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The Production of Panic

What is Happening in Yemen?

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Abstract

Despite the media's preoccupation with the terrorist threat emanating from Yemen, the sense of urgency underpinning the debate about the country's future stems from an economic tailspin forced by dwindling oil production. The debate is divided not between doves and hawks but between optimists and pessimists over what the current framework can achieve. Optimists say Yemen is entering a critical new phase, supported by unprecedented levels of international engagement. Pessimists argue that, beyond cosmetic measures, Yemen's track record on reform is dismal. A pragmatic third group argues that there is no point in continuing to deliver the same message but shouting louder. For the reform agenda to succeed, Yemen's elite power brokers must set aside personal rivalries and collectively surrender their advantage to the benefit of state institutions. The fact that Yemen has made relatively little progress on reform to date suggests the elites have not yet identified their own self-interest in the proposed changes. To succeed, advocates of reform will have to build key relationships, identify

incentives and frame the proposed changes in a way that appeals to the survival instincts of Yemen's decision-makers.

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