hadi government attempted to raise fuel prices in an effort to rein in its budget deficit and conclude talks with the IMF for the country to receive a 560 million dollar loan from the organisation (Ghobari 2014; International Crisis Group 2015:3). The Houthis, who had never trusted the transitional government, took advantage of the situation by organising demonstrations demanding a reinstatement of subsidies, a new government, and a swift implementation of NDC agreements. Although the Houthis did not

represent the bulk of Yemeni society, their demands resonated widely and far beyond their core support base because of the country's dire economic straits, thereby opening the door for the Houthi takeover of Sana'a, Hadi's escape to Saudi Arabia, and the current conflict in the country.

Finally, it is worth noting the role of spoilers in bringing about the current breakdown in social cohesion in Yemen. The GCC-brokered deal did not force Saleh into exile or curb his participation in national politics through his party, the General People's Congress (GPC). He therefore remained in the country to undermine the national dialogue as he plotted his own return to politics. It is widely known that Saleh and the Houthis have concluded a marriage of convenience, which has allied their forces long enough to topple Hadi's transitional government and rid them of common enemies.<sup>1</sup> According to the UN Special Envoy to Yemen, Jamal Benomar Saleh, who remains well connected and supported in the country, has also been behind the sabotage of electrical grids and oil pipelines by renegade tribesmen in the country, which resulted in Sana'a being without fuel or electricity for days in June 2014. In reaction, mass protests were organised on the 11<sup>th</sup> June calling for the overthrow of the Hadi government (Schmitz 2014a; International Crisis Group 2014c). The economy is therefore a key component which determines the success or failure of social cohesion efforts, and paying close attention to economic grievances is absolutely crucial to ensure that spoilers do not hijack attempts at peacebuilding.

## **Participation**

The third dimension of Jenson's model on social cohesion focuses on people's political participation at both the central and the local levels of government. In the case of Tunisia, political participation was at the heart of the tensions between Ennahda and the opposition parties. In the October 2011 Parliamentary elections, Ennahda won with 37 per cent of

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1 These common foes include General Ali Mohsen al-Ahmar, who combated the Houthis during Saleh's reign, and turned against Saleh during the revolution, as well as members of the opposition Islamist Islah party and the powerful Hashid tribal federation, which are led by brothers and have clashed with the Houthis and opposed Saleh's plans to have his son succeed him in power.

## **A comparative analysis of the Post-Arab Spring National Dialogues**

the vote. This meant that although it was the clear winner, a large portion of the electorate did not feel represented by the party. Fear of an Islamist political takeover was shared by many liberals, particularly in light of what was perceived as Ennahda's strategy to place its men and women at all levels of the political echelons. According to the opposition, during the two years that it was leading the Troika, Ennahda placed close to 2000 Islamists in positions of power in local, regional and central administrations (International Crisis Group 2014b:9). It was feared that Ennahda intended to use these well-placed loyalists to secure successes in the country's future elections. These political appointees could allegedly do this by offering jobs, promotions within the civil service, a helping hand to get to the top of waiting lists for cheap state housing and free healthcare to those who voted for Ennahda (International Crisis Group 2014b:9).

For a large portion of the Tunisian people, the national dialogue was intended to bring more political balance to the country. As for Ennahda, the level of wariness it faced within the National Constituent Assembly and beyond led it to decide that its best option was to compromise during the national dialogue and agree to hand over power to a technocratic interim government which would oversee the country's 2014 parliamentary and presidential elections. Analysts generally concur that Ennahda agreed to this out of self-preservation (International Crisis Group 2014d:7). Indeed, since the 2013 ouster of President Mohammed Morsi in Egypt, Ennahda became aware of the risks it ran if it alienated large segments of the political spectrum and was seen to govern single-handedly. The Ennahda leadership therefore instructed its base to strengthen the party's reputation within the political, business and media spheres through conciliation and compromise. In light of the regional climate of tension towards Islamist parties, Ennahda leaders feared a repeat of the persecution the party faced in the early 1990s after it obtained 20 to 25 per cent of the vote in the country's April 1989 legislative elections. Ennahda's leader Rached Ghannouchi is quoted as saying that: 'We must accept to negotiate with forces that are hostile to us, otherwise we risk returning to jail or being exiled again' (International Crisis Group 2014d:7). Regardless of its

motives, Ennahda's willingness to step down from power at the outcome of the national dialogue preserved social cohesion in the country. Although the party did not win the parliamentary and presidential elections which followed the national dialogue, Ennahda may very well have prepared the terrain for future wins by proving that it respected the values of democracy and was willing and able to compromise.

In Yemen, political participation proved to be a sticking point for the national dialogue. Southern participation in the dialogue was a point of contention during the planning stage. Despite the mandate that half of the dialogue delegates come from the South, most of the Al HIRAK leadership refused to participate in the NDC from the beginning, particularly those with secessionist views. Those southerners who did participate had personal ties with Hadi and were therefore not representative of the full range of positions in the South. They also did not possess sufficient political clout to enforce the NDC's decisions in the South. This made it difficult for the NDC to be the platform where the southern issue could be resolved definitively. Indeed, Al HIRAK members who were not represented in the NDC were reportedly expecting the dialogue to fail and waiting for their chance to escalate their independence campaign through protests, regardless of NDC decisions. It was estimated that this chance would occur during the referendum over the country's new Constitution, at which time they planned to launch a boycott and possibly turn to violence (Gaston 2014:5).

Unlike the southern delegation, the Houthi movement's participation in the dialogue seemed unproblematic. After rejecting the GCC Initiative and Hadi's replacement of Saleh during the transitional period, by 2013, the movement actively participated in the national dialogue, seemingly belatedly endorsing the GCC Initiative. The national dialogue's sub-committee on the Sa'ada conflict, in which the Houthi movement controlled the governorate of Sa'ada and parts of the surrounding governorates of al-Jawf, Amran and Hajjah, easily produced a report endorsed by the Houthis which called for: freedom of thought and worship for all sects, good governance and economic development, a prohibition against receiving foreign support, the prevention of the military from being used in internal



political struggles, and the disarming of militias (Schmitz 2014a). The fact that the Houthis agreed to the prohibition against receiving foreign support and the disarming of militias when they are an Iran-backed militia was taken as a positive step during the dialogue. However, the Houthis' strategy seemed to be to undermine the dialogue while actively participating in it. While the Houthis had 35 delegates in the NDC, they continued to wage battles in the North, in Sa'ada and different provinces around it, fighting with tribes allied to the Islah party, Yemen's most influential Islamist party, and with Salafi groups (Al-Muslimi 2014). The Houthi leadership argued that its target was not the Yemeni state, but rather Salafi groups which it has fought for decades, leaders of the Islah party and General Ali Mohsen al-Ahmar, who headed the wars waged by President Saleh against the Houthis. However, the movement's efforts to undermine the national dialogue in the north were warning signs that the Houthis were determined to shape the country's political map through armed conflict. Although the Houthi takeover of Sana'a surprised many, the writing was on the wall from the early days of the national dialogue.

### **Recognition**

The fourth dimension of Jenson's model on social cohesion concerns the respect for difference and tolerance of diversity in a society. In the case of Tunisia, the country's Constitution illustrates how the national dialogue fostered a respect for difference and tolerance for diversity in the country. Approving the Constitution was one of the three processes that the dialogue participants had to work on, along with choosing a new consensual interim Prime Minister to prepare the country's 2014 elections and establishing a new independent body to supervise the elections. The Constitution is therefore a direct product of the national dialogue and was one of the markers of its success.

Indeed, the text of the Constitution was lauded by analysts and international policymakers alike as one of the most democratic and liberal in the Arab world. The Constitution quieted the fears that Tunisians, and in particular Tunisian women, might lose their gains under the watch of

an Islamist-dominated National Constituent Assembly. The Constitution stipulates that Islam is the state religion, but that Tunisia is a civil state based on citizenship and the rule of law, meaning that Sharia law is not the main source of legislation in the country. An article ratified in the new Constitution establishes freedom of conscience in the country. This allows individuals to freely practice any religion, or no religion at all. Additionally, although Ennahda MPs had proposed declaring that women are 'complementary' to men, this formulation was not approved in the final draft. Instead, the Constitution introduces a number of elements that will be crucial for women's rights in the future. Article 46 specifically provides that the state must work to achieve 'parity between men and women in elected assemblies' (Al-Ali and Ben Romdhane 2014; Al-Sheikh 2014). Gender sensitive wording also peppered the entire Constitution. Article 40 states that the right to work is 'a right for every citizen, male and female' (Al-Ali and Ben Romdhane 2014; Al-Sheikh 2014). Gender sensitive wording is also used regarding the right to decent working conditions, to a fair wage and to stand for election. Indeed, Article 73 provides that 'every male and female voter' has the right to stand for election for the position of President of the Republic (Al-Ali and Ben Romdhane 2014; Al-Sheikh 2014). The Constitution therefore turns the page on any divisiveness within Tunisian society and promotes social cohesion through the respect of diversity.

In the case of Yemen, this article has covered the secessionist movement in the south in the section on Belonging. This movement represents segments of the southern population who do not feel committed to a united Yemen state. On the other hand, the Houthi problem in Yemen is based on sectarian/religious grievances, whereby the Houthis do not necessarily want to secede, but do not feel that their religious beliefs are accepted and respected by Sana'a. Tolerance for the Houthis' differences has not existed throughout the country's history. Indeed, Zaydism, the Shi'a sect of Islam which the Houthis follow, was severely repressed prior to the 1990 unification of both Yemens by the authorities of the Yemen Arab Republic, who followed the Sunni branch of Islam. Saudi Arabia also saw the Houthis

as a threat at its border, and by the 1970s, it began to fund a Salafi Wahhabi group in northern Yemen to convert Shi'a Zaydi locals to Wahhabism (Sunni Islam). By the 1990s, the Salafis had become powerful in the area, which made then President Saleh fearful of their increasing influence. Saleh decided to temper this influence by supporting the Houthis, letting the group's leader, Hussein al-Houthi, run for parliament in Saleh's ruling party (Al-Muslimi 2014). Hussein al-Houthi served in Parliament but soon abandoned politics to focus on the promotion of Zaydism in the North. In the late 1990s and early 2000s he launched Zaydi religious education and summer camp programmes for the young, largely in reaction to the continued use of these same measures by Salafi and Wahhabi organisations in the North. As repression against Zaydism also continued, he militarised the movement, urging members to purchase weapons to defend themselves (Schmitz 2012).

When the Saleh regime endorsed the Bush administration's War on Terror and the U.S. invasion of Iraq in 2003, Hussein al-Houthi saw an opportunity to broaden the appeal of his movement by attacking Saleh's alliance with the United States. Saleh responded to this provocation by ordering Hussein's arrest. Hussein's supporters clashed with government forces to resist Hussein's arrest, and this quickly metamorphosed into an armed conflict in Sa'ada in the summer of 2004. Hussein was killed at the end of this first war in the fall of 2004, but Hussein's father, Badr al-Din al-Houthi, and his brother, Abd Malik al-Houthi, assumed leadership and refused to compromise with Saleh. Five more wars ensued before Saleh was toppled by the Arab Spring revolution in the country (Schmitz 2012, 2014c; Al-Muslimi 2014). By the time the national dialogue came, the Houthis were distrustful of the central government because of their history with it. As will be seen in the following section, the Hadi government was also perceived as an extension of the Saleh regime which persecuted the Houthis, making the national dialogue a near impossible feat.

## Legitimacy

The final dimension of Jenson's model on social cohesion refers to the importance of legitimacy for major political institutions serving as mediators among individuals of different interests. In the case of Tunisia, the mediators of the national dialogue played a key role in its success. The fact that the mediators, the Tunisian General Labour Union (UGTT), UTICA (the employers' union), the Tunisian League for Human Rights (LTDH) and the National Bar Association, were not state institutions but fairly independent, respected and powerful civil society organisations certainly aided the process. The UGTT for instance, is the largest conglomeration of affiliated trade unions, which boasts 400 000 members across the country (International Crisis Group 2014b:3). It has often played an important role in key political events in Tunisia's history, including in the country's fight for independence from France in the 1950s and more recently during the Jasmine Revolution.<sup>2</sup> This has given it moral authority in the country, as it is perceived as having been a force for good in the country's recent history. Due to the presence within its ranks of individuals from all walks of the political spectrum, it was also perceived as a fairly unbiased mediator, as opposing political allegiances within the organisation cancelled each other out. Indeed, while the more anti-Islamist and leftist members of the union were inclined to endorse and push the secular opposition's agenda, the union's more centrist members resisted this. One example of this dynamic was the union's refusal to endorse the opposition's call for the dissolution of the National Constituent Assembly, which was dominated by Ennahda (International Crisis Group 2014b:4). The combined influence over Tunisian society of these civil society organisations made this mediating team difficult to ignore during the national dialogue. It was therefore able to exert considerable influence over the proceedings, and the UGTT's Secretary-General was able to direct and shape the debates, allegedly forcing the participants to remain in the room until satisfactory decisions were reached (International Crisis Group 2014b:4). It is therefore

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2 The name given to Tunisia's 2010–2011 revolution to topple President Ben Ali.

## A comparative analysis of the Post-Arab Spring National Dialogues

possible to state that the success of Tunisia's national dialogue was in large part due to the mediating team's considerable leverage over the dialogue's participants and its legitimacy in their eyes.

In the case of Yemen, no independent mediator was appointed to oversee the national dialogue, and it was organised and run by the transitional government. Problematically, the transitional government was not endorsed by all factions of Yemeni society, particularly the Houthis. Indeed, the Houthis publicly rejected the GCC initiative that removed Saleh from power, even though it achieved their goal of ousting the president. They believed the GCC initiative to be a conspiracy by Saudi Arabia and the United States to hijack Yemen's revolution. Because many of Yemen's elite, particularly Saleh's party, the GPC, were unaffected under the initiative, the Houthis felt that more change was needed and that all should step down in order for Yemen to forge a new path. After Saleh's vice-president, Abd Rabbuh Mansour Hadi, was brought to power, the Houthis continued to protest, although other political groups had stopped (Al-Muslimi 2014). There was therefore distrust between the Houthis and Hadi from the beginning of the transition process, as Hadi was seen as an extension of the Saleh regime which had persecuted the Houthis.<sup>3</sup> More generally, the transitional government was made up of a cabinet split evenly between members of Saleh's party and the opposition party the Mustarak, and a parliament which was dominated by Saleh's party. The Houthis argued that with such leadership, as temporary as it was, the revolution was incomplete, and these remnants of the old regime would eventually turn on the Houthis as had happened in the past.

As the dialogue came to an end and Hadi proposed a 6-state federation for the country, the Houthis descended upon Sana'a and proceeded to undermine Hadi and his government. In January 2015, they kidnapped

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3 As mentioned above, the Houthis were however not unwilling to conclude a marriage of convenience with Saleh himself, despite having participated in his downfall. It is generally held that this alliance was meant to be short-lived and that both sides would end up resuming their traditional stances towards each other upon defeating their common foes (Salisbury 2015).

Hadi's chief of staff, sacked the presidential palace and placed the president and government ministers under house arrest. After Hadi escaped from his house arrest and fled to the south, the Houthis pursued him, which pushed him to flee the country altogether.

Following Hadi's escape from house arrest, the Houthi Supreme Revolutionary Committee, the group's 15-member governing body, issued a statement via the state-run Saba News Agency declaring Hadi a fugitive who: 'lost any legitimacy as president after his reckless actions undermined the security, stability and economy of the country' (Al-Moshki 2015). Although the Houthis participated in the national dialogue, the legitimacy of the Hadi government seems to always have been an underlying issue for them, and they seized the first opportunity to topple him. This unravelled the fragile social cohesion achieved by the national dialogue, as Hadi loyalists, an international coalition headed by Saudi Arabia and other Houthi enemies have resisted the Houthi takeover.

## **Conclusion**

This article has sought to compare the post-Arab Spring social cohesion efforts of Tunisia and Yemen through their respective national dialogues. It has employed Jane Jenson's model on social cohesion to break down the comparative analysis into five components which characterise social cohesion. In doing so, it has explained why Tunisia's social cohesion efforts have seen greater success than Yemen's. It has found that while Yemen struggled with the demands of a secessionist movement during the national dialogue, Tunisian dialogue participants were more committed to their country's unity, making the dialogue much more feasible in the latter case. Realising the risks of a prolonged political crisis on the country's economy, Tunisian politicians decided to negotiate with each other to avoid an economic meltdown. In Yemen, however, the transitional government's lack of interest in the economy hijacked the achievements of the national dialogue, as the state of the economy was manipulated by spoilers to weaken social cohesion. At the height of the political crisis in Tunisia, the Ennahda party was willing to step down from power to restore

an acclaimed balance in political participation, while in Yemen, both the Southern and Houthi participation in the national dialogue masked hidden agendas which undermined the country's social cohesion. While Tunisia's national dialogue allowed it to usher in the future by passing a Constitution which guaranteed tolerance for diversity in the country, Yemen's history of rejection of the Houthis came back to haunt the national dialogue, as the movement was unwilling to trust the government's initiative and reverted to its traditional aggressive stance towards Sana'a. And finally, whereas Tunisia's dialogue was organised by respected independent mediators, Yemen's was not overseen by mediators and was instead organised by the very authorities which the Houthis mistrusted and viewed as illegitimate.

Key lessons learned emerge from Tunisia and Yemen's national dialogues which are worth considering by countries in similar transitional phases: the grievances of secessionist movements should in some cases be addressed separately prior to engaging in a national dialogue, as their demands can hijack national dialogues which are meant to cover all of a society's woes; the economy should be revitalised at the same time as the dialogue is taking place; spoilers, whose participation in national dialogues can hide ulterior motives, should be minded; national dialogues should assuage the fears of all participants and their constituencies by fostering tolerance for diversity within a society; and national dialogues should be overseen by an authority which is deemed legitimate by all participants. Although this is by no means an exhaustive list of the requirements for a successful national dialogue, recent history shows us that these are core elements which should not be overlooked when carrying out social cohesion efforts.

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