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Roots of Conflict and Fragmentation: A Historical Analysis of Yemen's Intermittent Wars and Political Division

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[Adel Dashela](#)

Yemen has become a complex international issue due to its strategic location. The country overlooks the Bab al-Mandab Strait and the Gulf of Aden, and it owns the island of Socotra in the Indian Ocean, which is also of strategic importance. Also, Bab el-Mandeb greatly controls international shipping lines, especially energy supplies and other international trade. This geographic positioning has made Yemen a focal point of competition between global powers. China is pursuing its Silk Road Initiative and sees Yemen as an integral part of its strategic plans. Meanwhile, Russia is working to expand its influence on the African continent, including in Yemen, to preserve its regional interests.

The ongoing conflict in Yemen is multifaceted. It pits the Iran-backed Houthi rebels against the internationally recognized Yemeni government, which is supported by Saudi Arabia. Regional powers like the United Arab Emirates are also vying for control over strategic areas, especially in southern Yemen and along the Red Sea coast. The conflict has taken an international dimension as well. The Houthi attacks on shipping in the Red Sea, which they have linked to the situation in Gaza, have prompted the U.S. to form a military alliance to secure maritime traffic in the region. This militarization of the Red Sea raises the risks and could further destabilize Yemen and the broader region. To address these complex issues and maintain international peace and security, it is crucial to understand the root causes of the conflict in Yemen. Any solutions must balance the competing interests of the various local, regional, and global actors involved.

Since the 1960s, Yemen has been plagued by intermittent conflicts and wars. The situation temporarily eased in the early 1990s following the unification of North and

South Yemen in 1990. However, in 1994, tensions escalated when Ali Salem Al-Beidh, the Vice President of the Republic and Chairman of the Socialist Party, declared the separation of South Yemen, sparking a civil war between the Unity State and the Socialist Party. Although the war eventually ended, Yemen experienced a period of relative calm. However, violence resurfaced in 2004 with the initial military confrontation between the Houthi group and Yemen's government forces in the Maran Mountains, located in the northern Saada Governorate near the southern border of Saudi Arabia.

A Historical View of the Root of Conflict

The roots of the conflict in Yemen can be traced back to historical and political factors spanning decades, particularly under the Al Hamid al-Din family (1904-1962), who ruled North Yemen after the Ottoman Caliphate's decline. The family, claiming descent from the Prophet Muhammad, governed regions divided between the Zaydi and Shafi'i sects. The Zaydis believed Yemen should be ruled by an Imam from Al-Hussein bin Ali's lineage, while the Shafi'is, the majority, rejected this theocratic rule, leading to intermittent conflicts. A popular revolution in 1962 ended the Imamate's rule, establishing a new republican system. This period involved interventions from regional powers, with Egypt supporting the Republican system and Saudi Arabia supporting the Royalist movement. After eight years of war, the Imamate movement reluctantly accepted the new Republican system following a Saudi-sponsored agreement in 1970.

Despite participating in the political process nominally, the Imamate movement harbored aspirations of returning to power. In the late 1970s, the Houthi group emerged in Sa'ada, north Yemen, influenced by the Iranian revolution and the ideology of Ayatollah Khomeini. The Houthis established a strong presence in the mountainous areas of Saada, near Saudi Arabia, disconnected from the new republican regime. Between 2004 and 2010, the Houthi group engaged in six intermittent conflicts with the Yemeni government forces. Despite various local mediations, including the 2008 Doha Agreement¹, sustainable peace in Yemen remained elusive. While these mediations temporarily halted the war, they have not resulted in lasting peace.

In 2011, "President Ali Abdullah Saleh's support began to unravel very publicly within the three most important pillars of political Yemen and power in the country: the tribes, the religious elite, and the military" (Phillips, 2011). The secessionist

movement in southern Yemen also increased the instability, with economic conditions worsening. A popular revolution against President Saleh (1942-2017) broke out in the same year. Still, even after a reconciliation agreement² (Gulf Initiative) was signed, despite initiating a political process and forming a transitional government based on the Gulf Initiative, it proved insufficient in averting the outbreak of civil war. The Houthis capitalized on the situation, expanding militarily and overthrowing the Saada Governorate in 2011. They targeted Salafist centers and advanced toward Sanaa, displacing tribal figures and citizens. The Houthis presented varied narratives, claiming to fight high prices, oppose Al-Qaeda, liberate tribes, and support South Yemen's people. They also adopted an anti-American rhetoric, with their famous slogan " God is the Greatest / Death to America / Death to Israel / A curse upon the Jews." (Patrick, 2024)

The Houthis spread their ideology, establishing a monopoly of power in northern Yemen. This influence extends to educational institutions, where children are taught the state slogan associated with their ideology in schools and other state-run establishments. The oath of allegiance to the group is given as a pledge to God regarding guardianship and authority (wilaya).³ In 2014, there were also the outcomes of the Yemeni National Dialogue (NDC).⁴ However, Houthis seized control of the capital, Sanaa. Although a power-sharing agreement⁵ was reached between the Houthis and other Yemeni factions, the Houthi group reneged on the agreement, taking control of institutions and imprisoning the head of state and the government, "and in early 2015, advanced southward from the capital to Aden on the Arabian Sea. (Sharp, 2017)

Operation Decisive Storm launched on 26 March 2015, aimed to eliminate threats to Saudi Arabia and restore Yemen's government led by President Hadi. "Iran understood that the fast-changing balance of power inside Yemen in combination with Saudi Arabia's growing anxiety presented it with a new opportunity" (Johnsen; Juneau, 2023). With this understanding came weapons supplies to support their local endeavors. The war quickly turned into a regional battleground, resulting in the fragmentation of the country's political landscape and the world's most severe humanitarian crisis, exacerbating the suffering of its population.⁶ Yemen has become fragmented into distinct security zones controlled by various armed groups, with no unified and strong government in place despite the existence of an internationally recognized government. The Houthi group controls the capital, Sana'a, and the densely populated northern regions. The National Resistance Forces,

led by Tariq Saleh, control the Mokha region with support from the UAE. The Southern Transitional Council (STC) ⁷ governs Aden and nearby areas, receiving direct UAE support. The internationally recognized government holds strategic oil and gas regions, including Marib and Hadramaut, as well as Taiz. This fragmentation of power has led to societal disintegration, fostering sectarianism and regionalism, which will pose challenges for future governance and the post-war recovery of Yemen.

The Houthi Group's Religious Project

The competing interests of local actors have complicated the situation, with each pursuing their own agendas. The Houthi group, for example, aims to establish a Zaydi state under Abdul-Malik al-Houthi based on a sectarian ideology concentrating power within a specific family. However, this project has proven to be unattainable in practice. The longevity of the conflict, spanning over two decades, indicates the inherent challenges and contradictions within the Houthi group's project. Their resort to military force and the continued escalation of the conflict demonstrate the limitations of their approach.

The Regional Dynamics of the Southern Transitional Council (STC)

On the other hand, In southern Yemen, the STC aims to reshape the political landscape and establish an independent state in South Yemen. The STC in southern Yemen aims to assert control over the region through military means. This regional project is a response to the historical regional conflicts and tensions that have shaped southern Yemen. However, the attempt to consolidate power through force has resulted in internal conflicts within the southern governorates, further exacerbating the challenges of governance and stability. The lingering effects of past regional conflicts continue to influence the dynamics of the Transitional Council's project. The presence of the Houthi group's sectarian project and the Transitional Council's Separatist aspirations have created a complex and multifaceted conflict in Yemen. These projects have hindered the country's progress toward peace and stability, as they are rooted in divisive ideologies and seek to impose their agendas through military force.

The Geopolitical Dynamics of Yemen's Conflict: Regional Actors

At the regional level, Iran perceives Yemen as an opportunity to expand its regional influence in the Horn of Africa and promote its Shiite doctrine in Africa. This poses a threat to Gulf states and exerts pressure on the West concerning its nuclear

program. The Houthi group's military operations in the Red Sea, targeting international shipping, can be understood within this context. Also, the Kingdom of Saudi Arabia (KSA) seeks a comprehensive political settlement to safeguard its strategic interests in Yemen, as it perceives the Houthi group as a security threat. The KSA aims to have the Houthis as a partner in power but not in full control of the state. However, the Houthi group believes it can force Saudi Arabia to accept its conditions and has demonstrated its capacity to strike Saudi interests, such as the 2019 attack on oil facilities in eastern Saudi Arabia. Moreover, the United Arab Emirates (UAE) also pursues its strategic goals by exerting significant influence over the southern components of Yemen through military and financial support. The UAE aims to establish influence in the Red Sea and the Gulf of Aden, and it currently controls the Yemeni island of Socotra in the Indian Ocean. It backs the secession of southern Yemen from the north, while the Sultanate of Oman, concerned about its strategic interests, refrained from participating in the Decisive Storm operation and hosted the chief negotiator of the Houthi group and their team since the beginning of the Decisive Storm in 2015.

International Dimensions of the Yemeni Conflict: Challenges in Achieving Lasting Peace and the Impact of Regional and Global Actors

On the international level, despite more than 20 resolutions issued by the Security Council and mediation efforts by the UN, peace has remained elusive in Yemen.⁸ This is due to various reasons - Firstly, the UN plays a mediating role and lacks the power to impose a settlement. Secondly, its executive mechanism often falls short in accurately assessing the situation, as it aims to maintain an impartial stance towards all Yemeni parties. Despite its sponsorship of the 2018 Stockholm Agreement⁹ between the Yemeni government and the Houthi group, the UN has struggled to implement it effectively. Furthermore, The U.S.A. predominantly viewed Yemen through the lens of Saudi Arabia, prioritizing the fight against Al-Qaeda, ensuring international navigation in the Red Sea and the Gulf of Aden, and addressing the humanitarian situation, sidelining military and security developments in the densely populated northern regions. More recently, Yemen has been subject to the perspectives of Saudi Arabia, Iran, and the UAE. The genuine concerns and demands of the Yemeni people have been overlooked, as armed groups control different parts of the country.

The Houthi group was designated as a global terrorist organization during the last days of the Trump administration. However, the Biden administration later removed

the Houthi group from the terrorist list, citing the aim of promoting the peace process in Yemen and addressing the humanitarian situation. “Despite removing the FTO designation, the United States left in place sanctions on senior Houthi leaders” (State Department, 2021). Nevertheless, following the Houthi group's targeting of the maritime vessels in the Red Sea, the Biden administration has designated the “Houthis, as a Specially Designated Global Terrorist group.”¹⁰ In addition to this, in collaboration with Britain, the US established an international coalition named “Prosperity Guardian” to safeguard international navigation in the Red Sea. Despite conducting military operations in the region, this coalition is unlikely to achieve lasting peace and may instead exacerbate the crisis. Recently, US Central Command declared that the vessel RUBYMAR, carrying 41,000 tons of fertilizers, had sunk in the Red Sea due to a Houthi military attack.¹¹ This alarming escalation poses significant risks to the environment and wildlife and could lead to a long-lasting environmental catastrophe that Yemen may struggle to address for years. The repercussions of this incident are expected to extend beyond Yemen's borders, impacting neighboring countries along the Red Sea.

The Path Ahead

Yemen's current situation presents an imminent escalation risk, especially after Israel's recent targeting of the port of Hodeidah in western Yemen, unless immediate action is taken. The persistence of the Houthi group in conducting military operations in the Red Sea raises concerns regarding the potential internationalization of the region and the likelihood of intervention by regional powers. Such a scenario would have grave implications for global peace, security, and trade. To avert the looming threat of war, concerned nations must explore alternative pathways toward achieving sustainable peace in Yemen. One approach involves sustained efforts to intercept Iranian weapons being smuggled to the Houthis via sea routes, thereby disrupting their military capabilities. Simultaneously, the ongoing Israeli military operations in Gaza must be stopped, and pressure should be exerted on regional powers to cease their military and financial support for Yemeni armed groups and instead direct funds to state institutions. It is essential to enable the Yemeni people to independently determine the future of their country, free from external influence.

Yemen's protracted conflict is deeply entrenched in the sectarian and regional projects pursued by the Houthi group and the Transitional Council. To overcome this complex predicament, empowering local governance emerges as a promising

avenue toward stability, as it addresses the underlying causes of the conflict and promotes inclusive governance practices. Under the auspices of the United Nations, the international community plays a vital role in facilitating a just and comprehensive political settlement that encompasses all Yemeni parties, without exception. By implementing the measures outlined above and providing sustained support, the international community can contribute to the realization of lasting peace in Yemen.

Notes

1. Conflict Ceasefire Conditions, Doha Agreement, 2007–2008, access: Feb 20, 2024, <https://shorturl.at/DST24>
2. Based on the agreement, the opposition formed a national unity government with 50 percent representation from either side. Ali Abdullah Saleh must relinquish power to his deputy, Abd Rabbuh Mansour Hadi. Here is the full of agreement. <https://shorturl.at/dmzP7>
3. “We solemnly accept the guardianship of God, His Prophet, Imam Ali and my lord and master Abdelmalek Badreddine al-Houthi, whom you ordered us to accept as guardian. We solemnly disavow your enemies, the enemies of the Prophet, the enemies of Imam Ali, and the enemies of my lord and master Abdelmalek Badreddine al-Houthi, whom you ordered us to accept as guardian.” Look at: Dashela, Adel. Northern Yemeni Tribes during the Eras of Ali Abdullah Saleh and the Houthi Movement: A Comparative Study, Sana’a Center for Strategic Studies, Feb 14, 2022, available from: <https://shorturl.at/xIQW4>,
4. A full Arabic document of the outcomes of the Yemeni National Dialogue Conference can be found Here, <https://shorturl.at/mvBLW>
5. The Peace and National Partnership Agreement, September 21, 2014, <https://cutt.ly/tmAmbyr>
6. “18.2 million people in Yemen require support. 17.6 million people are estimated to face acute food insecurity in 2024. An estimated 6.7 million people are living in inadequate shelters. Limited access to critical services continues to worsen the conditions for the most vulnerable groups, including women and children.12.4 million people lack sufficient access to safe drinking water, while more than 4.5

million children of school age (5 to 17 years) do not attend schools. An estimated 4.5 million people are currently displaced in Yemen.” <https://shorturl.at/BEGRU>

7. Southern Transitional Council (STC) formed in May 2017 with backing from the United Arab Emirates, the Southern Transitional Council (STC) is a military separatist institution that exercises military control over Aden and surrounding regions in southern Yemen. Equipped with well-trained military and security militias, the STC is actively involved in the current Yemeni government. The President of the Southern Transitional Council also serves as a member of the eight-member Presidential Leadership Council, established in 2022 with support from Saudi Arabia. Notably, the Presidential Leadership Council includes representatives from all Yemeni forces except for the armed Houthi group.

8. Here is a list of Security Council Resolutions,
<https://osesgy.unmissions.org/security-council-resolutions>

9. Full agreement can be found here, <https://shorturl.at/dqAM3>

10. U.S Department of State Terrorist Designation of the Houthis, Jan 17, 2024,
<https://www.state.gov/terrorist-designation-of-the-houthis/>

11. Rubymar ship attacked by Houthi rebels finally sinks in Red Sea, The Guardian, March 3, 2024, <https://www.theguardian.com/world/2024/mar/02/stricken-ship-attacked-by-houthi-rebels-sinks-in-red-sea>

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Biden Administration Launches Reset in Relations with Saudi Arabia, Withdraws Support for Saudi-Led War in Yemen, State Diplomatic and Consular Relations, Cambridge University Press, 2021, p 551.

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Adel Dashela is a Yemeni researcher and lecturer, holding a Ph.D. in English with a focus on political prison literature in the Arab World. His expertise includes post-conflict transitional justice, conflict studies, peace studies, and a comprehensive understanding of regional issues, and Yemeni affairs, including tribal dynamics. Currently, he is a visiting researcher, University of Turku, Finland.

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