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How Do Families Try to Survive Yemen's Brutal War? Following a Spiral of Research to Unexpected Conclusions

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Commentary

How Do Families Try to Survive Yemen's Brutal War? Following a Spiral of Research to Unexpected Conclusions

—Rory O'Neil

To care about an issue, we need to know it exists in the first place. One of my first memories of the University of New Hampshire (UNH) is of sitting in a lecture hall listening intently to a speaker explain why we should care about nuclear proliferation. I left the lecture with a good understanding of why we should care, and I couldn't help but wish that more of my fellow students had been able to attend and become informed about this important issue. I concluded that one needs to know that an issue exists in order to have any interest in acquiring more information. I imagine that this is why many of us, even as well-informed university citizens, remain blissfully unconcerned with the current situation in Yemen. I imagine this is also why so many political science students, myself included, are so intimidated by the concept of research in our field. We have no knowledge of it in the first place, causing it to slip under our radar.

I applied for the Research Experience and Apprenticeship Program (REAP) in order to learn more about how to conduct political science research. I had declared political science and international affairs as a major my first semester on campus, but to me research still meant original experiments conducted by scientists in white coats with goggles in a lab somewhere, and rats were probably involved. But what did research mean for *me*? I studied wars and governments, not rats, and I certainly did not wear a lab coat. The ability to conduct research as part of a faculty mentor's team during REAP meant that I didn't have to know the answer to that question; the experience itself would show me.



The author and her mentor, Professor Jeannie Sowers, discuss research findings during a meeting at Dimond Library. Photo by Jennifer Saunders/UNH Today.

When it came to choosing a project, I was faced with my first question about political science research, *what do we research?* Now, the unhelpful, but genuine, answer to that question is, *anything we want to*. Given my background in Arabic and my minor in Middle Eastern studies, I

decided to join my mentor, Professor Jeannie Sowers, in her work studying infrastructure destruction in the new Middle Eastern wars that broke out after a wave of popular uprisings swept the region in 2011 (Sowers et al., 2017). The concept of “new” wars references the way modern wars can maintain themselves through a complicated knot of state and non-state actors. The concept of “new” wars was a known starting point to conduct research, however that research worked. Professor Sowers advised me to begin my research by addressing the questions, “How does the ongoing violence in Yemen affect local populations, and how are non-governmental organizations (NGOs) adapting to the conditions in Yemen to provide aid?”

Spiraling In

Even though I understood my research topic and responsibilities, I still had no idea what actual research looked like until I began my work. This should come as a surprise to no one, especially those in the humanities: it is a lot of reading. Instead of lab coats, rats, and goggles, this type of research requires several skills: finding accurate sources, reading carefully, drawing out interpretations, and synthesizing different sources of information into a coherent argument. Political science research can include interviews and primary document analysis, but for an early undergraduate like me, the focus was on synthesizing others’ research: sifting through ideas, facts, figures, and concepts from several works and disciplines, and then integrating my unique perspective to create an original analysis.



Map of Yemen and its administrative districts (*Map from CIA, 2012*).

I like to describe my research process as a spiral, an analogy used by both Jeannie Sowers and Lisa Baglione, author of a book on research in the political science field (2016). An attempt to answer an original research question led me to locate and analyze literature on the topic. This literature and analysis phase required me to synthesize the uncovered data with my own interpretations. This synthesis left me with large gaps in my research and without an answer to my original research question. Based on the information I had, and the information I now knew that I was missing, I reoriented my research

question to address these gaps, which led me to new literature and new analysis, and so on. Every iteration of the research spiral led me to a deeper and more detailed research question, until I reached a kernel that materialized as a unique perspective.

I began my research by gathering information about how the ongoing violence in Yemen affected the local populations and how non-governmental humanitarian organizations (NGOs) were adapting to the conditions in Yemen in order to provide aid. I read humanitarian reports, such as the United Nations 2017 Yemen Humanitarian Response Plan, and Healthcare Reports by Médecins Sans Frontières. I was left with pages of information on the struggles facing Yemeni people, from displacement, to hunger and thirst, to violence and disease.

I found the stories of individual struggle and triumph that I discovered along the way the most intriguing. My initial questions became more precise; instead of general effects on population, I focused more pointedly on the cholera outbreak. Instead of NGO adaptations, I looked at individual and family unit coping mechanisms for survival. I was also drawn to the different ways conflict affected individuals based on gender. My findings on coping mechanisms for survival and the role of gender led me to a third round of research in which my focus was primarily on the human level of cyclical conflict, specifically involving women in Yemen.

Putting the Pieces Together

For me, synthesizing what I'd read at the end of each stage in the spiral was the most rewarding step. This is where the magic happens. Reading and annotating other people's research does not seem very original, but synthesis creates original content. At the end of each literature review, I wrote an abstract that combined everything that I had learned from the readings. During this writing process, I found a deeper understanding of the situation, both in Yemen as a whole and the individual situations of families and communities in the country, than even I had anticipated. I made my own connections that made my synthesis unique from all the literature I had read.

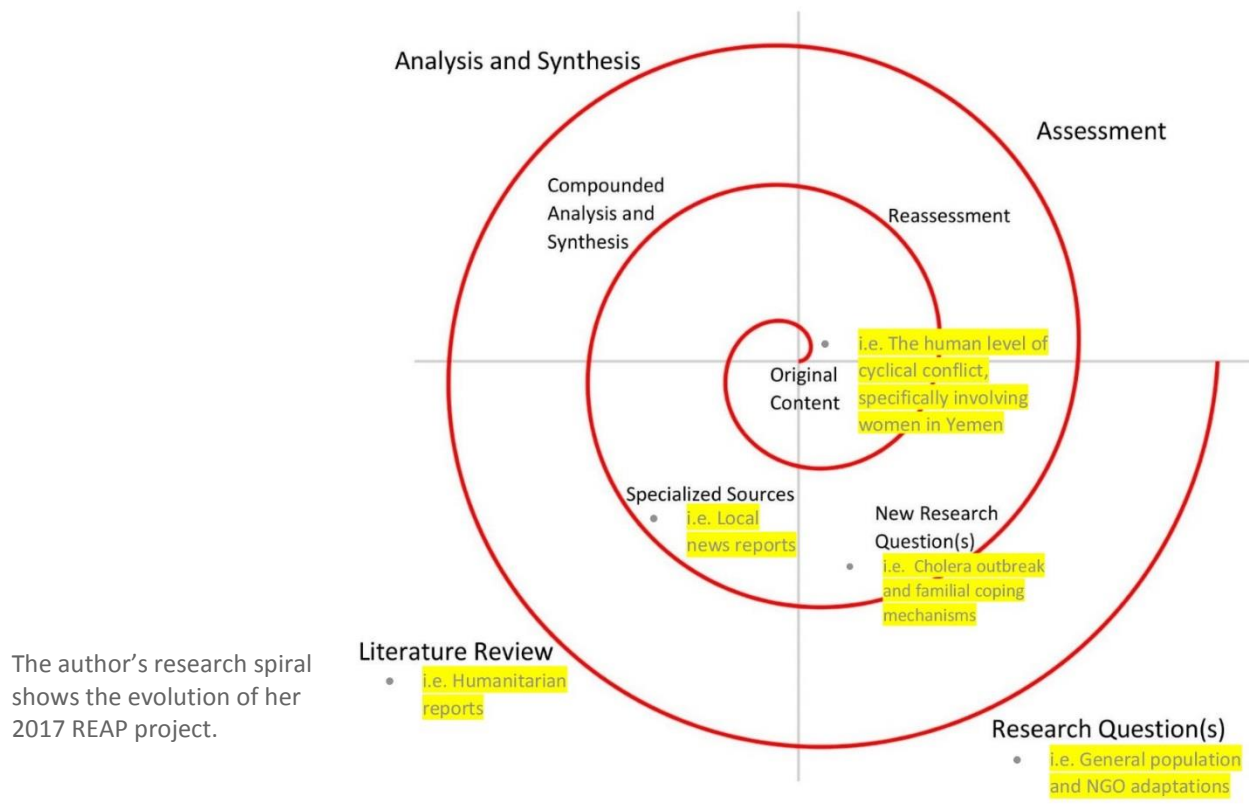
For example, the ongoing civil war in Yemen includes the worst cholera outbreak in history (United Nations, 2017). The massive amount of damaged or destroyed civilian infrastructure has devastated Yemen's sanitation, water treatment, and health systems, providing ample breeding grounds for cholera bacteria. Many individuals and families must engage in high-risk behaviors, such as drinking untreated water, spreading the epidemic. Humanitarian organizations like Médecins Sans Frontières (Doctors without Borders) and the International Committee of the Red Cross struggle to access the country to administer aid.

Through my synthesis processes, I found that humanitarian aid is difficult to provide in Yemen for four primary reasons. First, the Saudi-led blockade on the country has made it almost impossible to get in food and medical supplies. The Saudi-led coalition, with support from the United States, has used air strikes to destroy airports, ports, and roads. Second, both the internationally recognized government based in Riyadh, the capital of Saudi Arabia, and the Houthi forces in Yemen that contest this government have subjected cities and neighborhoods to sieges where civilians are deliberately cut off from food and supplies. Third, Yemeni men and women are reluctant to seek aid for fear that interactions with the wrong organizations or people may put a target on their backs. Fourth, many militias, including those affiliated with the government, prevent aid workers from reaching in-need

populations, because in order to remain in control, armed groups benefit when populations are dependent upon them.

This dependence manifests as individuals join the warring parties, primarily in order to provide for themselves and their families. Therefore, conflict and suffering are prolonged simply through human attempts to survive. Individual and familial strategies for survival in conflict contribute directly and indirectly to continued violence and instability. Individuals join warring parties as a means to survive conflict, but armed groups fuel conflict to perpetuate themselves.

Through several rounds of detailed research and refinement, I was able to reach a deep understanding of the cyclical nature of modern conflict: not only are "new wars" sustained by non-state and state actors in conflict, proxy war or otherwise, but the conflict in Yemen is sustained by the victims themselves, indirectly and unintentionally. By refocusing my research onto how individuals and family members were able or forced to adapt to conflict, I could understand why conflict persisted, and even found some early indications on how it could be stopped and prevented. Many individuals in conflict zones are forced to turn to crime in order to provide for their families or must rely on armed actors for protection. Other families often resort to child marriage and child labor, begging, and scavenging in order to survive. These adaptations breed further instability. When we can see the human needs behind such coping strategies, we have a better understanding of what will truly ease the suffering.



At the close of my research, I became interested in the way in which Yemeni women interacted with their conflict environments. Women in conflict areas face an increased risk of gender-based violence and often willingly put themselves at a higher risk for hunger and malnutrition by forgoing food for the sake of their families. However, the prolonged stress in Yemen has actually loosened some of the cultural norms around gender in Yemeni households, allowing more women access to paid work outside the home and shifting some domestic burdens to the male family members. My research spiral, from overarching concepts of “new wars,” to coping strategies, to women’s roles in conflict, led me to unexpected conclusions, such as the lessening of restrictive social norms for women, that would go unnoticed at a geopolitical level.

Creating original work through in-depth research in political science was fulfilling. At times, my work was depressing due to the nature of studying the casualties of conflict, such as child mortality and human suffering from cholera. However, I made my own unique connections between disciplines and, most importantly, put political science research—and Yemen—on my academic radar.

This project would not have been possible without the generous donations made to the Hamel Center for Undergraduate Research. I would like to specifically recognize Ms. Pamela Klingler, Cameron and Tori Wincup Ragen, the Rogers Family Undergraduate Research Fund, and The Grand Challenges for the Liberal Arts Initiative here at UNH for funding my REAP project. I would also like to extend a thank you to the Hamel Center and all of its amazing staff for allowing me this incredible opportunity. Finally, I would like to thank my faculty mentor, Professor Jeannie Sowers, for her invaluable guidance and support throughout my research project and beyond. Professor Sowers: I am honored to have been part of your research team and I look forward to continuing to learn and grow under your mentorship.

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Author and Mentor Bios

Rory O’Neil came to the University of New Hampshire (UNH) from her hometown of Nashua, New Hampshire to major in political science and international affairs, with minors in security studies and Middle Eastern studies. She is a member of the University Honors Program and will graduate in 2020. A Research Experience and Apprenticeship Program (REAP) grant awarded the summer after her first year at UNH and an interest in Middle Eastern conflict and public health enabled Rory to work with her mentor, Jeannie Sowers, on her study of the conflict in Yemen. Rory learned not only about the everyday struggles of people in conflict zones, but also invaluable lessons about conducting research in humanities fields. “Much of what is uncovered is interconnected and hard to untangle,” she explains, but she found the endeavor incredibly rewarding. Rory decided to write for *Inquiry* as a way to culminate her research and document the work she had done. After graduation, Rory plans to work in a government agency or think tank related to foreign policy, with a specific interest in Middle Eastern relations, or possibly work in the international aid and development sector.

Jeannie Sowers is an associate professor of political science and program chair for International Affairs at the University of New Hampshire (UNH). She has worked at UNH since 2006, specializing in Middle East and comparative politics. Dr. Sowers has mentored several students conducting field research in the Middle East through the International Research Opportunities Program (IROP) and Summer Undergraduate Research Fellowship (SURF) Abroad programs. Her previous mentees include Trevor Mauck (Morocco), Chelsea Moyer (Morocco), Hannah Lawrence (Egypt), and Austin Perea (Egypt/Jordan). She has also mentored students through theses, Intercollege (INCO) courses, and independent studies. Dr. Sowers was an ideal match for Rory’s interest in Middle Eastern conflicts and their impacts on civilians, and she sponsored her Research Experience and Apprenticeship Program (REAP) grant. She enjoys learning from students as they encounter new ideas and experiences, and enthusiastically supports student research and writing. Dr. Sowers recognizes the importance of having students write articles for *Inquiry* and notes, “In political science, you need to be able to make complex political issues accessible to a wider audience. Learning to present your research across disciplines and in multiple venues is an even more important skill with the spread of the internet and social media as important means of communication.”