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Yemen at a crossroads

What remains of Arabia Felix?

Stephan Reiner, Alexander Weissenburger (eds.)

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Introduction

Alexander Weissenburger, Stephan Reiner

The Institute for Peace Support and Conflict Management of the National Defence Academy in Vienna (*Institut für Friedenssicherung und Konfliktmanagement der Landesverteidigungsakademie; IFK*) is pleased to present this publication on the situation in the Republic of Yemen, its local, regional and global impacts, and the individual aspects to be considered in the country.

The Republic of Yemen is located on the south-western tip of the Arabian Peninsula. With its estimated 31.5 million inhabitants, it is the most populous country on the peninsula, and, with a per capita GDP of 2,500 Dollar in 2017, by far the poorest. The population is predominantly (99.1%) Muslim, around 65% of which is Sunni. The vast majority of the remaining 35% adheres to Zaydism, a Shi'ite denomination, distinct from 12er Shi'ism and today native only to Yemen, where it is the main denomination in the north-west of the country.[1]

As a republic, Yemen is the only country of the peninsula which is not a monarchy. What all states, with the exception of Oman,[2] have in common, however, is that they are products of the 20th century of our era. For example, Saudi Arabia became a kingdom in the year 1932, and the United Arab Emirates united in 1971. The Republic of Yemen was founded in 1990, when the Yemen Arab Republic (YAR) in the north-west of the country was united with the People's Democratic Republic of Yemen (PDRY), thus covering the south-east and east of the country. Colloquially, the halves are often simply referred to as North and South Yemen, respectively. The PDRY was formed in 1967 after Britain had left Aden. Two years later, Marxists took over, and the country was transformed into a socialist state with close ties to Cuba, the German Democratic Republic, and the Soviet Union. The YAR,

[1] See: CIA The World Factbook: Yemen: https://www.cia.gov/the-world-factbook/countries/yemen/#people-and-society.

[2] Even here it could be argued that Oman in its current form only came into existence after Sultan Qabus overthrew his father and radically transformed the country in the following decades.

on the other hand, was established after the last Zaydi Imam was overthrown in 1962. For most of the more than 1,000 years between the late 9th century, when Zaydism arrived in Yemen, and 1962, Yemen's north was ruled by an Imamate under which the country remained comparatively underdeveloped and largely cut off from the rest of the world. The ensuing civil war between the supporters of the republic and the proponents of the *ancién regime*, which went on for the better part of the decade, saw the involvement of Saudi Arabia on the side of the ousted Imam and Egypt on the side of the republicans. Whereas Egypt ended its involvement in Yemen in 1967 as a result of the Six-Day War against Israel, Saudi Arabia, while not militarily involved, nevertheless remained influential in Yemen as the country's principal financier. By further buying the allegiance of various northern tribes as well as of political and religious actors, by undermining attempts of unification prior to 1990, by encouraging secessionist tendencies after 1990, and by supporting the spread of fundamentalist Islamic teachings, Saudi Arabia tried to ensure that Yemen remained – as Helen Lackner puts it – "both weak enough and strong enough not to be a threat to the Saudi regime."[3]

At the same time, Ali Abdallah Salih, a colonel in the armed forced who had risen to the highest office, i.e. that of the president, in 1978, tried to use the fragmentation of the country to his own advantage. Thus, he kept the country in a permanent state of crisis, strategically trying to co-opt enemies and playing them off against each other. This strategy, famously likened by Salih himself to a "dance on the head of snakes", became all the more pertinent in the 1990s, when the steep rise in oil revenue gave the regime unprecedented monetary means to expand its clientelist policies. Whereas the economy in the 1970s and 80s was strongly reliant on remittances from guest workers in the Gulf countries, Yemen's refusal to support military intervention after Iraq had invaded Kuwait saw the expulsion of Yemeni workers from the Gulf. The shift "from a remittance-rich – and therefore relatively autonomous – citizenry and poor state to a poor and relatively economically dependent citizenry and an oil-rich state" saw the increasing concentration of power in the hands of the president, who sat at the centre of a multilayered patronage network, inclusion into which offered access to the circles

[3] On Yemeni history in the 20th century, see: Dresch, Paul, A History of Modern Yemen. Cambridge 2000, passim. See also: Lackner, Helen, Yemen in Crisis: Autocracy, Neoliberalism and the Disintegration of a State. Saqi Books 2017, p. 67-121, quote; p. 71.

of political and economic power.[4] As political parties and the government largely served as a mere façade for an increasingly kleptocratic state, the lack of political accountability in combination with the general population's worsening economic situation caused the system to fray – first in the periphery, then at the centre.[5]

Already in 1994, secessionist ambitions in the South caused a civil war, which the regime, in alliance with Islamist militias, swiftly decided in its favour. The grievances, however, remained and led to the formation of the so-called Hirak movement in the mid-2000s. In the north, on the other hand, the early 2000s saw the appearance of the Huthi movement, which amalgamated calls for a political opening and the economic development of the northern regions with Zaydi revivalism and an anti-imperialist agenda. In 2011, the Arab Spring hit Yemen, forcing Ali Abdallah Salih out of office after 33 years. Since then, Yemen has seen over a decade of instability, turmoil, and civil war. Whereas the peaceful transition of power to a government led by Salih's former vice-president, Abd Rabbuh Mansur Hadi, and the implementation of the National Dialogue Conference (NDC) to negotiate the post-revolutionary order, the international community was initially optimistic about the direction in which the country was heading. However, these hopes were finally crushed when al-Qaida spread in the southeast and the Huthi movement took control of wide parts of the country in 2014 and early 2015, forcing the internationally recognised government, including President Hadi, into exile. Despite the intervention of and international coalition under the leadership of Saudi Arabia and the United Arab Emirates, which started in March 2015, the Huthi movement has remained in power in large parts of the northwest of the country. The rest of the country is split between forces affiliated to the internationally recognised government in the northeast, the Southern Transitional Council (STC), which evolved out of the Hirak movement and is especially strong in the southwest, and the Hadrami Elite Forces in the south of the province whose name it carries.[6] The conflict is largely at a stalemate, with the Emirates having withdrawn from the coalition and

[4] See especially: Phillips, Sarah, Yemen and the Politics of Permanent Crisis, International Institute for Strategic Studies 2011, passim.

[5] On the economic situation, see: Lackner, Yemen in Crisis, pp. 235-260.

[6] For a map detailing the different influence zones in mid-2023, see: Sanaa Center for Strategic Studies, Military Mobilization in Hadhramaut, June 22, 2023, https://sanaacenter.org/the-yemen-review/may-2023/20388.

Saudi Arabia seeking a way out. Several peace initiatives since 2015 have failed, and the détente between Saudi Arabia and Iran – the latter supporting the Huthis –, starting in early 2023, does not (at least at the time of writing in October the same year) seem to have had any impact on the ground. Nevertheless, fighting has largely subsided since an UN-negotiated cease-fire in April 2022, and even though the cease-fire was not prolonged in October 2022, the military situation seems to have calmed down for the time being.

The humanitarian situation, on the other hand, remains dire. The conflict has resulted in what the UN describes as today's most severe humanitarian crisis, with 21.6 million people in need, more than half of them in acute need. Around 3 million people are internally displaced, and in 2021 the UN estimated that by the beginning of 2022, the number of war-related casualties would reach 377,000, around 60% of which would be caused indirectly by hunger and disease, to name but two.[7]

Despite the gravity of the situation, the crisis has largely failed to attract widespread media coverage, especially in the West. This is all the more reason for the IFK to see it as its duty to attempt to at least remedy this lack with this publication and shed light on the Yemen conflict, and to address the major aspects of its internal, regional and global dimensions.

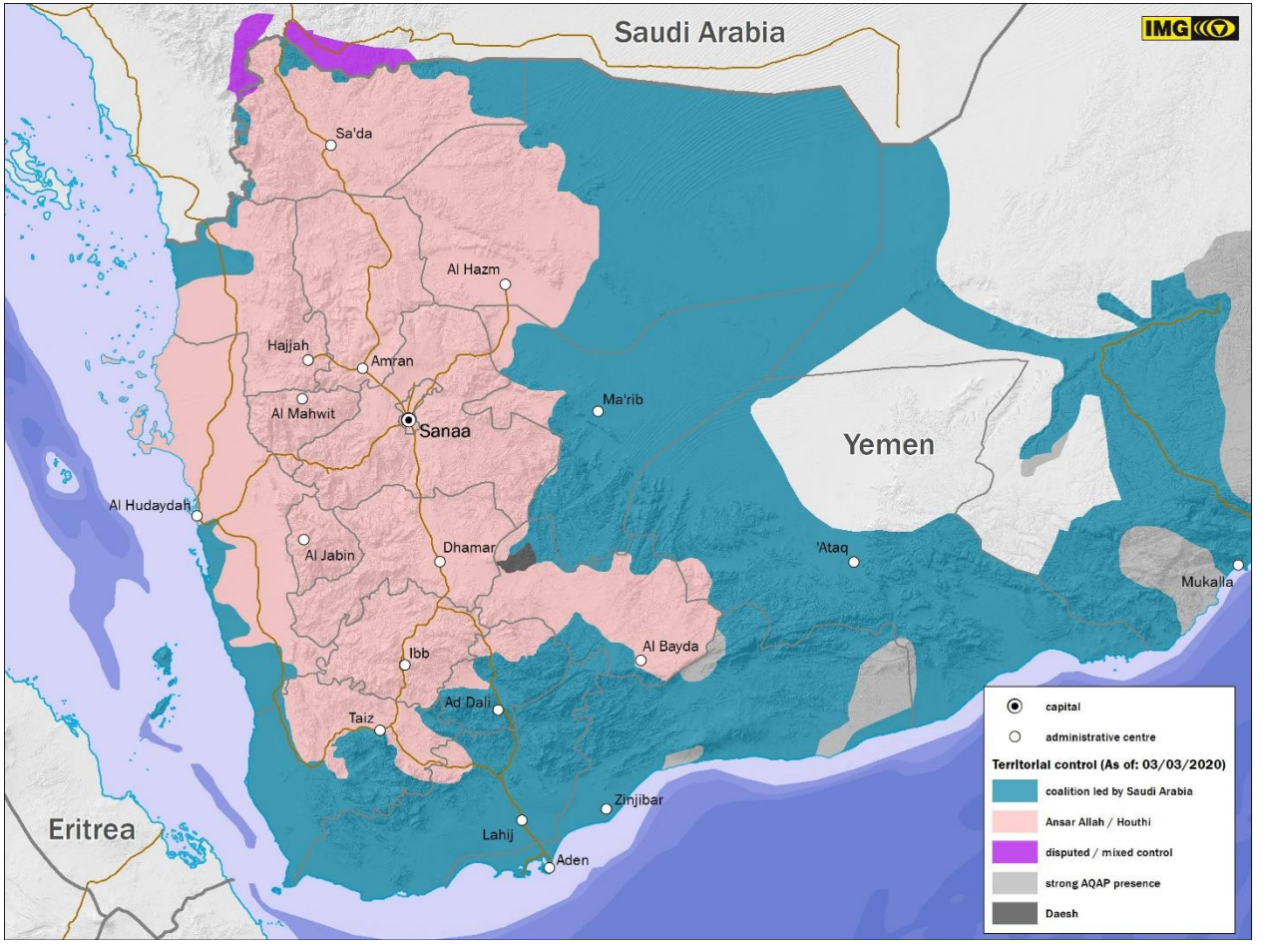
These were the IFK's reasons for initialising this publication. Several contributions were already made in 2022. However, the content is up to date. Recent events related to Israel's war with HAMAS in the Gaza Strip have brought Yemen as a whole back into the focus of international efforts and reporting. This anthology is intended as a supplement to this and addresses the major aspects of its internal, regional and global dimensions.

Of course, all these aspects cannot be covered by the Institute alone. The present anthology naturally takes this circumstance into account. We are

[7] United Nations Office for the Coordination of Humanitarian Affairs, Humanitarian Needs Overview: Yemen, December 2022, https://www.unocha.org/attachments/c328e656-ebbf-4e15-baec-5805c093b6b0/Yemen_HNO_2023_final.pdf; Al- Jazeera, Yemen war deaths will reach 377,000 by end of the year: UN, November 23, 2021, https://www.aljazeera.com/news/2021/11/23/un-yemen-recovery-possible-in-one-generation-if-war-stops-now.

therefore all the more pleased to have won over renowned academics to contribute to the publication of this anthology in the series of publications of the National Defence Academy. Said Al-Dailami, for example, sheds light on the role of Saudi Arabia in this conflict. Susanne Dahlgren approaches the conflict constellation from a historical perspective on the one hand and complements these aspects with her personal impressions after several research stays in Yemen itself on the other. Mareike Transfeld, supported by her co-author Dorothea Günther, writes about the political implications of a lack of humanitarian security and discusses the aspects of the recognisable state fragmentation in the country. Walter Posch, a member of the IFK, highlights the role of the Islamic Republic of Iran in the Yemen conflict and outlines the ideological connections behind it, developing possible scenarios for the future. With Ewa Strzelecka, we were able to win a proven expert on the individual conflict dynamics that are relevant for the role of women in armed conflicts and in the formation of political will. She also describes the dynamics of women's participation in politics since 2011. Finally, Alexander Weissenburger, co-editor of the anthology, looks at the entity of the Huthis, their ideology and origins, and in another article also at the terrorist component in the Yemeni conflict.

The authors and the two editors thank you for your interest and wish you, dear reader, insightful moments while reading. With this publication, we would like to support the Yemeni people in bringing their conflict back to the attention of the interested public.


Saudi Arabia
IMG
Sa'da
Al Hazm
Hajjah
Amran
Al Mahwit
Sanaa
Ma'rib
Yemen
Al Hudaydah
Al Jabin
Dhamar
'Ataq
Mukalla
Ibb
Al Bayda
Ad Dali
Taiz
Zinjibar
Lahij
Aden
Eritrea
capital
administrative centre
Territorial control (As of: 03/03/2020)
coalition led by Saudi Arabia
Ansar Allah / Houthi
disputed / mixed control
strong AQAP presence
Daesh

Saudi involvement in Yemeni politics; a relationship dominated by one side

Said Al-Dailami

"When the rich wage war, it's the poor who die."
Jean-Paul Sartre

Historical background: Saudi-Yemeni relations in the 20th century

For many decades, the Kingdom of Saudi Arabia has played an influential role in Yemen's internal affairs. Located on the Bab al-Mandab Strait, a narrow waterway linking the Red Sea and the Gulf of Aden that is mainly used for the world's oil shipments, Yemen has long "constituted a cornerstone of Saudi foreign policy."[1] Since the Kingdom's foundation in 1932, it has constantly sought to expand its influence and to ensure that its interests were met.[2]

Permanent tension and periodic shifts between a friendly neighbourly cooperation, providing benefits for both sides, and conflict marked the mutual relationship. In general, the phenomenon of frequently shifting alliances, or brief 'marriages of convenience,' is among the key features characterizing conflicts in the Middle East. This can be equally applied to Saudi-Yemeni relations.

After a short violent dispute over an undefined border in 1934, Saudi Arabia generally avoided open confrontation with its southern neighbour until 2015.[3] It rather maintained a defensive strategy of "meddling in [Yemen's] internal politics, backing […] local groups against others, using Yemeni guest workers as leverage, buying off tribal leaders" and occasionally conducting

[1] Darwich, "The Saudi Intervention in Yemen: Struggling for Status," p. 125.
[2] Ibid, pp. 125-142.
[3] Ibid.

military operations over border issues.[4] Evidently, the aggressive military intervention of 2015 put an end to this strategy.

The border issue

The history of Saudi-Yemeni relations is long and complicated. It started with a first dispute over the sovereignty of the former "Idrisi territory," comprising Yemen's northern provinces Asir, Jizan and Najran.[5] The Zaydi Imam, Yahya, who ruled North Yemen after the withdrawal of the Ottoman Empire in 1918, and Abd al-Aziz b. Saud, Saudi Arabia's founding father, soon clashed over the control of this area.[6]

After a brief but decisive war in 1934, the defeated Imam had to sign the Ta'if Treaty, which provided several conditions for the bilateral relations, including the mutual recognition of the war's end and the establishment of peace.[7] The treaty also stipulated the incorporation of the former Yemeni provinces into Saudi Arabia and defined Yemen's northern border line.[8]

The treaty, however, remained vague and contested by both parties, soon leading to its rejection.[9] For instance, it did not define the maritime borderline in the Red Sea, North Yemen's eastern border with Saudi Arabia or its southern border with South Yemen, which was under British rule at the time.[10]

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[4] Darwich, "The Saudi Intervention in Yemen: Struggling for Status," p. 125.

[5] Askar Halwan Al-Enazy, "'The International Boundary Treaty' (Treaty of Jeddah) Concluded between the Kingdom of Saudi Arabia and the Yemeni Republic on June 12, 2000," The American Journal of International Law, Vol. 96, No. 1 (2002): pp. 161-173,/ Stig Stenslie, "Not too strong, not too weak: Saudi Arabia's policy towards Yemen," NOREF Peacebuilding Resource Center, March 2013, https://www.files.ethz.ch/isn/162439/87736bc4da8b0e482f9492e6e8baacaf.pdf.

[6] Mark N. Katz, "Yemeni Unity and Saudi Security," Middle East Policy, Vol. 1, Issue 1, (1992): pp. 117-137./Stenslie, "Not too strong, not too weak: Saudi Arabia's policy towards Yemen."

[7] Al-Enazy, "The International Boundary Treaty," pp. 161-173./Katz, "Yemeni Unity and Saudi Security," pp. 117-137.

[8] Katz, "Yemeni Unity and Saudi Security," pp. 117-137.

[9] Al-Enazy, "The International Boundary Treaty," pp. 161-173.

[10] Katz, "Yemeni Unity and Saudi Security," pp. 117-137.

Apart from not being comprehensive, the Ta'if Treaty also contained a controversial clause that defined a term of 20 years for the treaty, with the possibility of renewal and/or amendment.[11] Moreover, it comprised several articles that were interpreted differently by Yemeni and Saudi leaders.[12] It is therefore not surprising that the legal status of the treaty and its implementation were constantly challenged by both parties.[13] While Yemeni officials repeatedly requested new negotiations over the demarcation of the borderline, stressing the country's historic territories, Saudi Arabia insisted on the boundary initially defined in 1934.[14] The discovery of oil and gas deposits in that area further consolidated the two opposite positions.[15]

Any attempts to permanently settle the controversy over the border demarcation therefore failed throughout the years until the Treaty of Jeddah was signed in 2000. The treaty reaffirmed the Ta'if agreement and was more comprehensive in its scope, but it remained incomplete and problematic.[16] One problematic issue was related to the established population settlements in the border region. While the Jeddah Treaty emphasised the original boundary of 1934, demographics in the area had changed significantly.[17] The nationality of the tribal populations therefore became one of the problems, and both Yemeni and Saudi tribes opposed the treaty immediately.[18] The Saudi government, for instance, frequently paid off tribes to accept the Saudi nationality.[19]

In fact, the disputed area spans a 1,300-mile line, the so-called "Ta'if Line", constituting the "longest unsettled frontier in the Middle East."[20] The region is mountainous and inhabited by strong Yemeni tribes, making it difficult to

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[11] Al-Enazy, "The International Boundary Treaty," 161-173./Katz, "Yemeni Unity and Saudi Security," pp. 117-137.
[12] Katz, "Yemeni Unity and Saudi Security," pp. 117-137.
[13] Al-Enazy, "The International Boundary Treaty," pp. 161-173.
[14] Ibid.
[15] Katz, "Yemeni Unity and Saudi Security," pp. 117-137.
[16] Al-Enazy, "The International Boundary Treaty," pp. 161-173.
[17] Ibid.
[18] Ibid.
[19] Katz, "Yemeni Unity and Saudi Security," pp. 117-137.
[20] John Duke Anthony, "Whither Saudi Arabian-Yemeni Relations?: Interests and Implications for U.p. Policies," U.p. -GCC Corporate Cooperation Committee, Inc., Issue Brief No. 3 (1999): p. 4.

control.[21] Thus, even after the conclusion of the treaty, Saudi leadership largely relied on the financial co-optation of established tribal leaders to secure the borderland region.[22]

The border issue should remain central to Saudi-Yemeni relations and subject of further dispute between the two countries throughout the following decades, significantly impairing their relationship. It furthermore exemplifies Saudi Arabia's long involvement in Yemen politics.[23] According to Brandt, "[T]he border issue is a recurring theme through all military interventions in Yemen."[24] The contested control over these "lost provinces" is therefore one of Yemen's biggest grievances.[25]

Civil war in the 1960s

Another important station in the development of Saudi-Yemeni relations refers to revolutionary uprisings that led to civil wars and a shift in leadership in Yemen in the 1960s. This crucial timespan was once again marked by Saudi Arabia's attempt to control Yemen's internal politics. Yemen, at the time, was divided into North and South. For a millennium, northern Yemen had been under the rule of the Zaydi Imamate.[26] The ruling religious elites were backed by tribes residing in the northwestern highlands of the country, including the Sa'da governorate.[27] Its members "traditionally followed the Shi'i Zaydi school of jurisprudence" and claimed descent from Prophet Muhammad.[28]

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[21] Marieke Brandt, "The hidden realities behind Saudi Arabia's Operation Decisive Storm in Yemen," May 15, 2015, https://www.focaalblog.com/2015/05/15/marieke-brandt-the-hidden-realities-behind-saudi-arabias-operation-decisive-storm-in-yemen/.

[22] Ibid.

[23] Ibid.

[24] Ibid.

[25] Asher Orkaby, "Saudi Arabia's War with the Houthis: Old Borders, New Lines," The Washington Institute for Near East Policy, April 9, 2015, https://www.washingtoninstitute.org/policy-analysis/saudi-arabias-war-houthis-old-borders-new-lines.

[26] Marieke Brandt, "Sufyān's 'Hybrid' War: Tribal Politics during the Hūthī Conflict," Journal of Arabian Studies: Arabia, the Gulf, and the Red Sea, 3:1 (2013): pp. 120-138, http://dx.doi.org/10.1080/21534764.2013.802942.

[27] Brandt, "Sufyān's 'Hybrid' War: Tribal Politics during the Hūthī Conflict," pp. 120-138.

[28] Ibid, p. 124./Brandt, "The hidden realities behind Saudi Arabia's Operation Decisive Storm in Yemen."

Meanwhile, South Yemen was under British occupation. In 1839, the British Empire first colonised the South of Yemen due to its economically important location and then established the 'Aden Protectorate' until 1967.[29] The British ultimately withdrew from the South in 1967, which led to the establishment of the People's Democratic Republic of Yemen (PDRY).[30]

Thus, two independent states were created. The 1962 revolution, however, provoked a civil war between republicans and forces loyal to the royal family.[31] The conflict lasted until the end of the decade and largely involved foreign interference. To support the newly declared YAR, Egypt's President Gamal Abdel Nasser sent troops to prevent it from being defeated by the royalists.[32] Egypt sought to establish a "modern Arab republic along Egyptian lines", thus undermining the traditional Arab monarchies.[33]

Saudi Arabia, in turn, allied with Britain and Jordan, among others, to back the royal forces by providing substantial military assistance.[34] This intervention in Yemen's domestic affairs certainly had many causes. One of Saudi Arabia's main objectives was to prevent "hostile foreign powers […] and ideologies" from gaining influence on its southern neighbour.[35] It feared not only the loss of its own influence but also a threat to its own political order as a monarchical rule.[36] Whether justified or not, the Kingdom has always regarded Yemen as a source of threat to its own stability and its wider regional power and has therefore taken every opportunity to interfere.[37]

After lengthy fighting, both Egypt and Saudi Arabia eventually withdrew their forces and withdrew their support of Yemen's local groups.[38] In 1970, a settlement was arranged between the warring parties, in which the royalists ultimately recognised the YAR.[39]

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[29] Johnsen, "Foreign Actors in Yemen: The History, the Politics and the Future."
[30] Ibid.
[31] Stenslie, "Not too strong, not too weak: Saudi Arabia's policy towards Yemen."
[32] Katz, "Yemeni Unity and Saudi Security," pp. 117-137.
[33] Johnsen, "Foreign Actors in Yemen: The History, the Politics and the Future," p. 7.
[34] Ibid./Katz, "Yemeni Unity and Saudi Security," pp. 117-137.
[35] Stenslie, "Not too strong, not too weak: Saudi Arabia's policy towards Yemen," 1.
[36] Katz, "Yemeni Unity and Saudi Security," pp. 117-137.
[37] Darwich, "The Saudi Intervention in Yemen: Struggling for Status," pp. 125-142.
[38] Katz, "Yemeni Unity and Saudi Security," pp. 117-137.
[39] Johnsen, "Foreign Actors in Yemen: The History, the Politics and the Future."

While the PDRY, opposed to tribal ideologies and committed to socialism, largely depended on the support of the Soviet Union, Saudi Arabia and North Yemen became increasingly cooperative to diminish Russian rule.[40] The Kingdom thus shifted its alliance with the royalists and started to provide military and financial aid to the government in Sana'a.[41] Most of North Yemen's annual budget was thus provided by its neighbour, which obviously strengthened its influence on domestic affairs.[42]

In addition, the internal economy was further impacted by the mass migration of millions of young Yemeni men to Saudi Arabia.[43] Due to high oil prices in the 1970s and 1980s, Saudi Arabia facilitated the entrance for Yemeni workers, whose contribution in their home country became a major source of income, thus considerably changing Yemen's social structures.[44]

Despite its financial support, Saudi Arabia, however, did not want North Yemen to become too strong and repeatedly refused weapon deliveries to the government, even though it continued to face internal security threats.[45] Another factor contributing to rising tensions between Saudi Arabia and North Yemen was the discovery of oil in northern territories. Evidently, this brought the 'old' border issue to the fore and prompted Saudi Arabia to make territorial claims.[46] Yemen's unification and the Gulf Crisis in the 1990s further exacerbated rising tensions between the neighbours and shifted their relationship once again.

1990 unity and the Gulf Crisis

The end of the Cold War and the consequent collapse of the Soviet Union, as well as the discovery of oil in the border regions, eventually forced North and South Yemen to strengthen their relations and agree to unify.[47] While both parties had frequently promoted unification efforts, recurring tensions,

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[40] Katz, "Yemeni Unity and Saudi Security," pp. 117-137./Lackner, "Understanding the Yemeni Crisis: The transformation of tribal roles in recent decades."
[41] Katz, "Yemeni Unity and Saudi Security," pp. 117-137.
[42] Ibid.
[43] Lackner, "Understanding the Yemeni Crisis: The transformation of tribal roles in recent decades."
[44] Ibid.
[45] Katz, "Yemeni Unity and Saudi Security," pp. 117-137.
[46] Ibid.
[47] Johnsen, "Foreign Actors in Yemen: The History, the Politics and the Future."

an unwillingness to concede power and influence and a lack of military strength to defeat the respective other undermined these efforts.[48] In addition, the external actors dominating the two states – Saudi Arabia and the Soviet Union – did not support their unity.[49]

With northern Yemen already struggling financially and southern Yemen facing bankruptcy after the withdrawal of financial and military aid provided by the former Soviet Union, the two states agreed to unify.[50] In April 1990, Ali Abdullah Salih, a former military officer who had become president of North Yemen in 1978 and established an authoritarian centralised system of government, and Ali Salem al-Baidh, leader of the PDRY, signed a unity agreement.[51] One month later, the Republic of Yemen (RoY) was declared, with Salih as its president and al-Baidh as its vice-president.

While Yemen's populations were initially enthusiastic and welcomed the unification on both sides, southern leaders quickly became frustrated with the new political order, which was dominated by Salih and his General People's Congress (GPC) and the northern Islamist party, Islah.[52] Disappointed about a considerable loss in power, southerners soon advocated a return to two independent states.[53]

Even though the new constitution entailed provisions for decentralised structures, such as elected local councils, the South increasingly perceived a general "power grab by northern leadership."[54] After al-Baidh left Sana'a in an attempt to secede, North Yemen launched military operations that led to a brief civil war in 1994 between northern and southern armed forces.[55]

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48 Katz, "Yemeni Unity and Saudi Security," pp. 117-137.

49 Ibid.

50 Peter Salisbury, "Federalism, conflict and fragmentation in Yemen," Saferworld, October 2015, https://www.saferworld.org.uk/resources/publications/1007-federalism-conflict-and-fragmentation-in-yemen.

51 Ibid./Gerald M. Feierstein, "Yemen: The 60-Year War." The Middle East Institute, Policy Paper 2019-2, February 2019, https://www.mei.edu/publications/yemen-60-year-war.

52 Feierstein, "Yemen: The 60-Year War."

53 Ibid.

54 Salisbury, "Federalism, conflict and fragmentation in Yemen," p. 9.

55 Feierstein, "Yemen: The 60-Year War."/ Salisbury, "Federalism, conflict and fragmentation in Yemen."

Meanwhile, Saudi Arabia, while publicly approving Yemen's unification, was increasingly concerned.[56] As already stated, the Kingdom did not want Yemen to become too powerful, and the establishment of a functioning parliamentary democracy could have strengthened the small country.[57] "Saudi Arabia's ideal southern neighbour would be [instead] a Yemen that was weak enough that it could not challenge […] [the Kingdom], but not so weak that it presented a risk of […] instability."[58] Saudi Arabia therefore indirectly supported the secession efforts.[59]

Salih, however, was able to defeat the separatist movement with the help of returned jihadists.[60] Evidently, the social and economic consequences of the conflict were significant, especially for southerners.[61] While Salih consolidated his authoritarian rule and control over Yemen's resources and institutions, the opposition in the South slowly became an organised protest movement, known as the Southern Movement – al-Hirak.[62]

Before the 1994 war and just after Yemen's unification, Saudi-Yemeni relations had already been considerably constrained. In fact, the Iraqi invasion of Kuwait in 1990 severely impacted the relationship and exacerbated tensions between the two.[63]

As he was holding a seat on the UN Security Council in 1990, Yemen's President Salih was in the unpleasant position to vote on several UN Security Council resolutions condemning Kuwait's invasion and authorizing military operations.[64] While openly doing the former, Salih strongly objected to foreign intervention and considered Saddam Hussein to be a strong partner.[65] Yemen therefore either abstained or voted against the Council's resolu-

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[56] Katz, "Yemeni Unity and Saudi Security," pp. 117-137.
[57] Johnsen, "Foreign Actors in Yemen: The History, the Politics and the Future."
[58] Ibid, p. 11.
[59] Ibid./Stenslie, "Not too strong, not too weak: Saudi Arabia's policy towards Yemen."/ Orkaby, "Saudi Arabia's War with the Houthis: Old Borders, New Lines,"
[60] Johnsen, "Foreign Actors in Yemen: The History, the Politics and the Future."/ Stenslie, "Not too strong, not too weak: Saudi Arabia's policy towards Yemen."
[61] Feierstein, "Yemen: The 60-Year War."
[62] Ibid./Johnsen, "Foreign Actors in Yemen: The History, the Politics and the Future."
[63] Katz, "Yemeni Unity and Saudi Security," pp. 117-137.
[64] Johnsen, "Foreign Actors in Yemen: The History, the Politics and the Future."
[65] Ibid./ Katz, "Yemeni Unity and Saudi Security," pp. 117-137.

tions.[66] Saudi Arabia felt betrayed and threatened by the actions of the Yemeni leader.[67] Consequently, the Kingdom expelled nearly one million Yemeni migrant workers and halted all financial aid, which weakened the country's economy significantly.[68] Another consequence was the serious reduction of bilateral and multilateral development assistance.[69] Widespread poverty and unemployment would continue to thrive, laying the foundation for further conflict to erupt.

Saada wars and the role of Saudi Arabia

Following Yemen's unification and the 1994 civil war, many of the unresolved issues from the 1960s rebellion as well as increasing social and economic grievances due to the uneven distribution of resources and widespread corruption soon led to exacerbated tensions and the emergence of the rebel Huthi movement in the northern governorate of Sa'da.[70]

Driven by anger and frustration, the Huthis, a Shi'i Zaydi revivalist group, started protesting the political and economic marginalisation of the Sa'da region as well as the dilution of Zaydi influence and identity.[71] As stated earlier, the Zaydi community had historically been the ruling elite in northern Yemen and had increasingly lost its influence after the 1960s.[72] Largely marginalised, they felt betrayed and threatened by the Yemeni government and

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66 Katz, "Yemeni Unity and Saudi Security," pp. 117-137.

67 Ibid.

68 Ibid./Lackner, "Understanding the Yemeni Crisis: The transformation of tribal roles in recent decades."/Johnsen, "Foreign Actors in Yemen: The History, the Politics and the Future."

69 Lackner, "Understanding the Yemeni Crisis: The transformation of tribal roles in recent decades," p. 12.

70 Feierstein, "Yemen: The 60-Year War."/Lackner, "Understanding the Yemeni Crisis: The transformation of tribal roles in recent decades."

71 Christopher Boucek, "War in Saada. From Local Insurrection to National Challenge." Yemen: On the brink, a Carnegie Paper Series, Middle East Program, No. 110, Carnegie Endowment for International Peace (2010), https://carnegieendowment.org/files/war_in_saada.pdf./Feierstein, "Yemen: The 60-Year War."

72 Brandt, "The hidden realities behind Saudi Arabia's Operation Decisive Storm in Yemen."

the growing influence of Saudi Arabia, which arguably promoted 'Wahhabi' Sunni practices in the region.[73]

While Saudi-Yemeni relations were briefly constrained after the Gulf Crisis, the Kingdom closely collaborated with the Salih government at the beginning of the 2000s. The Saudis largely relied on the Yemeni leadership to maintain stability.[74] As already stated, Yemen's wealthy neighbour already subsidised tribal and religious leaders, military officers, and government officials shortly after the first border dispute in 1934.[75] The Kingdom thus installed a sort of "checkbook diplomacy" as a way of maintaining control over Yemen's domestic politics.[76] Together with President Salih, Saudi Arabia continued with this strategy throughout the years to instrumentalise Yemen's powerful local actors.

The Huthi rebels were heavily opposed to this form of co-optation and regarded it as the underlying cause of the unequal sharing of resources, income, and socio-political participation.[77] Indeed, the "Saleh regime sought to tie the shaykhs to the government by co-opting them into its [established] patronage system."[78] Saudi Arabia thereby provided the necessary funds. President Salih thus further consolidated his control over the country's valuable resources. As a result, Yemen's living standards and employment rates drastically declined while the wealth of the regime's inner circle steadily increased.[79]

Deteriorating living conditions were particularly prevalent in the Sa'da governorate, one of Yemen's poorest regions at the northern border with Saudi

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[73] Ibid./International Crisis Group, "Truce Test: The Huthis and Yemen's War of Narratives."/Mareike Transfeld, "Political bargaining and violent conflict: shifting elite alliances as the decisive factor in Yemen's transformation." Mediterranean Politics, 21:1 (2016): pp. 150-169. https://doi.org/10.1080/13629395.2015.1081454.

[74] Darwich, "The Saudi Intervention in Yemen: Struggling for Status," pp. 125-142.

[75] Brandt, "The hidden realities behind Saudi Arabia's Operation Decisive Storm in Yemen."/Katz, "Yemeni Unity and Saudi Security," pp. 117-137./Lackner, "Understanding the Yemeni Crisis: The transformation of tribal roles in recent decades."

[76] Johnsen, "Foreign Actors in Yemen: The History, the Politics and the Future," p. 4.

[77] Brandt, "The hidden realities behind Saudi Arabia's Operation Decisive Storm in Yemen."

[78] Brandt, "Sufyān's 'Hybrid' War: Tribal Politics during the Hūthī Conflict," p. 126.

[79] Salisbury, "Federalism, conflict and fragmentation in Yemen."

Arabia, which had long suffered from underdevelopment.[80] As it was one of the last regions incorporated into the republic, the central government did little to address local grievances.[81] The province was, in fact, never fully integrated into the new political order and received scant civil services.[82] The intended implementation of the Saudi-Yemeni border agreement brought additional socio-political and economic transformations that challenged the Sa'da governorate.[83]

Apart from the economic and political marginalisation, the worldwide 'war on terror' following the events of 9/11 had serious impacts on Yemen's internal politics, fuelling anti-American sentiments and exacerbating tensions.[84] Salih's close cooperation with the US and other Western powers to fight terrorist organisations, such as al-Qaeda and other affiliate groups, led to further dissatisfaction with the regime.[85] The collaboration had been intensified after US citizens were killed in a terrorist attack on the US warship *USS Cole* in Aden in 2000.[86] On the other hand, the Huthis propagated an anti-American, anti-Western ideology and Zaydi revivalism, which resonated with large parts of Yemeni society.[87]

It must be noted that Zaydi revivalism already emerged in the 1990s as the 'Believing Youth' movement (*Shabab al-Mu'min*), an informal advocacy group that focused primarily on religious revival and social activism.[88] Interestingly,

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[80] Boucek, "War in Saada. From Local Insurrection to National Challenge."/Brandt, "The hidden realities behind Saudi Arabia's Operation Decisive Storm in Yemen."

[81] Boucek, "War in Saada. From Local Insurrection to National Challenge."

[82] Ibid./Brandt, "The hidden realities behind Saudi Arabia's Operation Decisive Storm in Yemen."

[83] Brandt, "The hidden realities behind Saudi Arabia's Operation Decisive Storm in Yemen."

[84] Ibid./Transfeld, "Political bargaining and violent conflict: shifting elite alliances as the decisive factor in Yemen's transformation," pp. 150-169.

[85] International Crisis Group, "Truce Test: The Huthis and Yemen's War of Narratives."/Robinson, "Yemen's Tragedy: War, Stalemate, and Suffering."

[86] United Nations Foundation. "Yemen: a brief background," Accessed June 11, 2022, https://unfoundation.org/what-we-do/issues/peace-human-rights-and-humanitarian-response/yemen-a-brief-background/.

[87] Feierstein, "Yemen: The 60-Year War."/ Salisbury, "Federalism, conflict and fragmentation in Yemen."

[88] Boucek, "War in Saada. From Local Insurrection to National Challenge."/Brandt, "Sufyān's 'Hybrid' War: Tribal Politics during the Hūthī Conflict," pp. 120-138.

its spiritual leaders, Badr al-Din al-Huthi and his son Hussein, who had strong reputations in Sa'da, were initially supported by Salih to fight the latter's rivals.[89] This strategy essentially characterised Salih's rule.

President Salih always sought to weaken his domestic rivals by playing them off against one another, sowing tensions and provoking internal conflicts to strengthen his own rule.[90] He thus adopted the strategy of shifting alliances or 'marriages of convenience,' which is characteristic of conflicts in the Middle Eastern context. In 2000, Salih's support shifted again, and he cut the financial aid for Husayn al-Huthi.[91]

A complex miscellany of "competing sectarian identities, regional underdevelopment, perceived socioeconomic injustices and historical grievances" therefore caused the emergence of the Huthi movement.[92] Subsequently, the Huthis challenged the authority and legitimacy of Yemen's central government by starting its active, yet initially nonviolent, rebellion in the mid-2000s.[93] When the disturbances in Sa'da grew and the protests against Salih's regime spread to the capital, the government decided to arrest Husayn al-Huthi.[94] What followed was six rounds of violent conflict between Salih's government forces and the Huthi rebels from 2004 to 2010.[95] Husayn al-Huthi was killed by military forces in the first 'Sa'da war' in 2004.[96] His father, Badr al-Din, and younger half-brother then assumed the group's leadership.[97] In the aftermath, "war blended into war" as periodic cease-fires proved to

[89] Feierstein, "Yemen: The 60-Year War."/ Johnsen, "Foreign Actors in Yemen: The History, the Politics and the Future."
[90] Johnsen, "Foreign Actors in Yemen: The History, the Politics and the Future," p. 9./Brandt, "The hidden realities behind Saudi Arabia's Operation Decisive Storm in Yemen."
[91] Johnsen, "Foreign Actors in Yemen: The History, the Politics and the Future."
[92] Boucek, "War in Saada. From Local Insurrection to National Challenge," p. 2.
[93] Darwich, "The Saudi Intervention in Yemen: Struggling for Status," pp. 125-142.
[94] Boucek, "War in Saada. From Local Insurrection to National Challenge."/Johnsen, "Foreign Actors in Yemen: The History, the Politics and the Future."
[95] Boucek, "War in Saada. From Local Insurrection to National Challenge."
[96] International Crisis Group, "Truce Test: The Huthis and Yemen's War of Narratives."/Johnsen, "Foreign Actors in Yemen: The History, the Politics and the Future."
[97] Johnsen, "Foreign Actors in Yemen: The History, the Politics and the Future."

be unsuccessful.[98] Although the government in Sana'a had some military advantages, it was unable to defeat the rebels.[99] Consequently, the fighting further exacerbated the situation and divided the population in the region.

Embarrassed by its deficient performance in the Sa'da wars, the Salih government sought regional and Western support during its last round in 2009 by framing the Huthis as a terrorist group receiving Iran's military assistance.[100] After an alleged incursion into Saudi Arabia that killed Saudi border guards, the Kingdom decided to intervene militarily.[101] The military offensive, however, seemed to be already in the making and not a mere reaction.[102] As already stated, Yemen represented a major security challenge and threat to the Kingdom's stability. Its forces were therefore well prepared and ready to respond.[103]

It was the first open military operation in decades. Despite its technological superiority, the intervention was far from successful, and Saudi forces failed to defeat the Huthi fighters.[104]

Yet, "Saudi Arabia's actions […] compounded the complexity of the situation and dramatically complicated future mediation efforts."[105] Even prior to the military operation, the Kingdom allegedly provided financial aid and diplomatic assistance to Yemen's central government.[106] In addition, the Gulf Cooperation Council (GCC) supported the government's efforts to contain the Huthis and later also Saudi Arabia.[107]

Even though a cease-fire between the warring parties was reached in early 2010, the fighting had left its mark. The enormous financial and humanitarian costs of the wars accelerated the economic crisis and worsened the situation on the ground.

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98 Ibid, 10.
99 Feierstein, "Yemen: The 60-Year War."
100 Boucek, "War in Saada. From Local Insurrection to National Challenge."/International Crisis Group, "Truce Test: The Huthis and Yemen's War of Narratives."
101 International Crisis Group, "Truce Test: The Huthis and Yemen's War of Narratives."
102 Boucek, "War in Saada. From Local Insurrection to National Challenge."
103 Ibid.
104 Darwich, "The Saudi Intervention in Yemen: Struggling for Status," pp. 125-142.
105 Boucek, "War in Saada. From Local Insurrection to National Challenge," p. 2.
106 Boucek, "War in Saada. From Local Insurrection to National Challenge."
107 Ibid.

Saudi Arabia and its role in Yemen's political transition

By early 2011, Salih's rule had been contested by the Huthi insurrection in the northern region, a renewed terrorist threat, the Southern Movement, and intra-elite rivalries.[108] Deteriorated living conditions and the government's reluctance to address these issues added to the explosive mixture and made Salih particularly vulnerable to the revolutionary uprisings of 2011.[109]

The protests, however, soon escalated and were extended to intra-elite violent conflict.[110] At the same time, terrorist militia groups seized the opportunity to take control over southern territories while the Huthis concentrated their power on the Saada province.[111] Concerned about a possible civil war and the increased terrorist threat, regional and international actors intervened in the conflict and eventually urged Salih to step down under the terms of a deal proposed by the GCC.[112]

The role of Saudi Arabia and the GCC in the National Dialogue Conference

The influence of foreign actors in Yemen's transition following the revolution of 2011 is therefore unquestionable. Especially the GCC and Saudi Arabia played a particularly significant role.

The GCC was established in 1981 with the aim of increasing economic and cultural cooperation between the six Gulf monarchies – Saudi Arabia, UAE, Kuwait, Oman, Qatar, and Bahrain.[113] Throughout the years, Yemen's government under Salih repeatedly voiced its desire to become a member of the

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[108] Johnsen, "Foreign Actors in Yemen: The History, the Politics and the Future."

[109] Ibid./Lackner, "Understanding the Yemeni Crisis: The transformation of tribal roles in recent decades."

[110] Christina Bennett, "The Importance of Regional Cooperation: The GCC Initiative in Yemen," International Peace Institute, Planning Ahead for a Postconflict Syria: Lessons from Iraq, Lebanon, and Yemen (2013) https://www.jstor.org/stable/resrep09598.7./ Salisbury, "Federalism, conflict and fragmentation in Yemen."

[111] Salisbury, "Federalism, conflict and fragmentation in Yemen."

[112] Ibid.

[113] Bennett, "The Importance of Regional Cooperation: The GCC Initiative in Yemen," pp. 10-12.

GCC, with the aim of gaining further access to development aid.[114] While the GCC allowed Yemen limited access to some of its Ministerial Councils, Yemen's membership never materialised.[115] Unlike the Gulf monarchies, the country was poor and populous, which represented a perceived 'otherness' and a societal threat.[116] Yemen's republican political order could furthermore have pressured the ruling families to establish democratic institutions, thus undermining their influence and power.[117]

While the GCC's involvement in conflict mediation and regional policymaking was generally limited, it played a key role in the settlement of Yemen's conflict of 2011.[118] Due to the GCC states' growing economic and military resources and general prosperity, Western countries had increasingly pressured the organisation to act on Yemen, especially with regard to the terrorist threat.[119] Driven by a common desire to prevent rebel movements from spreading to their territories, along with changing demographics and a failing economy, the GCC states had helped to create the 'Friends of Yemen' group.[120] Together with other Western donors, the group aimed at fostering Yemeni state-building processes and helping to boost its economy while dealing with widespread corruption.[121]

When Salih desperately turned to the international community for help, the GCC, backed by the UN Security Council, the US, and the EU put forward

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[114] Gertjan Hoetjes, "The Gulf Cooperation Council and the Failure of Peacebuilding in Yemen." The International Spectator, 56:4 (2021): 151-166. https://doi.org/10.1080/03932729.2021.1987034.

[115] Ibid./Johnsen, "Foreign Actors in Yemen: The History, the Politics and the Future."

[116] Hoetjes, "The Gulf Cooperation Council and the Failure of Peacebuilding in Yemen," pp. 151-166./Johnsen, "Foreign Actors in Yemen: The History, the Politics and the Future."

[117] Hoetjes, "The Gulf Cooperation Council and the Failure of Peacebuilding in Yemen," pp. 151-166.

[118] Ibid.

[119] Ibid.

[120] Bennett, "The Importance of Regional Cooperation: The GCC Initiative in Yemen."/Hoetjes, "The Gulf Cooperation Council and the Failure of Peacebuilding in Yemen," pp. 151-166.

[121] Bennett, "The Importance of Regional Cooperation: The GCC Initiative in Yemen," pp. 10-12./Hoetjes, "The Gulf Cooperation Council and the Failure of Peacebuilding in Yemen," pp. 151-166.

an initiative to end the political crisis.[122] Under the leading role of Saudi Arabia, the most dominant country in the GCC, a political settlement was developed and signed in Riyadh in November 2011.[123] The so-called 'GCC Initiative' ended President Salih's thirty-three-year term and installed Abd Rabbuh Mansour Hadi, his then vice-president, as interim president.[124]

The GCC Initiative furthermore provided a 'Transition Implementation Plan' to initiate fundamental military reforms, parliamentary elections, tackling corruption, and addressing tribal and other social grievances.[125] Its aim was to address the unresolved issues that had led to the 2011 movement and to overcome factional tensions and divisions.[126] Another central element of the implementation plan was the organisation of a six-month national dialogue process.[127] In a series of talks, different stakeholders, including political parties, youth, women, and civil society organisations, should create consensus in drafting Yemen's new constitution.[128]

The National Dialogue Conference (NDC) started in March 2013 and held its last session in January 2014.[129] The internationally sponsored Conference aimed at including all parts of Yemeni society and addressing various grievances of its populations.[130] The international community further provided technical assistance and ensured the presence of women and other social groups while sanctioning any jeopardizing attempts.[131] Eventually, "565 delegates" attended the proceedings, including representatives of the Huthi and Hirak movements.[132]

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122 Bennett, "The Importance of Regional Cooperation: The GCC Initiative in Yemen," pp. 10-12./Transfeld, "Political bargaining and violent conflict: shifting elite alliances as the decisive factor in Yemen's transformation," pp. 150-169.

123 Bennett, "The Importance of Regional Cooperation: The GCC Initiative in Yemen," pp. 10-12.

124 Ibid.

125 Ibid, p. 10.

126 Salisbury, "Federalism, conflict and fragmentation in Yemen."

127 Bennett, "The Importance of Regional Cooperation: The GCC Initiative in Yemen," pp. 10-12.

128 Ibid.

129 Transfeld, "Political bargaining and violent conflict: shifting elite alliances as the decisive factor in Yemen's transformation," pp. 150-169.

130 Ibid.

131 Ibid.

132 Robinson, "Yemen's Tragedy: War, Stalemate, and Suffering."/ Feierstein, "Yemen: The 60-Year War."

The NDC was charged with providing recommendations on a broad range of issues, including governance, development, military reforms, and reorganisation of the security apparatus as well as social cohesion, transitional justice, and environmental affairs.[133] Finally, the delegates presented about 1,800 recommendations and formed a committee to revise the constitution accordingly.[134]

It must be emphasised, however, that President Hadi and his supporters dominated the negotiations and its outcomes to a considerable extent.[135] Many involved groups felt that their issues were not being sufficiently addressed, and political violence outside the Conference grew, prompting accusations of sabotage on both sides.[136] The southerners, for instance, objected to the recommendations related to the proposed federal structure.[137] The NDC was therefore unable to create a broad consensus on a variety of issues and failed to solve the country's internal conflicts.[138]

In fact, the question of how many federal states should be created became the greatest source of tension and dispute as "it touched directly on the distribution of power and resources."[139] To obfuscate the NDC's failure and counteract erupting violence, President Hadi imposed a "controversial six-region solution."[140] The Saudi leadership had arguably predetermined this solution.[141] Yet, this top-down approach only fuelled tensions and violence.

NDC's "utopian view of the future" therefore failed to sufficiently address widespread social and economic grievances and to provide sustainable solu-

133 Feierstein, "Yemen: The 60-Year War."
134 Ibid.
135 Transfeld, "Political bargaining and violent conflict: shifting elite alliances as the decisive factor in Yemen's transformation," pp. 150-169.
136 Ibid.
137 Marie-Christine Heinze, "Jemen. Akteure, Faktoren, Szenarien." CARPO Center for Applied Research in Partnership with the Orient, Report 01, December 22, 2014, https://carpo-bonn.org/en/01-yemen-actors-factors-scenarios-in-german/.
138 Transfeld, "Political bargaining and violent conflict: shifting elite alliances as the decisive factor in Yemen's transformation," pp. 150-169.
139 Ibid, p. 161.
140 Ibid.
141 Said Al-Dailami, Jemen. Der vergessene Krieg (Munich: C.H. Beck Paperback, 2019).

tions.[142] Old ruling elites were still in power, and even parts of Salih's patronage system remained intact, partly also through the financial support provided by Saudi Arabia and the other GCC states.[143] This undermined the Hadi regime's domestic legitimacy.

What followed can be framed as the result of the failing transition process, exacerbated by the military intervention of foreign actors.

Reasons for military intervention

By 2014, Yemen's socio-economic and political situation had deteriorated dramatically, which once again created a security vacuum. The Hadi government had to face serious issues, including frequent al-Qaeda attacks, the separatist movement in the south, continuing influence of Salih and his military supporters as well as widespread poverty and corruption. The situation became worse when the government decided to cut fuel subsidies and reduce financial support for Yemen's poor families.[144] The democratic transition process had failed due to a lack of profound reforms and implementation mechanisms, coupled with too much foreign interference.[145]

Consequently, the Huthis, who had already started protesting the new federal structure and other reforms, seized the opportunity to gain control of the capital Sana'a and take military control in September 2014.[146] Ex-President Salih, who had remained at the head of the ruling party, supported the invasion with the help of loyal armed forces.[147] The joint Huthi-Salih forces thus exploited the weakness of the transitional government and were supported by frustrated and disappointed Yemeni citizens.[148] The Huthi takeover further fragmented the state into various power groups and split the security forces into two camps: one loyal to the Hadi government and the other loyal to Salih and his Huthi ally.[149]

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142 Salisbury, "Federalism, conflict and fragmentation in Yemen."
143 Hoetjes, "The Gulf Cooperation Council and the Failure of Peacebuilding in Yemen," pp. 151-166.
144 Ibid.
145 Darwich, "The Saudi Intervention in Yemen: Struggling for Status," pp. 125-142.
146 International Crisis Group, "Truce Test: The Huthis and Yemen's War of Narratives."
147 Ibid.
148 Feierstein, "Yemen: The 60-Year War."
149 Darwich, "The Saudi Intervention in Yemen: Struggling for Status," pp. 125-142.

Only few months later, Hadi, who had been put into 'house arrest' by the Huthi militia, was forced to resign in early 2015.[150] He then succeeded to flee to southern Aden, which he declared Yemen's new capital.[151] When the Huthis advanced to the south, seizing the international airport and attacking Hadi's headquarters, he fled to Saudi Arabia, from where he revoked his resignation.[152]

Arriving in Riyadh, Hadi allegedly requested the GCC to intervene and stop the supposedly Iran-backed Huthi advance.[153] Riyadh, willing to challenge its long-term rival, quickly responded to the request and ensured its assistance in restoring the 'legitimate' political order.[154] On March 25, 2015, Saudi Arabia announced that it was leading a coalition to restore Hadi's rule and expel the Huthis from the capital.[155] One day later, "Operation Decisive Storm" was launched with the first airstrikes on Yemen.[156] Interestingly, the Kingdom announced the operation from Washington, underlining the US's support and military assistance.[157] The operation's declared duration of "about 'six weeks' […] turned out to be wildly off the mark."[158]

The UN subsequently issued UN Security Council Resolution 2216, which remains the official legitimisation of the military offensive, recognises the Hadi government and demands a return to the political transition process.[159] The cause of Saudi Arabia's decision to go to war is often related to its regional rivalry with Iran and the assumption that the Huthis would act as an Iranian proxy. Yet, the Kingdom's motivation may be much more complex. The legitimate question therefore arises as to what exactly prompted Saudi Arabia to intervene.

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150 Ibid./Feierstein, "Yemen: The 60-Year War."
151 Darwich, "The Saudi Intervention in Yemen: Struggling for Status," pp. 125-142.
152 Ibid./Johnsen, "Foreign Actors in Yemen: The History, the Politics and the Future."
153 Feierstein, "Yemen: The 60-Year War."
154 Jens Heibach, "Saudi-Arabiens Krieg im Jemen: keine Ausstiegsstrategie." GIGA German Institute of Global and Area Studies, Focus, Nahost, Nummer 2, Mai 2017, https://www.giga-hamburg.de/de/publikationen/giga-focus/saudi-arabiens-krieg-im-jemen-keine-ausstiegsstrategie.
155 Darwich, "The Saudi Intervention in Yemen: Struggling for Status," pp. 125-142.
156 Ibid./Johnsen, "Foreign Actors in Yemen: The History, the Politics and the Future."
157 Johnsen, "Foreign Actors in Yemen: The History, the Politics and the Future."
158 Ibid, p. 13.
159 Feierstein, "Yemen: The 60-Year War."

Politico-security considerations

A Sunni-Shi'a proxy war?

Although it might not serve as a comprehensive explanation for Saudi Arabia's military offensive, the Kingdom's efforts to confront the perceived "Iranian expansionism" certainly played a role in its decision to launch the operation.[160] Thus, the intervention might be rooted in the larger struggle between the two regional powers and a reaction to Iran's authority in the region.[161] Indeed, Saudi Arabia had long aimed at limiting Iran's influence on Yemen's domestic affairs.[162] By officially framing the Huthi rebels as Iranian proxies, the Kingdom attempted to display its military operation as a wider effort to "counter the threat of Iran and the expansion of Shiism in the Gulf."[163] Saudi Arabia thus dragged a sectarian dimension into the conflict, which might have attracted its regional Sunni allies.

Yet, Iran had played only a limited, if any, role in the rise of the Huthis.[164] The claim that Iran would provide support to the Huthis even prior to 2014 has already been contested due to a lack of sufficient evidence.[165] Evidently, the Huthis evolved domestically as a rebellious movement protesting social grievances and the political order.[166] According to several scholars, Iranian leadership even discouraged the Huthis from taking control over Sana'a in 2014, which they obviously ignored.[167] In fact, the Huthis did not receive any direct commands from Iran, and Tehran was therefore aware of its limited ability to influence the Huthis' decisions.[168] The ongoing war, however, even-

[160] Brandt, "The hidden realities behind Saudi Arabia's Operation Decisive Storm in Yemen."
[161] Darwich, "The Saudi Intervention in Yemen: Struggling for Status," pp. 125-142.
[162] Brandt, "The hidden realities behind Saudi Arabia's Operation Decisive Storm in Yemen."
[163] Darwich, "The Saudi Intervention in Yemen: Struggling for Status," p. 129.
[164] Heibach, "Saudi-Arabiens Krieg im Jemen: keine Ausstiegsstrategie."
[165] Brandt, "The hidden realities behind Saudi Arabia's Operation Decisive Storm in Yemen."/Darwich, "The Saudi Intervention in Yemen: Struggling for Status," pp. 125-142.
[166] Darwich, "The Saudi Intervention in Yemen: Struggling for Status," pp. 125-142.
[167] Ibid./Heibach, "Saudi-Arabiens Krieg im Jemen: keine Ausstiegsstrategie."
[168] Heibach, "Saudi-Arabiens Krieg im Jemen: keine Ausstiegsstrategie."

tually drove the Huthis into the fold of Iran.[169] Indeed, the cooperation between Iran and the Huthis evolved over the years as they both share similar geopolitical interests and antagonists.[170]

Even though the Sunni-Shi'a proxy war narrative between the two regional powers might miss the complex nature of the Saudi-led intervention, it was frequently used as its legitimisation.[171] "Riyadh's decision can be seen as an expression of a more independent foreign policy, which is […] prepared to take aggressive action against Iranian expansionist ambitions."[172]

A change in leadership

Apart from the wider regional struggle, a change in Saudi Arabia's leadership might be another reason for the military intervention. While the Saudi King usually has the overall responsibility for foreign policy, the powerful Crown Princes have long directed the Yemen portfolio.[173] Saudi Crown Prince and Defence Minister Prince Sultan bin Abd al-Aziz created the Special Office for Yemen Affairs and remained in charge of it until he died in 2011.[174] During that period, Saudi Arabia's strategy was rather restrained, marked by financial co-optation of Yemeni politicians, tribal and religious leaders, and military officers.[175] After the passing of King Abdullah and the ascendancy of King Salman al-Saud to power in January 2015, both domestic and foreign policymaking changed substantially.[176] King Salman appointed his ambitious son Mohammed bin Salman as Defence Minister and Deputy Crown Prince, who was subsequently in charge of all decision-making processes related to the Yemen war.[177] The strategy shift from defensive foreign policy toward

[169] Al-Dailami, Jemen. Der vergessene Krieg, p. 120.
[170] Johnsen, "Foreign Actors in Yemen: The History, the Politics and the Future."/ Robinson, "Yemen's Tragedy: War, Stalemate, and Suffering."
[171] Darwich, "The Saudi Intervention in Yemen: Struggling for Status," pp. 125-142.
[172] Heibach, "Saudi-Arabiens Krieg im Jemen: keine Ausstiegsstrategie."
[173] Stenslie, "Not too strong, not too weak: Saudi Arabia's policy towards Yemen."
[174] Heibach, "Saudi-Arabiens Krieg im Jemen: keine Ausstiegsstrategie."/Stenslie, "Not too strong, not too weak: Saudi Arabia's policy towards Yemen."
[175] Ibid.
[176] Darwich, "The Saudi Intervention in Yemen: Struggling for Status," pp. 125-142.
[177] Ibid.

offensive military intervention is therefore also associated with the shift in Saudi leadership. Some scholars claim that Prince Salman aimed to establish himself in line of succession by proving his military superiority.[178]

A continuous threat to security and influence

Historically, Saudi Arabia considered Yemen's internal affairs as a constant threat to its own security and stability. One of the Kingdom's main interests in the decision to go to war was definitely the security of its southern border.[179] Throughout the years, Saudi leadership closely monitored shifts in power and opinion in Yemen and relied on the cooperation with the respective governments and other powerful local actors.[180] Threatened by the increasing fragmentation and worried about losing its influence in the country, Saudi Arabia did everything to keep Hadi in power. This was particularly important for the Kingdom as it had itself installed the transitional government in cooperation with the GCC.[181] Given Saudi Arabia's influence during the transition period, it is obvious that the Kingdom acted as the main 'string puller' behind the Yemeni government. The Huthi/Salih coup in 2014, however, exposed the government's vulnerabilities and therefore threatened Saudi influence. In addition, a failed neighbouring state would have had serious implications for two of Saudi Arabia's national security interests: terrorism and the security of Saudi borders.[182] The entry into war was thus no longer avertable.

[178] Heibach, "Saudi-Arabiens Krieg im Jemen: keine Ausstiegsstrategie."/Darwich, "The Saudi Intervention in Yemen: Struggling for Status," pp. 125-142.

[179] Anne-Linda Amira Augustin, "Der Krieg im Jemen und seine Akteure," Rosa Luxemburg Stiftung, Online-Publikation, August 2019, https://www.rosalux.de/publikation/id/40861/der-krieg-im-jemen-und-seine-akteure.

[180] Brandt, "The hidden realities behind Saudi Arabia's Operation Decisive Storm in Yemen."

[181] Ibid.

[182] Heibach, "Saudi-Arabiens Krieg im Jemen: keine Ausstiegsstrategie."/Stenslie, "Not too strong, not too weak: Saudi Arabia's policy towards Yemen."

Geostrategic and economic interests

Oil trade and the Bab el-Mandab Strait

Another important dimension in Saudi Arabia's interference is related to its geostrategic and economic interests. Located on the Bab al-Mandab Strait where the Red Sea meets the Indian Ocean, Yemen has for centuries been an important trade centre.[183] The narrow waterway between the Arabian Peninsula and the Horn of Africa represents one of the key choke points for international oil trade and commerce in the Middle East.[184] With an estimated 10 percent of the world's trade passing through the 'Gate of Tears', including crude oil and refined petroleum products, it is of enormous strategic importance and has thus become the centre of military entanglement and great power competition.[185] Indeed, several foreign actors have installed military bases around the strait and taken control of strategically important seaports.[186] As oil mogul, Saudi Arabia naturally has a particular interest in securing its control over the waterway. This can also be seen in its attempt to create an alternative access to the Indian Ocean to become independent of the Strait of Hormuz and Iran.[187] New oil pipelines are therefore already being installed in the Yemeni al-Mahra region.[188]

For Saudi Arabia, defeating the Huthis would eventually mean gaining control over the contested key point for oil production and distribution. It would also allow the country to regain its influence over Yemen's oil reserves and other natural resources, which are currently controlled by the Huthi fighters. The Kingdom would thus dominate roughly three quarters of the Arabian Peninsula.[189]

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183 Boucek, "War in Saada. From Local Insurrection to National Challenge."/Katz, "Yemeni Unity and Saudi Security," pp. 117-137.

184 Johnsen, "Foreign Actors in Yemen: The History, the Politics and the Future."

185 Hannah Kuperman, "Securing the Bab el-Mandeb: Can Threats to the Red Sea Drive Regional Cooperation?," Gulf International Forum, Commentary, April 1, 2021, https://gulfif.org/securing-the-bab-el-mandeb-can-threats-to-the-red-sea-drive-regional-cooperation/.

186 Johnsen, "Foreign Actors in Yemen: The History, the Politics and the Future."

187 Al-Dailami, Jemen, p. 177.

188 Ibid, p. 178./Augustin, "Der Krieg im Jemen und seine Akteure."

189 Al-Dailami, Jemen, pp. 179-181.

Power and prestige

Apart from economic gains and material needs, Saudi Arabia's attempt to increase its own prestige and status as leading regional power might have been a rationale for the aggressive intervention.[190] By demonstrating military strength and assertiveness, the Kingdom fought for its own status as a powerful nation at both the regional and international levels.[191] While it officially framed the intervention as an attempt to restore the 'legitimate' government and save the Yemeni people, speaking of a "just" and "necessary" war, its underlying motivation might have been more personally than it claimed.[192]

It must be emphasised that Saudi Arabia's Yemen policy is based on a "classical strategy of attacking the weaker to teach their opponents a lesson."[193] The Saudi-led intervention can thus be considered a military power test.[194] Some scholars argue that "symbolic, non-material motives – status in particular" may also serve as explanations for military attacks.[195] Accordingly, "'[H]onor and prestige [are] even more important than wealth and security'."[196] In the case of Saudi Arabia's intervention in Yemen, a combination of these factors probably was the trigger. What is certain is that the Kingdom had long strived to become the leading regional power in the Middle East. Its continuous influence on Yemen's internal affairs, its dominance in the GCC, the long-term rivalry with Iran and finally the Saudi-led military offensive are all examples underlining the Kingdom's attempts to become the sole regional leadership. When the Saudis felt that they were not duly recognised, they sent a strong, deterrent message to their rivals in order to cement their own power claims.[197]

However, Saudi Arabia's pursuit of status and prestige was certainly based on miscalculations and has long backfired. The Kingdom was unable to score any fundamental military victories and thus exposed its power limitations. The war only contributed to Yemen's long-term instability and humanitarian

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[190] Darwich, "The Saudi Intervention in Yemen: Struggling for Status," pp. 125-142./ Heibach, "Saudi-Arabiens Krieg im Jemen: keine Ausstiegsstrategie."
[191] Darwich, "The Saudi Intervention in Yemen: Struggling for Status," pp. 125-142.
[192] Ibid, p. 137.
[193] Ibid, p. 136.
[194] Al-Dailami, Jemen, p. 126.
[195] Darwich, "The Saudi Intervention in Yemen: Struggling for Status," p. 131.
[196] Ibid.
[197] Darwich, "The Saudi Intervention in Yemen: Struggling for Status," pp. 125-142.

crisis.[198] It further fragmented the society and jeopardised any attempt to find a peaceful way out. Due to large numbers of civilian casualties and the collateral damage caused by the attacks as well as prevalent human rights violations and war crimes, the international community has heavily criticised and openly condemned the Saudi-led intervention.[199] Although it was initially supported, the Kingdom's international reputation was massively damaged.

The Saudi-led coalition and the Hadi government

The relationship between the Saudi-led coalition and the Yemeni government under President Hadi is yet another prime example of shifting alliances, which is characteristic of conflicts in the region. It furthermore exemplifies the foreign actor's strategy of pulling the strings behind the scenes through instrumentalising local entities.

While Hadi was trying to adopt Salih's traditional approach of co-opting Yemen's influential leaders and playing them off against each other, it became increasingly difficult for him to prevail against those others.[200] His political power was mostly legitimised by the international community, more precisely by Saudi Arabia and the GCC states, which had pushed him into the role. The 2014 Huthi takeover of Sana'a with the help of loyal Salih forces eventually exposed Hadi's serious political weakness and lack of domestic legitimacy.[201] When he was forced to flee to Riyadh because of the Huthi advance, he requested the GCC states in the wake of the offensive to intervene militarily in support of restoring his rule.[202] While almost all GCC members responded positively to his request, assuring their support, Oman abstained and opted for a more neutral position.[203] This decision eventually prompted Saudi Arabia to take the lead and form its own military coalition.[204] Since then, the Saudi-led coalition had backed the internationally recognised exile government under Hadi. Recent developments, however, once again

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198 Ibid.

199 Ibid.

200 Heinze, "Jemen. Akteure, Faktoren, Szenarien."

201 Ibid./Hoetjes, "The Gulf Cooperation Council and the Failure of Peacebuilding in Yemen," pp. 151-166.

202 Al-Dailami, Jemen, pp. 112-113.

203 Hoetjes, "The Gulf Cooperation Council and the Failure of Peacebuilding in Yemen," pp. 151-166.

204 Ibid.

shifted the Saudi-Hadi alliance. Following a series of escalations around the Ma'rib governorate, a truce was signed between the warring parties in April 2022.[205] Hadi accepted the deal due to sustained pressure from the Saudi-led coalition and ceded his power to a new Presidential Leadership Council.[206] The truce agreement once more underlines the influence of the Saudi-led coalition on Yemen's internal affairs. It furthermore points to an imbalance of power in the relationship between Hadi and the coalition. According to the International Crisis Group, even the Huthis "mock the council as […] a 'reshuffling of mercenaries' backed by Saudi Arabia" and "see merely another twist in a Saudi-led plot to control Yemen."[207]

It has been assumed that the Yemeni president was gradually degraded to a 'political hostage' and thus became a mere executor of Saudi politics. As mentioned earlier, Saudi Arabia actually pulled the strings while Hadi was forced to make political concessions. Since he had been in exile, he barely appeared in public. It was also rumoured that he was under house arrest in Saudi Arabia, only doing what he was told to do.[208]

Another influential player: the United Arab Emirates

Along with Saudi Arabia, the UAE has also played an outsized role in Yemen's history, more specifically in the current violent conflict. The UAE is a small but ambitious rising power in the Gulf due to its economic prosperity and its increasingly visible political and military role in the wider power structure of the region.[209] While initially supporting the Saudi-led military intervention, UAE's foreign-policy making changed during Yemen's war.[210] Shifting alliances and different prioritisation also characterise UAE's role in the conflict.

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[205] International Crisis Group, "Truce Test: The Huthis and Yemen's War of Narratives."
[206] Ibid.
[207] Ibid, p. 2.
[208] Mohammed Alshuwaiter, "President Hadi and the future of legitimacy in Yemen," Middle East Institute, May 14, 2020, https://www.mei.edu/publications/president-hadi-and-future-legitimacy-yemen.
[209] Betul Dogan-Akkas, "The UAE's foreign policymaking in Yemen: from bandwagoning to buck-passing." Third World Quarterly, 42:4 (2021): pp. 717-735. https://doi.org/10.1080/01436597.2020.1842730.
[210] Ibid.

UAE's intervention in Yemen

The UAE is Saudi Arabia's primary aggressive partner in the coalition.[211] While the Saudis received most of the world's criticism for their military intervention, the UAE also contributed to the war's fragmentation and played a powerful role on the ground.[212] Yet, its strategy differed from that of its coalition partner. While Saudi Arabia concentrated its efforts on combating Huthi militias in the northern territories, the UAE focused on creating and equipping effective mercenaries and installed military bases, especially along Yemen's southern coastlines and on the island of Socotra.[213] At the beginning of the Saudi-led intervention, the UAE had more troops involved in active combat on the ground than its Saudi partner.[214] Both UAE soldiers and UAE-backed proxies initially fought on the side of Yemen's internationally recognised government.[215] Thus, the UAE officially had two main enemies: the Huthi militias and violent terrorist groups, such as al-Qaeda and ISIS.[216] One critical moment, however, changed UAE's strategy fundamentally. When "45 Emirati soldiers were killed by a Huthi missile strike" in Ma'rib, the UAE adjusted its approach and decided to form and fund proxy forces on the ground that also operated outside the control of Hadi's government.[217]

Indeed, the UAE institutionalised and trained numerous militias in southern Yemen throughout 2015 and 2016.[218] These UAE-aligned forces include, *inter alia*, the Salafist-led Security Belt Forces and the Shabwani and Hadrami

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211 Abdul-Ahad, "Yemen on the brink: how the UAE is profiting from the chaos of civil war."

212 Ibid.

213 Johnsen, "Foreign Actors in Yemen: The History, the Politics and the Future."

214 Ibid.

215 Ibid./ Sheren Khalel, "UAE deeply involved in Yemen despite claims for withdrawal, experts say," Middle East Eye, February 22, 2021. https://www.middleeasteye.net/news/uae-yemen-conflict-deeply-involved-experts-say.

216 Ibrahim Jalal, "The UAE may have withdrawn from Yemen, but its influence remains strong," Middle East Institute, February 25, 2020, https://www.mei.edu/publications/uae-may-have-withdrawn-yemen-its-influence-remains-strong.

217 Johnsen, "Foreign Actors in Yemen: The History, the Politics and the Future," p. 16.

218 Augustin, "Der Krieg im Jemen und seine Akteure."

Elite Forces as well as the Giants Brigades.[219] These paramilitary forces mostly operate under the command of the Saudi-led coalition and concentrate their efforts on counterterrorism campaigns in the South.[220] Reportedly, they now comprise an estimated 90,000 Yemeni mercenaries.[221] Since its formation, the UAE has furthermore backed the pro-secessionist Southern Transitional Council (STC).[222] In 2017, exile President Hadi dismissed several South Yemeni ministers and government officials due to continuing southern independence efforts.[223] After subsequent mass protests in the South, the former officials formed the STC by building on the Southern Movement and Southern Resistance.[224] The primary separatist organisation became the most prominent political power in the South.[225]

While the STC was not openly advocating against the Hadi government, it strongly opposed the Islah party due to its affiliation with the Muslim Brotherhood, which is also in line with the UAE's overall political strategy.[226] Different objectives and intra-coalition divisions, however, soon led to violent clashes between troops loyal to the Hadi government and STC-affiliated militias.[227] In 2019, the STC and Hadi eventually signed the Saudi-negotiated Riyadh Agreement to prevent further confrontations.[228] According to the agreement, the Hadi government and its military forces must include STC members.[229] Yet, its implementation is not successful.[230] UAE's strategy to rely on local alliances using privately trained and funded mercenary armies to advance its military goals and increase the control on the ground appears to be highly effective. Thus, it does not compromise the safety of Emirati

[219] Ibid./Johnsen, "Foreign Actors in Yemen: The History, the Politics and the Future."
[220] Augustin, "Der Krieg im Jemen und seine Akteure."/Jalal, "The UAE may have withdrawn from Yemen, but its influence remains strong."
[221] Dogan-Akkas, "The UAE's foreign policymaking in Yemen: from bandwagoning to buck-passing," pp. 717-735.
[222] Khalel, "UAE deeply involved in Yemen despite claims for withdrawal, experts say."
[223] Augustin, "Der Krieg im Jemen und seine Akteure."
[224] Ibid.
[225] Abdul-Ahad, "Yemen on the brink: how the UAE is profiting from the chaos of civil war."
[226] Johnsen, "Foreign Actors in Yemen: The History, the Politics and the Future."
[227] Ibid.
[228] Alshuwaiter, "President Hadi and the future of legitimacy in Yemen."
[229] Johnsen, "Foreign Actors in Yemen: The History, the Politics and the Future."
[230] Alshuwaiter, "President Hadi and the future of legitimacy in Yemen."

soldiers while keeping an excessive influence on the course of the war. According to Abdul-Ahad, the Emiratis succeeded in creating a "parallel state" by building military camps and bases and controlling a network of Yemeni proxy forces that furthermore run alleged underground prisons and other institutions.[231]

Rationale and overarching objectives of intervention

In view of the UAE's geographic location, the Kingdom's security was not under a direct threat from Yemen's violent conflict. Its intervention did thus not derive from a mere need for military survival. So, what exactly encouraged the UAE to enter the war? As for Saudi Arabia, the reasons may be varied, but what was certainly at the centre of its considerations were economic gains and status. Its strategic direction outlined above al-ready points to UAE's overarching objectives for intervening.

Yemen's strategically important location on the Bab el-Mandab Strait also motivated the UAE to increase its influence in the region. Early on, the UAE was extremely interested in the important waterway, its main seaports as well as the Yemeni islands off the coast. Throughout the war, the UAE concentrated its control over most parts of this powerful territory by establishing military bases and backing local militias in the region. Its goal was to maintain influence and control over the strategic ports, such as Aden and Mokha, as well as key shipping lanes. This course of action was based on UAE's overall objective to become the region's commercial and logistic hub, and this depends on the area's maritime security. By controlling both sides of the Red Sea, the UAE could establish itself as the primary sea force that has the 'Gate of Tears' at its disposal.

With reference to UAE's strategic direction in Yemen's war, one may also detect a trans-formation in its foreign policymaking. In fact, UAE's foreign policy initially relied on powerful alliances, adopting 'bandwagoning' approaches to secure its own stability and im-prove its power both domestically and regionally. Prior to the Arab Spring uprisings, its foreign policy principles were therefore rather defensive and diplomacy oriented.

[231] Abdul-Ahad, "Yemen on the brink: how the UAE is profiting from the chaos of civil war."

The UAE's increasing support of separatist organisations and the establishment of own proxy forces that control strategically important territories in the south, however, point to a significant policy shift. Considering subsequent fragmentation and divisions within the anti-Huthi alliance, it thus prioritised economic gains over the military assistance of the coalition. Economic wealth is therefore a central element in UAE's role in Yemen.

Its assertive foreign policy furthermore intended to establish the UAE as a leading regional power. Besides, the UAE had so far not experienced any reputational damage. By 'passing the buck' of greater responsibility to its Saudi coalition partner, it successfully consolidated its power and avoided any further national or international criticism. As stated earlier, the war was extremely damaging for the Saudis, not only in economic terms but also as it carried the overall responsibility for initiating the bloody intervention. By progressively pulling itself out and focusing on indirect operations, the UAE was further able to advance its economic interests.

This effective strategy furthermore allowed the UAE to consolidate its influence in the region and establish itself as Saudi Arabia's powerful rival. Indeed, the UAE succeeded in creating an influential counterpart to the Saudi-backed Yemeni government by supporting the STC and leading strong mercenary forces on the ground. The Emiratis have demonstrated that they dominate the region's wars and that they are militarily superior to Saudi Arabia. They have thus come a little closer to reaching the overarching goal of predominance in the Middle East.

UAE's 2019 withdrawal

Emirati leadership officially announced its military drawdown from Yemen's front-line combat in July 2019, withdrawing most of its troops.[232] However, it also stated that this does not entail a "total decline of its military role" and that "its military presence will remain to assist local Yemeni forces."[233] Indeed, the UAE has maintained a contingent of soldiers on the Red Sea Coast,

[232] International Crisis Group, "Truce Test: The Huthis and Yemen's War of Narratives."
[233] Dogan-Akkas, "The UAE's foreign policymaking in Yemen: from bandwagoning to buck-passing," p. 725.

on its base in Mokha and in some other strategic areas.[234] It also remains active on the island of Socotra. The UAE-backed STC took control over the island in 2020.[235] The presence of UAE-backed proxy units on the ground further suggests continued Emirati influence on Yemen's war. The military drawdown was therefore a gradual process, including the UAE's strategic preparation of subsequent indirect engagement.[236]

Essentially, two facts encouraged the UAE to withdraw its troops.

Firstly, the UAE had already established, trained, and equipped enough powerful military forces who operate under its command.[237] As stated earlier, the Emiratis control many non-state armed groups, providing them direct training, capacity building, logistic and material assistance as well as regular salaries.[238] With an estimated 90,000 Yemeni fighters on the ground, the UAE could easily pull back its troops while maintaining considerable influence.[239] The formalisation of the STC as an official political actor in Yemen through the conclusion of the Riyadh Agreement furthermore ensured the legitimacy of Abu Dhabi's southern proxy.[240]

Secondly, the UAE aims to prevent any reputational damage. The large number of casualties, widespread human rights violations and the collateral damage caused by the war have evoked harsh international criticism. The associated costs both diplomatically and in terms of lives have led the UAE to recalculate and adjust its position in the war.[241] Although Saudi Arabia has been at the centre of the critique, taking most of the blame, the UAE has found it increasingly difficult to justify its military presence.[242] Peace agreements between the warring parties have furthermore questioned Emirati operations on the ground.[243] The announcement of the withdrawal of UAE's

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234 Johnsen, "Foreign Actors in Yemen: The History, the Politics and the Future."
235 Ibid.
236 Jalal, "The UAE may have withdrawn from Yemen, but its influence remains strong."
237 Johnsen, "Foreign Actors in Yemen: The History, the Politics and the Future."
238 Jalal, "The UAE may have withdrawn from Yemen, but its influence remains strong."
239 Johnsen, "Foreign Actors in Yemen: The History, the Politics and the Future."
240 Jalal, "The UAE may have withdrawn from Yemen, but its influence remains strong."
241 Johnsen, "The UAE's Three Strategic interests in Yemen."
242 Ibid.
243 Jalal, "The UAE may have withdrawn from Yemen, but its influence remains strong."

official physical presence can therefore be seen as an attempt to improve its global reputation.[244] Naturally, the UAE's military drawdown has had significant implications for the trajectories of the war and the peace process.[245] It certainly weakened the Saudi-led coalition and further isolated Saudi Arabia, increasing international pressure on the Kingdom.[246] Internal divisions and the establishment of powerful local groups who pursue different objectives further fragmented the coalition, weakening the Yemeni government.[247]

However, the UAE has not officially terminated its membership in the Saudi-led coalition and will certainly continue its engagement against terrorism in the region.[248] Moreover, recent developments may provoke another military offensive by the UAE. In autumn 2021, the Huthis consolidated their battlefield position and managed to seize the province Shabwa of the Ma'rib governorate.[249] The Ma'rib region is strategically important for the UAE as it has rich oil and gas fields.[250] Besides, until the Huthi offensive, it was the only remaining city under full control of the internationally recognised government.[251] Taking control of Ma'rib would therefore increase the strength of the Huthis considerably.[252] To prevent this scenario, the UAE-backed Giants Brigades intervened and pushed the Huthis out of the province.[253] Driven by the military setbacks, the Huthis launched missile and drone attacks on Saudi Arabia and the UAE.[254] The Saudi-led coalition swiftly responded with intense airstrikes on Sana'a and other Huthi-controlled territories.[255]

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244 Khalel, "UAE deeply involved in Yemen despite claims for withdrawal, experts say."
245 Jalal, "The UAE may have withdrawn from Yemen, but its influence remains strong."
246 Ibid.
247 Ibid.
248 Ibid.
249 International Crisis Group, "Truce Test: The Huthis and Yemen's War of Narratives."/ Mareike Transfeld, "Three Scenarios for the Yemen War," Stiftung Wissenschaft und Politik, German Institute for International and Security Affairs, SWP Comment 2022/ C 06, January 28, 2022, https://www.swp-berlin.org/10.18449/2022C06/.
250 Johnsen, "The UAE's Three Strategic interests in Yemen."
251 Lackner, "After six years of war, what is happening in Yemen?"
252 Ibid.
253 Transfeld, "Three Scenarios for the Yemen War."
254 International Crisis Group, "Truce Test: The Huthis and Yemen's War of Narratives."
255 Ibid.

In view of UAE's vested interests in Yemen's South, Huthi advances into UAE-controlled areas could provoke more direct military engagement.[256] Huthi attacks on their own territory could, however, jeopardise its image as a safe and economically vibrant place to live, especially for expatriates.[257] The Emiratis may therefore wish to avoid any further direct confrontations.

Concluding Remarks

After nine years of war, the once vibrant and culturally rich Yemen is massively destroyed. Starvation, inadequate living conditions, lack of social services and health supplies, violence and abuse are the prevailing circumstances. Although the temporary truce may have opened a small window of opportunity, it does not appear very promising for achieving lasting peace. The war and its outcomes remain a significant threat to millions of Yemenis and to the region's overall stability.[258] The Yemeni context is marked by distrust, constantly shifting alliances and collusion between a variety of actors who all follow different personal objectives. The unpredictability of their actions is thus particularly striking.

This contribution has therefore sought to examine Yemen's evolving dynamics by assessing the role of Saudi Arabia and its former partner and rival, the UAE. One thing is certain: foreign actors, specifically Saudi Arabia, have influenced political events in Yemen throughout recent history, supporting various actors in the country at different times, especially during periods of war and conflict.[259] The Yemeni-Saudi relationship was at times cooperative, but mostly marked by a continuous tension. Yemen essentially existed in the "shadows of its wealthier, more powerful neighbours."[260] These neighbours always sought to expand their own influence and power status by exploiting Yemen's weaker position. The intervention in Yemen's conflict allowed the Gulf monarchies to present themselves as "new symbols of stability" and

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256 Transfeld, "Three Scenarios for the Yemen War."

257 Elana DeLozier, "Houthi Strikes on UAE Open Another Front in Yemen War," The Washington Institute for Near East Policy, January 18, 2022, https://www.washingtoninstitute.org/policy-analysis/houthi-strikes-uae-open-another-front-yemen-war.

258 International Crisis Group, "Truce Test: The Huthis and Yemen's War of Narratives."

259 Augustin, "Der Krieg im Jemen und seine Akteure."

260 Johnsen, "Foreign Actors in Yemen: The History, the Politics and the Future," p. 6.

show off their military power.[261] Yet, the military intervention led by Saudi Arabia has also exposed greater miscalculations and strategic mistakes. Especially Saudi Arabia has lost considerable influence on Yemen's political landscape and has faced high reputational costs.

Notwithstanding, the small country on the edge of the Arabian Peninsula will likely see "more not less foreign intervention" in the near future,[262] whether in the form of humanitarian aid to improve the country's dire living conditions or militarily, as foreign actors seek to increase their economic gains.[263] Lasting peace and a stable political order can only be achieved if the impact of regional disputes and the interference of foreign actors in internal affairs decrease significantly. Inclusive dialogue and the assumption of responsibility of all parties involved are necessary conditions for initiating the process. Even if peace were to last, much work remains to be done.

"Yet again, millions of long-suffering Yemenis hope for an end to the fighting, but each disappointment worsens despair. Yemeni distrust of their 'leaders,' whether military or political, national or foreign, has certainly been confirmed by events."[264]

[261] Abdul-Ahad, "Yemen on the brink: how the UAE is profiting from the chaos of civil war."
[262] Johnsen, "Foreign Actors in Yemen: The History, the Politics and the Future," p. 50.
[263] Ibid.
[264] Lackner, "After six years of war, what is happening in Yemen?"

The Southern Question and its roots

Susanne Dahlgren

Whenever the Southern question is mentioned in the media, it is dismissed as a 'secession attempt' and thus outside the scope of any constructive analysis of the Yemeni situation. This label tells us very little about the nature of the southern grievances and, what is important, about the nature of the activism. In the same vein, the Southern question tends to be discussed as a regional problem, which the Yemeni government is supposed to solve along with problems in other regions. Such conceptualisation does not only omit the historical facts that I will discuss below, but also the current challenges for ending the devastating war. This essay discusses the background and meaning of the Southern Cause (*al-Qadiyya al-Janubiyya*), the umbrella term for expressions, aspirations and activities centred around the strong sense of loss that the people of the South have experienced after their state joined with North Yemen in 1990 to form the Republic of Yemen.

When one sits in a living room in any southern home, the discussion turns to the grievances that the people present have experienced. One former member of the army staff once explained to me what it means to be a Southerner:[1]

> "If you as a nation *(watan)* are taken away everything that you had [sic!] built, the land you cultivated, your industries, your advancing education system and health care, your public sector jobs, your affordable housing – and all this is replaced by a system that makes life expensive and insecure, favours someone you have never met, by a system that is built upon bribery and dishonesty – how would you react? In many countries throughout the world – and in different time periods – people have reacted to similar circumstances with an armed uprising, or by sporadic violence with the aim of shaking the regime's stability, simply to get their voice heard. We Southerners in Yemen, after watching quietly for years the destruction of our society did not take recourse in violence but instead, we came up with a popular movement that declared peacefulness as its leading principle".

[1] This took place in December 2009 in a private home in Aden.

What this dismissed former army commander meant was that peacefulness, unarmed resistance, as present in the original idea of the movement, *al-hirak al-silmi* (the peaceful movement), was chosen as a core principle for the movement. These people were inspired by the principle of peacefulness after watching news on peaceful uprisings in Europe and Asia (the Arab Spring was only to come later). Initially, the members of al-Hirak borrowed the orange colour in their rallies from the Ukrainian orange revolution.[2] This did not last long as the movement, which was initially founded by the deposed army staff, began to attract young graduates and other unemployed youth whose imagination and digital skills helped to reshape the movement's public image both in the street and on the Internet. This peaceful social movement presented a precedence to the 2011 Arab Spring uprisings throughout Yemen, which also adopted the peaceful principle, together with the equality and mutual care principles that Hirak had nurtured since its beginning in 2007. As the Yemeni author Aydrus al-Naqib put it, 2007 "was the culmination of a long series of moves aimed at restoring the southern political life, which was stricken by the 1994 war, the war that turned the country into military barracks and the land and its people into a spoil of war in the hands of the oppressive victors" (al-Naqib 2017). As al-Naqib elaborates in a newspaper column, the peacefulness turned into armed resistance in one night once the Huthi movement had taken over Sana'a and pointed its troops towards the south (ibid.). What lies behind the attempt to promote peaceful civil resistance despite the violent response that it meets, what are its roots and, most importantly, how do those ideas fit into the current war situation in Yemen? Could the peaceful movement pave the way to a lasting peace and to an end of the war in Yemen? To elaborate these questions, let us go fifty years back in time and see how it all started.

A socialist revolution on the Arab Peninsula

In the 1950s, the British Crown Colony of Aden was the centre of labour migration in the region, a busy outpost of the imperial regime. The British plan was to invest in its colonial presence and build an oil refinery after it had lost its facilities in Iran. However, winds of change were heard all around the Middle East, Asia and Africa. Aden soon became the hub of anti-colonial

[2] The Ukrainian orange revolution refers to the events during 2004 and 2005 in the Ukrainian capital Kyiv.

fighting as well as the centre of insurgence against the Yemeni Imamate. Strikes in industrial sites occurred on a daily basis, together with demonstrations and bomb explosions. British military vehicles patrolled the narrow streets of Aden's old town, arresting and shooting at people they labelled as "terrorists." Activists travelled to Cairo and Damascus, met local intellectuals and listened to the radio where news about the struggles in other countries could be heard. The world was divided by a Cold War rhetoric which spoke about 'influence zones' or mere 'satellite states'. These were balanced by the Non-Aligned Countries' movement, a third block between the United-States- and the Soviet-led world. In this Cold War setting, a Third World radicalism arose and influenced people from Angola to Cuba and from Vietnam to Algeria. In what was called the Aden Colony and Protectorates, these voices soon gained a large following, and, alongside the Aden Trade Union Congress, radicalised women's organisations and various literary clubs, political parties were established. Of these, three organisations were especially prominent. The South Arabian League (SAL) gathered resistance to British rule in the protectorates but not resistance to the autocratic rulers of the country that collaborated with the British. More radical were the Front for the Liberation of Occupied South Yemen (FLOSY) and the National Liberation Front (NLF), two radical Third-World movements that differed mainly in their relationship to Egypt, the regional superpower under the charismatic leader Gamal Abdel Nasser, which was engaged in the North Yemeni civil war. Many Yemenis were critical of Nasser's hegemonic aspirations to control the anti-Imamate movement in the north and the anti-colonial resistance in the south.

British attempts to "modernise" the various emirates and sultanates of the country and to link them administratively to the Aden Colony (since 1963, the State of Aden) were resisted from all sides as the common feeling was that it was high time for the colonial power to exit. But the empire was not ready to go; instead, it engaged in a military campaign to curb and eliminate popular resistance. The last years of British rule were patterned by blood, suffering and absence of all the basic rights that a people in its own land is entitled to. Once the colonial army finally drew the conclusion and started to prepare an orderly exit, a bloody struggle ensued between the two leading resistance parties, the FLOSY and the NLF. After months of fighting, the latter won and started to build an independent state, only to radicalise two years later with a programme to eliminate inequality between the social strata

as well as other divisions and promote what was called women's emancipation (*tahrir al-mar'a*). These deeds were considered necessary by the movement in order to bring movement into the stagnant society that the British had maintained for 129 years. This radical political line did not please the former masters in Britain, and thus the promised economic support (compensation for exploiting the land for more than a hundred years) was minimised. Still, the British, who throughout the 1960s had been busy resisting Egyptian influence in North Yemen, were pleased that the Nasserist-leaning FLOSY lost the game.[3] Another blow to the new nation came once the Suez crisis closed the canal, the major waterway between Europe, Asia and Africa that brought ships to call in Aden harbour. Once the harbour economy collapsed, the nation's economy was in ruins. With such a start, the new country soon adopted the name People's Democratic Republic of Yemen where "democratic" indicated that it belonged to the anti-imperialist front led by the Soviet Union and China, and "Yemen" stood for the desire to unify with North Yemen that was emerging from the long civil war.

The only Marxist state in the Arab World has always mesmerised outside observers. How is it possible that a Communist regime took over in an Arab country known for its tribal culture, hereditary hierarchies, and seclusion of the female half? As very little has been written about daily life under the PDRY, many observers today dismiss the period as an alien attempt to bring Eastern European *Realsozialismus* to Arab soil. Yemeni unity accelerated this misconception as it became common for some commentators to parallel German unification with that of Yemen. Nothing could be less accurate in a discussion of life under socialism on the Arab Peninsula. From such a Cold War studies perspective, it is difficult to understand that for most South Yemenis who lived through those years of socialism-inspired nation building, life was relatively good compared to what came after. Only three years after unification, when I enquired about sentiments among Adeni residents on how they now viewed life, the typical answer pointed to economic uncertainty and the emergence of crime. People experienced the loss of earlier accomplishments in education, health care and jobs and felt that things were not improving. The new capital of Sana'a was far away, and things were now decided in ministries by people many of whom had never visited the south.

[3] In the late 1960s, SAL and FLOSY continued to fight against the NLF from North Yemen (Ismael and Ismael 1986, p. 65).

By 1993, local politicians in the south had understood that to survive in the new reality, it was necessary to have one's own men and women in key positions in the regions, rather than nominees of the new capital, Sana'a. Few people trusted the Sana'a-based regime irrespective of the fact that there were southerners in key positions, too. Similar sentiments grew among the southern elite in Sana'a. By the summer of 1993, southern leaders who signed the unity deal with Ali Abdallah Saloh had withdrawn from the capital as life became precarious, and more than 150 southern politicians were assassinated in obscure circumstances. It took only few months after the withdrawal of the southern politicians for the first civil war of the new republic to start. After weeks of fighting, in July 1994, the northern army occupied Aden, and the southern army staff was sent to prison or on pension. The war had devastating consequences for the South, even though it became evident that Yemeni unity was still desired by most southerners. To reward the Islah party for its steadfastness in the war alongside the northern fraction of the still not yet unified army, President Salih handed Aden's administration to the party. The result was a catastrophe for the city: Islah administration was incompetent, and the provision of public services ground to a halt. Not only that, but the new administrators also created an atmosphere where all public events were cancelled. Artists and musicians withdrew to their homes. Activists did the same: the public sphere declined significantly in the following years. In 1998, the party finally gave up, and a more representative, and importantly, culturally acceptable local administration was nominated.

How was life in democratic Yemen?

I lived in the PDRY for the first time in the summer of 1982 and after a couple of visits spent there the last year of its existence, 1988-89. While the East Germans and Russians were there with various projects, including military and intelligence collaboration, so were other foreign states with their projects, such as Lebanon, Kuwait, and Denmark. These projects and their ex-pat staff had very little contact with ordinary Yemenis. Far more important were the various UN bodies and other international aid organisations, whose role in hiring locals and training a capable civil service provided contacts among people and created opportunities to the ever-expanding number of female graduates of Aden University. Their role in building a functioning health care system brought concrete results that the ordinary citizen could benefit from. The PDRY's administration on the one hand relied

on routines and an administrative system adopted during the British era, and on the other on experience in working with the UN bodies. It was transparent and clean of corruption as I, alongside other foreigners working with the administration,[4] could testify to. Still, the state showed its ugly face to its opponents. These included part of the local business elite, the Islamist members of the *ulama,* and those who opposed the politics of the regime. They were either forced to leave the country or to experience imprisonment or constant harassment.[5] For these people, the neighbouring North Yemen or Saudi Arabia was the better option.[6]

But what was socialism in the South like?

According to Ismael and Ismael (1986, 36), the country manifested a sort of eclectic Marxism, meaning that its ideological choices were unique and differed from the European socialist countries' conventions. As attested to me by hundreds of South Yemenis I have come across, "socialism" is not the word (less so "communism") that people use when discussing the PDRY[7]. Instead, they talk of Democratic Yemen, the country's name shortened, and describe the good and bad features that pattern daily life. These accounts include mentions of secure jobs and improving services, low cost of housing and safety in the street. Many men were proud of the new roles opened to women in public life and the labour market after women's education was given a chance. Negative aspects people mentioned were shortages of basic

[4] During 1988-89, 1991 and 1992 I worked as an administrator for a Finnish health care project, located in al-Mahra and with office in Aden. Until 1990 our Yemeni partner was the Ministry of Public Health in Aden and after that, in Sana'a.

[5] In February 1968, the Supreme Court cast sentences for treason to key members of the Federal Council, the British-initiated ruling body, and to some key shaykhs and sultans who were accused of collaborating with the colonial authority, see al-Ayyam 2014. This trial was one of the events that scared many to leave the country.

[6] See Ismael and Ismael 1986, pp. 64-68 and Amnesty Reports from respective years.

[7] Stookey (1982) looks at the PDRY historically as a "Marxist republic" while Ismael and Ismael (1986) analyse it as a "left-wing experiment" with a political science perspective. Lackner had visited the country and met with state representatives, an account that she published in 1985. Brehony (2011) uses interviews with leading politicians and British archives, including MI6 reports and his own notes. Halliday (1975 and 1990) and Kostiner (1990) discuss the PDRY in the light of international politics. Many scholars rely on newspaper archives and interviews with leading politicians and less on talking to ordinary citizens, some exceptions are Stork 1973 and Molyneux 1982.

foodstuffs such as sugar and fruit. Some considered the lack of manifest religiosity, such as a ban of women wearing the veil in public office, a problem. While mosques functioned as they always have, Wahhabi and Salafi preachers were banned from public office. People criticised problems with the system rather openly to me, and those with relatives on the other side of the Yemeni border were monitored by security. When I was able to visit North Yemen for the first time in 1991, I spoke with people with relatives in the south who had the same problem. North-South tension was the number one security issue in both Yemens prior to unity.

The PDRY was an unfinished project that brought welfare while making life hard for those who did not agree with its Third-World radical ideas of equality (as in between the rich and the poor or between the genders), anti-imperialism (as in stopping the imperialist powers from dictating small nations' affairs) and an easy life for the working people (as expressed in the metaphorical Arab saying '*khalas*' [that's it, let's take a break]. When entering the PDRY first time in the summer of 1982, I met young activists who were enthusiastic to build a nation state and a society that is good for everyone, enthusiasm that I observed had faded away by the end of the 1980s. In my recent attempts to make sense of state-building in erstwhile North Yemen, my thought of what actually separated the northern and the southern states in the 1960s to 1980s was not 'socialism' or 'capitalism' as neither of those systems existed in the two countries. In the Soviet-style communist jargon, the PDRY was a country 'oriented towards socialism,' not a socialist country. This was institutionally manifest in PDRY's observatory status and not full or even associate membership in the COMECON, the Council for Mutual Assistance or the main body to design economic collaboration between the Soviet Union and the European socialist countries plus Mongolia, Vietnam, and Cuba. Among the observatory status countries was, by the way, also my home country, Finland, which, once it had joined, had extensive trade relations with its eastern neighbour. In fact, the PDRY was called socialist only by Western politicians attempting to make the point that the country needed to be isolated for hosting Palestinian and Iraqi radicals. As airplane hijacking was the order of the day among the radical groups in the 1970s, PDRY was dragged into these tragic instances, too, without its own fault.

As the American political scientist Sheila Carapico has shown, from the economic perspective, the two Yemeni countries were not that dissimilar (Carapico 1993). Political economist Kiren Chaudry has mentioned that the

PDRY had a smaller public sector than the YAR ever had, and part of its industries were either privately owned or in mixed ownership (Chaudhry 1989, 1997). This fact led Carapico to write, "Disparities in the relative weight of private and public enterprise [between YAR and PDRY] were far more subtle than the designations 'capitalist' and 'socialist' indicate" (Carapico ibid.). When the British rule ended in 1967, it left behind a weakly glued mosaic of states that formed the South Arabian Federation, no remarkable industries except oil refinery, and a population that had been excluded from the fruits of the imperial rule, namely access to civil service jobs and education as the British brought civil servants from India to man administrative, educational and juridical posts alongside its own staff (Gavin 1975, Stookey 1982, Lackner 1986).

But why is it that, similar to some other post-socialist states, many South Yemenis look back with nostalgia on the times of the party rule? This is a question that I have attempted to find some answers to while spending the years after unity continuing my research. My conclusion partly relies on a sociological view and partly on a political-science approach. As we know, the PDRY provided a basic income to all and created circumstances where the income gap between the wealthiest and the poorest was among the smallest in the world. When unity came, the two extremes emerged in the south: traffic light beggars, people desperately trying to get the means to survive on a daily basis, and the hugely wealthy people with their large SUVs and gated villas. While life was modest, nobody was starving. The PDRY took many steps in building a national education system and managed to diminish illiteracy rates for both sexes at a fast-growing speed. The health system reached the remotest countryside, and while the state was poor, life expectancy rose among men and women alike. In the countryside, the agrarian reform brought steady income to the agrarian poor (Lackner 2007). Modest industrialisation and shifting of the public administration to local hands (from the earlier British and the overseas-recruited Indian hands) together with rising education levels among girls brought women to the labour market and to high administrative posts (Dahlgren 2010, Stork 1973). This positive development was interrupted in 1985 once an internal power struggle in the ruling party halted the administration. These events erupted into bloody fighting in January 1986. The 10-day tragic episode left thousands dead.[8] The massacre

[8] Aden's Bloody Monday 1988, Gueyras 1986.

was started by Ali Nasir Muhammad, the party leader who suspected his comrades of planning to topple him from the party leadership and from his parallel positions as both president and prime minister. The result was an absurd blood bath and manhunt round Aden as revenge between the two opposing party wings soon involved tribal backing, too. Still today, automatic rifle bullet sprays pattern the inside walls of some public buildings in Aden. Ali Nasir's faction lost the fight, and he left South Yemen with several thousand supporters to form a powerful lobby in the rivalling Yemeni state in the north. His men played a major role in the next war to come, the 1994 war in between the northern and southern armies. But not only that, Ali Nasir, who was nicknamed Ali Marhaba ("Ali at your service"), built his rule by distributing state resources in a way that favoured his own constituency, as I was able to observe when visiting homes in Aden, where I met people whom he had "helped." While the January 1986 events were crucial to the ruling party and can be said to have contributed to the hasty decision to enter unity with North Yemen, for regular citizens the sad intermezzo proved the impotence of the party leadership, even though it did not shatter their belief in the southern welfare state. As the party leadership had failed, the idea of an egalitarian society without tribal, religious, or other divisions and hierarchies lived on and, in today's Yemen, continues in the demands of al-Hirak. The first multi-party elections in 1993 proved that the Southern state enjoyed popular support as the Socialist Party won in all regions of the South. This was despite the fact the party had so dramatically failed in securing southerners' interests and security, first in the 1986 catastrophe and then in the hasty unity deal.[9]

Upon unity day on 22 May 1990, the former southern leaders left Aden to join the unity regime in Sana'a, where it proved difficult to serve southerners' interests. Several southern civil service employees in different levels of administration in Sana'a attested to me how southerners were excluded from key decision-making processes and how documents and figures were hidden from them. During the 1990s, the YSP lost importance in Yemeni politics.

[9] The Yemeni Socialist Party won 56 seats plus 12 independents. Two of these were women, the only women elected to the parliament. Most of its votes came from the south, where it won in all constituencies. See: Inter-Parliamentary Union: YEMEN Parliamentary Chamber: Majlis Annowab, 1993, http://archive.ipu.org/parline-e/reports/arc/2353_93.htm.

Currently, the party is divided vis-à-vis the Southern question. In anticipation of a future establishment of an independent southern state, the southern lobby with headquarters in Aden calls itself the Southern Socialist Party, while the unity lobby is in Sana'a and has kept the party's old name YSP. For many reasons, it would be too narrow a perspective to draw a history of the southern state by focusing only on the regime. During my ethnographic studies over the decades, I have noticed how the idea of the southern welfare state lives on, irrespective of the misfortunes of its former ruling party.

"They will be influenced by us, and we will influence them."

The above quote is something a 16-year-old girl told me in a Women's Union neighbourhood club's literacy class in 1991, when everyone still was optimistic about unity. It did not take a long time for the optimism to fade. The new state operated from the northern capital Sana'a, a fact that had two dramatic consequences for southerners. First, the administrative system was destined to follow the northern practice that was based on the Egyptian administrative system. It was more cumbersome and required more paperwork, signatures, and stamps than the British system that the PDRY had maintained. While the ministries were divided equally in the unity agreement[10] between the northern and southern cabinets, with the deputy coming from the respective other part of the country, the political culture was not only strange to the southern civil servants but included corruption and bribes, a new element, as I have discussed elsewhere (Dahlgren, forthcoming).[11]

The other dramatic change had to do with numbers that worked against the South: the northern population was manifold compared to the less than three million southerners, and as the development challenges were much bigger in the north, focus tended to be on that part of the country. It did not help that President Salih threatened to push Southerners to the sea, as a university professor in Aden reported to me in 1998. Fear of demographic change was the talk of the day in Aden at that time. But the sense of marginalisation had many roots. In Sana'a, many northern civil servants had never visited the other part of the country, and some did not even know that al-Mahra was

[10] See Yemen Arab Republic et al. 1991.

[11] See Amber 1999 for details. A southern civil servant, she worked in the presidential council, the leading body of the country during the early years of unity.

part of Yemen[12]. One after another, all the positive indicators in health, employment, and education that the PDRY had succeeded in achieving turned to negative, a fact that was hidden in statistics by no longer comparing the figures with those before unity, or by scrambling the YAR and PDRY statistics into one.

Aden lost its status as a former Crown Colony and capital of the PDRY and was transformed into a governorate centre. The war of 1994 resulted in the de-facto destruction of all industries in the southern territory and the redistribution of agrarian and other profitable land to the elite in Sana'a (al-Rabi'i 2003). While the Southern political elite had moved to Sana'a in 1990, those who remained there after the political crisis of 1993-94 felt incapable of turning the tide for the South. For regular people, impoverishment and a sense of marginalisation was the tune of the day. As the conservative Islah party was given the municipal administration in Aden following the war in 1994, all public gatherings stopped, and many southerners active earlier took self-imposed curfews.[13]

These sentiments finally gained a political expression in 2007 once the Southern Movement came into being. The initiative soon gained wider support, originally formulated by officers who following the war of 1994 had been dismissed or imprisoned. In 2008, people still whispered when talking about the movement, and the first major demonstration to reclaim southern dignity and reconcile with past divisions in January 2008 was met by the regime in Sana'a with bullets, leaving four dead. Since then, the foreign media has used the label 'secessionists' when talking about what has been happening in the southern territories; as if you could disparage a nation-wide social movement by simply labelling it with a negative term. As I have repeatedly argued, the Southern question is a national question, which means that it has consequences for the state in Yemen; it is not a regional problem for the government in Sana'a to put right. In a talk given at Chatham House in June 2023, the STC's president, Aydarus al-Zubayd, addressed the "separation" issue, saying that the STC has no intention of leaving Yemenis in the north who

[12] See fn. 4.

[13] See Paluch 2001 on the story of the legendary Southern women's rights activist Radhia Shamshir.

oppose the Huthi takeover at the mercy of the movement but instead to advance southern independence as part of the UN-led peace process.[14]

To go back to my sociological and political science frameworks to analyse what went wrong with Yemeni unity from a southern perspective, the social groups that gained most during the PDRY were the poor and those without a kinship network to survive, a common feature in the impoverished urban centres. As the traditional hierarchy based on honourable roots was toned down by the Marxist regime, those groups who earlier had faced permanent marginalisation such as the so-called *akhdam* (a social category of people with allegedly dishonourable origin and with whom other categories were neither supposed to socialise nor to intermarry) could advance in life. Importantly, and not a marginal "gender issue", as many analysts of Yemen tend to treat it, women made many advancements during the previous regime that lack comparison in the modern history of the entire Arab world. Today's young generation, born after unity, who form the core of the Southern uprising, were influenced by their womenfolk at home, who explained to their children how life was better in Democratic Yemen (Augustin 2021).

Declining political situation

The Southern independence movement was earlier accused of having no international recognition or partners. Since the Southern Transitional Council (STC) was established in 2017 and gained partnership with the UAE, it has been accused of being a proxy of the gulf state. Still, out of the options among regional players the Emirates might not be the worst; at least it does not directly link southerners to the devastating Saudi-Iran controversy the way the Huthis are embroiled in it. The question is, who sets the agenda in the STC-UAE collaboration? As many southerners warn, no foreign player should be given free rein to operate and promote its interests in the South. There have been occasions when the Emiratis crossed that line, the most remarkable certainly being their entry to Soqotra, the large island off the coast in the Indian Ocean with UNESCO-declared unique habitat, and the far-reaching plans to transform the island into an Emirati business loot (Dahlgren 2018a and 2018b).

[14] Southern Transitional Council: President Al-Zubaidi at Chatham House: We have been working to gain peaceful independence for the South under supervision of the United Nations, no date, https://en.stcaden.com/news/11141.

Another source of concern has been the Emirati-STC collaboration in curbing Jihadism in the southern area. Too many innocent men with no contacts to global terrorism have landed in the secret detention centres. As the respected southern human rights advocate and lawyer Afra Hariri, who was the first to raise attention to the hidden torture centres that the UAE had set up with its local partners, has ascertained, while most southerners are very likely to agree on the need to fight Jihadism, the process needs to be transparent, with the detainees brought to a court of law[15]. The challenge the STC faces is to broaden its foreign partner base, but adding Saudi Arabia to the list of close partners only makes things worse. Too deep is the suspicion of the mighty northern neighbour in all of Yemen.

Another front of war that tends to be forgotten in media analyses is the economic situation and collapsed means of survival of the population living in areas outside the immediate fighting. In writing this, the economic collapse in the southern governorates plays a major role in how the frontlines of alliance and opposition are formed. Popular demonstrations that surfaced again in September 2021[16] and continued. Social and economic problems have to be solved prior to any political decisions on power-sharing is possibly being made. Despite this, the Saudis took the decision to form a Presidential Leadership Council (PLC) and to depose President Hadi and Vice President Ali Muhsin, a process I shall discuss later in the paper.

STC vs. Hadi regime

A lot of interest has been directed to the internal fight in the anti-Huthi coalition (see Dahlgren 2019). While the focus has been on how the STC-lead militia and national army loyal to Hadi have fought each other, the actual controversy is between the STC and the Islah party. The STC has since long claimed that Islah facilitates Jihadist groups in Yemen, a claim that still needs to be validated, and that Islah's obsession with occupying territories in the

[15] As quoted in Hariri's private Facebook site, translated by SD. (In author's archives).

[16] See: ACAPS: Yemen: Increased civil unrest and worsening humanitarian situation in southern governorates, November 29, 2021, https://reliefweb.int/report/yemen/acaps-thematic-report-increased-civil-unrest-and-worsening-humanitarian-situation and Euro-Med Monitor: Yemen: Government and Transitional Council unite in suppressing protesters [EN/AR], September 19, 2021, https://reliefweb.int/report/yemen/yemen-government-and-transitional-council-unite-suppressing-protesters.

South actually allowed the Huthis to advance to Ma'rib, the oil-rich governorate in the east where heavy fighting took place before the cease fire was declared.[17] The Islah-STC conflict has local roots, as discussed earlier, which reach back in history far longer than the present-day rivalry in the global Sunni leadership, as can be seen in the Saudi hostility towards the Muslim Brotherhood. While I am writing this, the STC-affiliated militia has successfully evicted Islah from Shabwa and continues to fight it in the neighbouring governorate Abyan under the campaign entitled "Eastern Arrows", targeting Jihadist elements who since the early 1990s have resided in this governorate. These military victories have made many Yemeni observers talk about the actual coming of a Southern state. In May 2023, the STC took a historically important step in forming a broad political consensus, making advances in uniting different southern political elements behind a plan to establish a southern federal state. Some 30 political, tribal, community-based and civil society organisations signed the Southern National Charter, a document to promote the southern issue through dialogue and inclusion.[18] The cooperation of such a large political spectrum is unprecedented in southern Yemeni history. While large sectors of southern population in all southern regions celebrated the move, opponents claimed it a STC hijack. These opponents believe that it was only a matter of time before the STC would strike a deal with the Huthis on splitting Yemen into two, the same accusation as I above discussed with regard to Islah. In such a situation, northerners who resist Huthi rule (majority of northerners) would be left without a state of their own. That would mean that the current Yemen war would show its real face,

[17] In an interview with NewsYemen on July 20, 2020, the American security expert Irina Zuckerman claims that Islah is internally divided into a "Turkish-Qatari fraction" and a "Saudi coalition fraction" thus invoking the Qatar boycott announced by Saudi Arabia in 2017 to end in the early 2021. According to her, Islah is increasingly seeking an alliance with the Huthi on a common ground based on arrangements that will divide Yemeni territory in between the two groups. She discusses Islah as the Muslim Brotherhood leaving aside that this party unifies various political and ideological currents that might not be directly involved in the current war, see: An American expert for NewsYemen: The Islah defines the Huthis as a partner and its control of the government must be curbed. July 28, 2020. https://www.newsyemen.life/new/59282.

[18] Al-Qadi, Bassam: Signing of the Southern National Charter Marks Key Outcome of Consultative Meeting, American Center for South Yemen Studies, May 12, 2023, https://www.americancentersy.org/2023/05/signing-of-southern-national-charter.html.

that is, that it is an actual continuation of the 1960s civil war in North Yemen with the descendants of the royalists finally gaining a victory.

Attempts at national reconciliation

While the National Dialogue Conference (NDC) was being held in a five-star hotel in Sana'a in March 2013 and January 2014, the demand to separate the South from the North became ever stronger with huge rallies, called Milliyuniyyas, held in the Parade square in Aden (Dahlgren 2014). A small group of Hirakis represented the south in the conference, which did not achieve any concrete means to solve the Southern question.[19] At the same time, the campaign to declare Southerners infidels became active again. In a sermon entitled "Preserving unity is preserving Islam", held on February 23, 2013 in a mosque in Sana'a, Salafi imam Muhammad al-Imam issued a fatwa that compared national separation to leaving Islam.[20]

The Arab Spring unravelled the earlier, president-centred political system and started a chaotic era that the Huthis took advantage of – a group that nobody expected to be able to run the country. While the Huthi administration is not the best experienced in Yemen's history, one should not believe that the group is not here to stay. The term "transition" has been used in analysing Yemeni politics post-2011, but that term would require knowledge of where the system is heading, and presently nobody knows. Instead, chaos is a better term to describe this period in Yemeni politics. Those forces that have presented an alternative to chaos have been called "separatists" or "rebels". Regions do not only have different needs but also different aims; thus decentralisation is a way forward. During the NDC, increased regional autonomy was declared a means to preserve unity. Still, the conference failed to draw a roadmap leading out of the chaos. Both the southern forces in and around al-Hirak and the Huthis did not find their interests served in the NDC. With Salih manipulating the political scene outside the conference, the country soon found itself entangled in a civil war. And as I have explained

[19] Since the 2000s, a number of committees have been nominated to solve the issues of the south and one operated also under the National Dialogue Conference. No measures have been taken to solve the pending cases.

[20] Aden al-Ghad. Shaykh al-din al-Yamani Muhammad al-Imam: man yada'u ila al-infisal kaman yada'u ila al-kafr (sawt), March 23, 2013, http://adenalghad.net/news/43735/.

elsewhere, it is a question of multiple wars with outside powers interfering from all sides (Augustin and Dahlgren 2015).

The Presidential Leadership Council

The news of the formation of a PLC and the relinquishing of powers by President Hadi eclipsed the important news of the dismissal of Hadi's Vice President Colonel Ali Muhsin al-Ahmar. Ali Muhsin is a joker in Yemeni politics; born in Sanhan, a tribal area important in North Yemeni politics, he rose to political importance as the right hand of President Salih. It is rumoured that he learned the tricks on how to deal with Jihadist groups to serve political purposes from Salih. As I pointed out earlier, he was involved in fights inside the Saudi Coalition with his army units occupying territories in the South from STC-affiliated and other, locally formed militias. He is said to have facilitated Huthi advancement in the eastern and central territories of the country, areas where the latter do not have any local support. Thus arose the allegation that "Islah works in collaboration with the Huthis."

The instalment of the PLC forms part of the "Gulf initiative," the ill-reputed political interference in Yemeni affairs that Saudi Arabia initiated together with some Gulf States, the USA, and the European Union. In 2011, this group of outside powers made the notorious golden handshake with President Salih that allowed him to keep the fortunes he had looted from the state treasury and to stay in politics, mistakes that paved the road to war. Thus, the Saudi-handpicked PLC has not been received enthusiastically by Yemeni activists and ordinary citizens. Still, it can be analysed as a step forward on a road without a roadmap. Evidently, Saudi Arabia lacks a plan of how to exit the war but places the responsibility on the Huthis to end the war. The right move, however, was not only to depose the impotent President Hadi but especially Vice President Ali Muhsin, whom southerners accuse of building a "second front" in the war: that of his army units and political affiliates flocked around the Islah party to invade areas in the South.

The council is led by Dr Rashad al-Alimi, a graduate from the Police College of Kuwait. Born in Ta'izz, and a close associate of former President Hadi, he made a career in government posts, including that of the Minister of the Interior in the early 2000s. Since the Huthi takeover of Sana'a, he has lived in Riyadh and acted as Hadi's advisor. With his intelligence experience, the

Saudi move of selecting him instead of some self-declared candidates to replace Hadi was a strategic one; with al-Alimi, Saudi Arabia can continue to keep Yemeni politics on its leash. Similarly, Islah does not have a leading figure in the council but is represented by a handpicked candidate, Abdullah Bawazir, a businessman born in Shabwa but active in investments in Hadhramaut.[21] According to Emirati sources a close ally of Hadi, he also maintains close links to Islah.[22] Consequently, not all the southern-born members of the council have links to independence forces, and in any case, the establishment document of the council includes allegiance to national unity among its main principles.[23] Another southern-born member is Faraj Salmin Al-Buhsani, a graduate from the Soviet military Frunze Academy and acting governor of Hadhramaut. Holding the title Major General, he is also the commander of the Second Military Command that is located in Hadhramaut. Given the divided field of southern political affiliations and the Saudi attempts to push Hadhramaut to join, it was vital for Saudi Arabia to have a politician active in the current Hadhrami politics in the council. Still, al-Buhsani remained loyal to the southern cause, as was manifest in his withdrawal in June 2023 from the PLC in protest of the increased mismanagement of the PLC-led government and the presence of Ali Muhsin's army command in Hadhramaut. In an effort to rally allies around itself, Saudi Arabia hosted the launching of the Hadhramaut National Council, a body of Hadhrami politicians who believe in a leading role of the governorate within the premises of a Yemeni unity, the same month.

While all the members of the PLC except al-Alimi have an equal position as vice-presidents, clearly the politically most experienced member is STC leader Aydarus al-Zubaydi. A pilot by training and Major General by rank, al-Zubaydi has been active from early on in southern attempts to stop northern hegemony in unified Yemen. His prominence in politics rose after Hadi

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[21] On Bawazir, see Arab News: Gulf investors 'will return to Yemen after the war ends', April 04, 2015, https://www.arabnews.com/saudi-arabia/news/727666.

[22] See: The National News: Who are the 8 members of Yemen's new Presidential Council?, April 07, 2022, https://www.thenationalnews.com/gulf-news/2022/04/07/who-are-the-8-members-of-yemens-new-presidential-council/.

[23] The full text of the announcement in English translation is provided by the Ta'izz-based respectable human rights organization Human Rights Information & Training Center. Human Rights Information & Training Center: The Yemeni president announces the transfer of his full powers to a new presidential council. April 7, 2022, https://hritc.co/23299?lang=en.

nominated him Governor of Aden in 2015, only to sack him after a year. One year later, the popular ex-governor established the STC to unify al-Hirak. He also made efforts to attract political forces earlier alienated by al-Hirak to join a national council with the aim to take administrative control of the entire south, an aim largely accomplished in the May 2023 Southern National Charter. Al-Zubaydi has good relations with prominent Yemenis in the UAE, an influential lobby of Yemenis outside the country, and with President Muhammad bin Zayed. The Emirati lobby of Yemeni politics is thus served with his nomination, but even more crucially, independence forces in the South, whose prominence nobody should underestimate. The youngest member of the PLC is Brigadier General Abdul Rahman al-Muharrami al-Yafa'i, again a military man but with quite an exceptional background. He is the commander of the Giants Brigade, the Emirati-trained elite troops that have proved invincible in battle. He prefers to hide his identity behind the battle name Abu Zara'a.[24] Born in Yafa'i in the South, he comes from a family of prominent military men. His uncle acted as Chief of Staff of the Yemeni army while his father was a regional security leader. Before joining the war and establishing the Giants, he studied at the Dammaj Institute, the ill-reputed Salafist school earlier situated in the Huthi heartlands and destroyed by the movement in 2013. The Dammaj Institute is well-known for having had Jihadists among its students, while Abu Zara'a gained his reputation in the battlefield in fighting not only the Huthi militia but also Jihadists in the southern territories. In one of his rare public appearances, Abu Zara'a called for teaching imams and religious leaders moderate views, to promote tolerance of religious differences, and to reject extremism. He also advised religious authorities to condemn terrorist acts.[25] The Giants Brigade has a brilliant reputation for having won all the battles it has participated in, and its role in securing the important cities of Hudayda and Ma'rib was crucial.

The northern-born members of the PLC represent various regions of the north the same way as the southern members represent different southern regions. Still, given that northern Yemeni politics since the times of the Imamate have been patterned by a rivalry between the less educated (but in traditional means more cunning) northern highlanders and the better edu-

[24] It is not customary in Yemen to call a parent with the name of a son or daughter. Al-Muharrami took his battlefield name from his daughter Zara'a.

[25] Aden-Hura: al-'Amid Abu Zara'a al-Muharrami yaltaqi wazir aal-awqaf wal-irshad. April 24, 2022, https://www.aden-hura.com/news/12033.

cated and commercially more successful lowlanders, the choices are doomed to raise opposition especially among the residents of the Yemeni highland, whom the Imamate favoured in state administration and army (see Chaudhry 1989 and 1997). While lowland landowners had access to Aden, where they nurtured their businesses in the vivid colonial market, the poorer northern highlanders felt marginalised despite holding some of the positions in the civil service and army. In the 1962-70 civil war, these social groups largely fought each other, a fight for national resources and recognition that was never resolved, a struggle that continues in the current war. For southerners, the issues at stake in the war (Huthi rallying the grievances of the poor highlanders) remain alien, and thus they have concentrated their efforts in keeping the Huthis (and other northerners) out of their territory. The PLC representative of the northern highlanders, Uthman Mujalli, is a leading tribal *shaykh* from the Huthi core area Sa'da. In national politics, he became known during the first anti-Huthi wars (2004-2009), when he and his prominent tribe fought against the Huthi insurgency. Thus, he followed in the footsteps of his father and grandfather, who fought against the Imamate already in the 1940s. In his early years, Mujalli studied in Britain and graduated from the Police Academy in Sana'a. As an independent, he won a seat in the parliament and, upon joining the PGC, was awarded a less important ministerial post. Mujalli is a red flag for the Huthis, who accuse him of initiating the call for Saudis to intervene in Yemen and to spread the controversial accusation that Ansar Allah is championing for the re-establishment of the Imamate. In 2011, the Huthis kidnapped him and moved across the border to Saudi Arabia. Islah has opposed Mujalli's role in peace negotiations during the current war (Brandt 2017, 50-51, al-Baydhani 2017). Picking only one member in the PLC from among the vast and populous northern highlands is hardly a wise move, considering how that area has historically seen its role in running the (northern) state and the army.

Another northern politician and another member of Islah is Sultan Ali al-Arada, tribal *shaykh* from his native Ma'rib and, since 2012, governor of the governorate. He is one of the winners of the war with the prosperous war economy that made Ma'rib an El Dorado in the otherwise suffering country. Before the war, this flourishing centre of business used to be an isolated regional city with a tense security situation. Al-Arada's road to national politics started already during Ibrahim al-Hamdi's presidency in the 1970s. In 1982, when President Salih established the General People's Congress (GPC)

as an umbrella forum for legitimate political forces, he nominated al-Arada as a member. This forum gathered not only politically active men but influential *shaykhs* and tribal dignitaries from all regions of North Yemen. After the enactment of a party system following Yemeni unity, the GPC was transformed into a political party. In the early 2000s, Al-Arada left the party after some disagreement with Salih and joined Islah. He is Brigadier General in the army. After his appointment in the PLC, an alleged conspiracy became public once Islah-member and Nobel laureate Tawakkul Karman warned via Facebook of the danger of Saudis wishing to dispose of al-Arada as governor of Ma'rib.[26]

The clearly most controversial figure in the PLC is ex-president Salih's nephew, Brigadier General Tariq Muhammad Salih. A sly old fox in the Yemeni political scene, President Salih entrusted Tariq the role of heading the Presidential Guard, the elite troop that received the best armaments, obtained in the course of Salih's pretended partnership in the War on Terror. After the collapse of the alliance between his uncle and the Huthis, Tariq changed sides and today leads the Emirati-trained and -sponsored National Resistance Forces. Politically, Tariq lacks a wide following, but as a military commander and member of the pre-2011 elite of Sana'a, his role in the PLC serves his political ambitions. The absent names of the council among the self-nominated leaders of the country naturally include the al-Ahmar clan, the tribal family from Amran among whom the supreme *shaykh* of al-Hashid tribal confederation has been nominated. The mighty father Abdullah al-Ahmar was made the speaker of the parliament by Salih. One of his most prominent offspring, Hamid, is a leading businessman who owns key Yemeni enterprises and currently lives in exile in the Emirates, while another son, Sadiq, follows in his father's footsteps as the supreme *shaykh*. The family forms a key element of the Islah party.

The formation of the council was accompanied by a long declaration, which included the nomination of a 50-member – some of them women – Consultation and Reconciliation Committee. After the military clashes in Shabwa (the southern territory with part of the oil fields) between STC-affiliated bri-

[26] Al-Arabi News. Masu'ul hukumi yakashaf 'an mu'amarat 'ala al-Shaykh al-'Arada, July 08, 2022. https://al-arabinews.com/news4719.html. The Turkey-based reporter writes that al-Arada was supposed to be replaced by Tariq Salih as the new governor of Ma'rib in an effort to restore the Salih clan's rule in Yemen.

gades and the national army allied with Islah, a committee was established to prepare the merging of various militias with the national army. Still, the most crucial tasks lie with the economy: how to provide food and electricity to the hard suffering population and pay salaries to the long-deprived civil servants. For the STC, the founding of the PLC represents a recognition of its role as the leading political group in the south, and a seat on the UN negotiating table with the Huthis. The aims of the council include promoting collaboration instead of internal fighting in the Saudi-UAE camp in Yemen and taking steps towards ending the war with the Huthis, a task which, when this text was being written, seems totally beyond reach.

Finally, the Yemen war is not different from any other modern-era wars where fighting takes place on the home front as on actual battlefields. The difference, perhaps, that characterises our times is the scope and speed of the information war. With social media, the number of influencers has multiplied by thousands when compared to the pre-Twitter era. Thus, different narratives are played off against each other in every Yemeni's mobile screen. In this chapter, I concentrate on the southern cause as its proponents prefer to call it a challenge to the secessionist narrative, which is deeply insulting to a large section of Yemeni people. For Southerners united behind the cause at issue, the aim is to restore their sovereignty and thus dismantle their union with North Yemen, which turned out to be destructive. Southerners challenging the unity narrative frequently compare their situation with that of the United Arab Republic, which Egypt and Syria formed in 1958 and which was dissolved in 1961 after Syria decided to leave the state union.[27] Restoring the union of North and South Yemen is impossible in the current circumstances, given that the Huthis are there to stay, controlling (almost) the entire erstwhile North Yemen. Still, in view of the fact that the leading force among the Southern independence movement, the STC, has declared its solidarity with the northern people under Huthi rule, we should not expect to hear a declaration of independence from the southern tip of the Arabian Peninsula very soon.

[27] Among others, the STC Vice President Hani Bin Brik made the comparison in a BBC interview in 2019, see Southern Transitional Council: Sheikh Hani Ben Brik on BBC: the Yemeni unity failed as the Egyptian-Syrian unity but the unity in Yemen was imposed by force, no date, https://en.stcaden.com/news/8440.

The Huthi movement and political authority on the ground in Upper Yemen

Alexander Weissenburger

Introduction

For more than twenty years now, the Huthi movement, also known as Ansar Allah (the Partisans of Allah), has been one of the main political actors in Yemen. After fighting the Yemeni government in several rounds of war in the north of the country and participating in the transition process following Salih's resignation, the movement rose to power at the end of 2014. Since then, the movement has constituted the de-facto authority on the ground, holding sway over roughly two thirds of the Yemeni population. On the one hand, the movement is thus one of the most durable, capable and successful contemporary Islamist movement, while on the other it is one of the least well-understood. The reasons for this glaring imbalance between the importance of the movement and the dearth of interest by academia and especially the media are manifold. The movement does not constitute a terrorist threat to the West, nor is there any significant inflow of refugees resulting from the conflict. Moreover, thorough investigations into the movement and the war would have to address uncomfortable issues connected to the conduct of Western allies and Western support for their war effort. Instead, any analysis of the Huthis often amounts to little more than reducing it to a mere tool of Iranian hegemonic interests.

In order to convey a more nuanced impression of the movement, this article goes beyond such limited descriptions and portrays the Huthis as a movement in its own right. The following chapters discuss the movement's roots, its rise to power, its system of governance in power, and its ideology. The last chapter addresses the movement's relationship with and importance to regional state actors, primarily Iran and Saudi Arabia. And while – in the light of this wide scope – the brevity of the article inevitably comes at the expense of its profundity in the respective subject, the extensive referencing of academic standard literature on the movement will give the reader ample possibility for additional research.

The roots of the movement

The Huthi movement hails from the province of Sa'da in the north-western Yemen. Sa'da has traditionally been a stronghold of Zaydism, a Shi'ite denomination that from the end of the 10th century onwards has had a significant presence in the north-western highlands of the country, the area commonly referred to as Upper-Yemen.

Zaydism is primarily defined by its theory of legitimate political leadership in form of an imamate. Whereas Twelver Shi'ism, the by far largest strand of Shi'ism, holds that the twelfth and last imam, Muhammad al-Mahdi, will return in the end of days to establish peace and justice, Zaydism lacks this eschatological element. For Zaydis, Muhammad's great-grandson Zayd b. Ali (hence "Zaydism") and not his older brother Muhammad al-Baqir was the rightful fifth imam. After him, every male member of the family of the prophet, the so-called *ahl al-bayt*, has had the right to lead the *umma* as long as he fulfils certain conditions and proves himself to be the worthiest.[1]

During most of the period between 879 and 1962, Upper-Yemen was ruled by an imam from amongst the *ahl al-bayt*. In 1962, the imamate was overthrown, and the Yemen Arab Republic (YAR) established. In the ensuing civil war until 1970, the republican forces were supported by Egypt, while Saudi Arabia, fearing the spread of republican and socialist ideas to its southern neighbour, supported the former Zaydi imam, who unsuccessfully attempted to re-establish himself.[2] With the fall of the imamate, the *ahl al-bayt*, who did not merely provide the imams but also filled the majority of the highest positions in the state apparatus, suddenly lost most of their influence and prestige. At the same time, the republican government began to foster a sort of non-sectarian state Islam. They encouraged Sunni Islamists, who became particularly strong in the education sector and began to foster a nationalism based on Yemeni tribal heritage and genealogy. This excluded the

[1] On the Zaydi theory of the imamate, see especially: Strothmann, Rudolf: Das Staatsrecht der Zaiditen. Strasbourg 1912, passim and Haider, Najam: Shīʾī Islam: An Introduction. Cambridge 2014, pp. 103-122.

[2] For the history of Yemen, see especially: Dresch, Paul: Tribes, Government and History in Yemen. Oxford 2001, passim.

ahl al-bayt, who, as Prophet Muhammad's family, claim originally to hail from Mecca.[3]

The discrimination of the *ahl al-bayt*, as well as concerns about the suppression of Zaydi learning, resulted in the appearance a Zaydi revival movement from the late 1980s onwards.[4] This revival movement laid the groundwork for the Huthi movement.

The Sa'da Wars: The Huthis before their rise to power

The Huthi movement takes its name from its founder Husayn al-Huthi. Born into a family of religious scholars from among the *ahl al-bayt*,[5] he was a member of the Yemeni parliament for the al-Haqq Party, the political wing of the Zaydi revival movement, from 1993 until 1997 and later studied theology in Sudan. After his return to Yemen in 2000, he became active in the *Shabab al-Mu'min* (the Believing Youth), a Zaydi education network. Around 2002, al-Huthi began to give lectures in the Sa'da province, which are collectively known as the *Malazim Husayn al-Huthi* (literally: [Lecture] Notes of Husayn al-Huthi) and still constitute the frame of reference for Huthi ideology.[6]

In Sudan, al-Huthi seemed to have been influenced by the teachings of Islamist movements such as the Muslim Brotherhood[7] and was strongly impressed by the success of the so-called "Islamic Revolution" in Iran. His

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[3] For the ahl al-bayt's loss of importance, see especially: Bruck, Gabriele vom, Islam, Memory and Modernity. New York 2005, passim.

[4] On Zaydi revivalism, see especially: King, James R.: Zaydī revival in a hostile republic: Competing identities, loyalties and visions of state in Republican Yemen. In: Arabica, 59/2912, pp. 404-445 and Dorlian, Samy: La Mouvance Zaydite dans le Yémen Contemporain. Paris 2013, passim.

[5] As ahl al-bayt, the Huthis are not, as is sometimes erroneously claimed, a tribe. On the standing of the Huthis within Yemeni tribal society, see: Weissenburger, Alexander. Al-Mawaddah al-Khālida? The Hūthī Movement and the Idea of the Rule of the Ahl al-Bayt. In: Brandt, Marieke (ed.): Tribes in Modern Yemen: An Anthology. Vienna 2021, pp. 121-136.

[6] Brandt, Marieke: Tribes and Politics in Yemen: A History of the Houthi Conflict. London 2017, pp. 131-150.

[7] Haykel, Bernard. The Huthi Movement's Religious and Political Ideology and its Relationship to Zaydism in Yemen. In: Hamidaddin, Abdullah: The Huthi Movement in Yemen: Ideology, Ambition, and Security in the Arab Gulf. London 2022, p. 20.

most immediate motivation to become politically active again, however, were the Israeli-Palestinian conflict and especially the so-called "War on Terror", which brought with it a sharply increased influence of the United States in Yemen and much of the rest of the Islamic world. The decision of the Yemeni government to openly participate in this "War on Terror" was hugely unpopular among the Yemeni population; Husayn al-Huthi was the only public figure to openly stand up against this Yemeni involvement.[8]

As al-Huthi's followers began to publicly chant the slogan he had coined – "*Allahu akbar, al-mawt li-Amrika, al-mawt li-Isra'il, al-la'na 'ala al-yahud, al-nasr li-l-Islam*" (God is great, death to America, death to Israel, curse upon the Jews, victory to Islam) – the Yemeni government became increasingly worried about al-Huthi and began to arrest his followers. In June 2004, the government started a military campaign against the incipient movement in Sa'da, and on September 10, Husayn al-Huthi was killed as he tried to surrender.[9] The government took the body to Sana'a and distributed pictures of the corpse in Sa'da city, the capital of the eponymous province. While arguably intended as a show of strength, the act was widely interpreted as contemptuous and helped to raise al-Huthi's status in the eyes of his followers to that of a martyr.[10] In March 2005, the conflict flared up again. Ultimately, between 2004 and 2010, the government and the movement fought six rounds of war, the last of which, from August 2009 to February 2010, saw Saudi Arabian involvement after the Huthis had moved fighters through Saudi territory. Collectively, these six rounds of war became known as the "Sa'da Wars" (*Hurub Sa'da*).[11]

After Husayn al-Huthi's death, his father, famous scholar Badr al-Din al-Huthi, took over the leadership of the movement. At the time of the third

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[8] Albloshi, Hamad H.: Ideological Roots of the Hūthī Movement in Yemen. In: Journal of Arabian Studies 6/2016, pp. 157-159 and Dorlian, Samy. The Sa'da War in Yemen: Between Politics and Sectarianism. In: The Muslim World 101/2011: p. 191.

[9] See Brandt: Tribes and Politics, pp. 133-134, 157-167.

[10] The movement commonly refers to Husayn al-Huthi as "al-Shahīd al-Qā'id" (the Martyr Leader). On the treatment of the corpse, see: Hamidi, Ayman. Inscriptions of Violence in Northern Yemen: Haunting Histories, Unstable Moral Spaces. Middle Eastern Studies/45, pp. 176-177.

[11] For the course of the conflict, see especially Brandt: Tribes and Politics, passim and Salmoni, Barak A., Bryce Loidolt and Madeleine Wells. Regime and Periphery in Northern Yemen: The Huthi Phenomenon. Santa Monica 2010, passim.

war, Abd al-Malik al-Huthi, Husayn's younger half-brother, had emerged as the new leader of the movement, a position he still holds at the time of writing. During the course of the six wars, possible governments agreement with Husayn al-Huthi's blend of anti-imperialist rhetoric's and Zaydi revivalism, which are analysed in more detail further down, was substituted by more immediate concerns. The regime's heavy-handed approach in fighting the movement, entailing considerable loss of live, health, and property for the civilian population, led many people to throw in their lot with the Huthis. Additionally, the increasing involvement of tribal forces in the conflict led to expanding circles of revenge killings, which further aggravated the situation.[12]

Roughly a year after the end of the sixth war, the Arab Spring reached Yemen. The movement, by now referring to itself as *Ansar Allah* (Helpers of God), participated in the revolution in the form of a group calling itself *al-Shabab al-Sumud* (the Youth of Steadfastness).[13] After President Ali Abdallah Salih had stepped down in January 2012, the movement participated in the National Dialogue Conference (NDC), which was set up to bring the major political actors to the table in order to negotiate the political order of the post-Salih era. Before the conference was concluded, two key members of the Huthi delegation were assassinated. As they belonged to the more moderate, dovish, wing of the movement, the balance inside the movement shifted towards the hardliners, which helped to facilitate what came next.[14]

Already while participating in the NDC, the movement had taken control over Sa'da; now, after forming an alliance with its former enemy, Ali Abdallah Salih, it began to expand southwards. Salih still exerted considerable political and military influence. He had only stepped down as president, not as leader of his party, the General People's Congress (GPC), and still commanded the loyalty of large parts of the armed forces. At least in retrospect, it therefore comes as no big surprise that in September 2014, the alliance was

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[12] Loc. cit.

[13] Weissenburger, Alexander. The Zaydi revival and the Hūthī movement in Yemen. In: Rizvi, Sajjad and Ahab Bdaiwi: Oxford Handbook of Shi'i Islam, in editing process.

[14] For the Huthis during the transition process, see: Brandt, Marieke. The Huthi Enigma: Ansar Allah and the "Second Republic". In: Heinze, Marie-Christine: Yemen and the Search for Stability: Power, Politics and Society after the Arab Spring. London 2018, pp. 160-183.

able to take Sana'a.[15] The movement and interim President Abd Rabbuh Mansur Hadi, who had been elected[16] in February 2012, signed a power-sharing agreement called the Peace and National Partnership Agreement (PNPA). The unpopularity resulting from the mismanagement and corruption of Hadi's government in the time before the PNPA, as well as the increase in fuel prices after the International Monetary Fund had called for a cut of fuel subsidies, made it easy for the movement to consolidate its influence. Ultimately, in January 2015, President Hadi resigned and was put under house arrest. After a month, he was able to flee to Aden, where he withdrew his resignation.[17] Eventually fleeing to Riyadh as the movement closed in on Aden, Hadi requested assistance from the GCC. On March 28, 2015, a coalition of ten countries, including Egypt and all members of the GCC[18] except Oman and led by Saudi Arabia, began to intervene in the conflict.[19]

The Huthis in power

Three weeks after Hadi had resigned, the Huthi movement declared the formation of the Supreme Revolutionary Committee (SRC), which was to serve as interim authority for two years. Headed by Muhammad Ali al-Huthi and staffed by Huthi-loyalists,[20] the committee was the institutional manifestation of the movement, which began to increasingly entrench itself in the Yemeni state apparatus. Shortly after its formation, the SRC dissolved the Yemeni parliament and in 2016 handed the power to the newly created Supreme Political Committee (SPC). The SPC has ten members, equally split between the Huthi movement and the GPC. In reality, however, power largely remained in the hands of the Huthi faction of the committee as well as the SRC; Especially Muhammad Ali al-Huthi, which retained much of its influence behind the scenes. Also, the position of the head of the committee, who

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15 Lackner, Helen: Yemen on Crisis: Autocracy, Neo-Liberalism and the Disintegration of the State. London 2017, pp. 41-42, 158-164.

16 Hadi was the only candidate on the ballot.

17 Lackner: Yemen in Crisis, pp. 50, 232.

18 Qatar left the coalition following the 2017, diplomatic crisis and the UAE, the other main actor in the coalition, drew out in 2019.

19 Lackner: Yemen in Crisis, pp. 54-59.

20 Almahfali Mohammed and James Roots: How Iran's Islamic Revolution Does, and Does Not, Influence Houthi Rule in Northern Yemen, Sanaa Center for Strategic Studies, February 13, 2020, https://sanaacenter.org/publications/analysis/9050.

serves as president of the Huthi state and presides over the prime minister and his government, was always filled by loyalists of the Huthi movement.[21]

In late 2017, the marriage of convenience between Ali Abdullah Salih and the movement collapsed as the former withdrew from the alliance, openly siding with the coalition. After a short series of clashes, Salih was killed on December 4, 2017 and his loyalists and family members ousted from positions of influence.[22] Since the end of 2017, the movement has thus *de facto* been the sole authority in large parts of Upper Yemen, including the capital Sana'a, ruling over roughly 20 million people, which is approximately 70% of the country's total population.[23]

Although the political centre of gravity in the areas controlled by the movement is formally the president and the SPC, actual power remains in the hands of Abd al-Malik al-Huthi and his small, trusted circle of followers.[24] With Abd al-Malik al-Huthi in hiding, he is represented in Sana'a by Ahmad Hamid, a long-term friend who was instrumental in his rise to the leadership of the movement.[25] Additionally, the movement has implemented a system of political commissars, the so-called *mushrifun* (supervisors), who function as parallel administrations and serve "as a direct link between the inner circle of the Huthi leadership and the local governance system."[26]

In addition to its capture of the state apparatus, the movement has taken control of the media, the religious sphere, the education system, and the armed forces. Already in 2012, the movement established its primary media

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[21] Loc. cit, Lackner: Yemen in Crisis, pp. 52, 163.

[22] UN Security Council: Letter dated January 26, 2018, from the Panel of Experts on Yemen mandated by Security Council resolution 2342 (2017) addressed to the President of the Security Council. 2018, pp. 11-13.

[23] International Crisis Group: Truce Test: The Huthis and Yemen's War on Narratives, Brussels April 29, 2022, p. 9.

[24] UN Security Council: Letter dated January 26, 2018, p. 20.

[25] Johnsen, Gregory, D.: The Kingpin of Sana'a – A Profile of Ahmed Hamed, Sanaa Center for Strategic Studies, May 18, 2021, https://sanaacenter.org/publications/main-publications/14180.

[26] ACAPS: The Houthi Supervisory System (2020), https://www.acaps.org/sites/acaps/files/products/files/20200617_acaps_yemen_analysis_hub_the_houthi_supervisory_system_0.pdf.

institution, the news platform Al Masirah. Based in Beirut,[27] Al Masirah increased consistently in size and improved its quality of output. The outlet now entails a newspaper, a website and a satellite television channel, thus providing a wide range of content, including news, documentaries, and speeches by Abd al-Malik al-Huthi as well as by other leaders. Besides Al Masirah, there exists a whole cottage industry of smaller homepages, transporting, albeit sometimes with a different emphasis, essentially the same message. Besides setting up its own media, the movement took over formerly state-run media outlets[28] and uses most of the available social media platforms.

This media strategy follows the group's idea of the "Soft War" (*al-harb al-na'ima*), which it developed from Joseph Nye's concept of "Soft Power" (*al-quwwa al-na'ima*). The Huthis argue that war is not only fought on the battlefront but also in the media – which the West used to launch a widespread campaign of disinformation against Yemen and the *umma* in general. Targeting the religious and thus the moral foundation of the population, the West attempted to weaken Muslims' resolve in the face of Western imperialism, the movement claims. In order to counter this alleged intellectual onslaught, the movement portrays itself as having no choice but to protect the Yemeni population through equally spreading its own version of the truth.[29]

This systematic attempt to influence the population, to justify the movement's actions, thereby in fact normalising its crip to power, is also visible in the education system and with regards to institutionalised religion. The movement installed Yahya al-Huthi, on of Abd al-Malik's half-brothers, as

[27] Transfeld, Mareike: Iran's Small Hand in Yemen, Carnegie Endowment for International Peace, 2017, https://carnegieendowment.org/sada/67988.

[28] Loveluck, Louisa: "Yemen TV v Yemen TV: Saudi Arabia steps up propaganda war with copycat media." In: The Daily Telegraph, May 28, 2015, https://www.telegraph.co.uk/news/worldnews/middleeast/yemen/11637271/Yemen-TV-v-Yemen-TV-Saudi-Arabia-steps-up-propaganda-war-with-copycat-media.html.

[29] For a more thorough discussion of the "Soft War", see: Weissenburger, Alexander: "The Soft war and the Past: The Huthi Movements use of Historical Narratives as Source of Legitimacy. In: Hamidaddin, Abdullah: The Huthi Movement in Yemen: Ideology, Ambition, and Security in the Arab Gulf, London 2022, pp. 57-59.

the Minister of Education in 2016,[30] made changes to school curricula[31] and organise annual summer camps for pupils.[32] Similarly, the movement took control of the religious sphere, replacing Qadi Muhammad al-Amrani as head mufti, replacing him with the Huthi loyalist Shams al-Din Sharaf al-Din in early 2017.[33] Additionally, the Council of the Yemeni Scholars was disbanded and the Union of Yemeni Scholars founded in its stead.[34]

Finally in this brief listing of the elements of the Huthi power grab, the movement attempted to take control of as much of the Yemeni armed forces as possible. Right from the outset of the alliance with Salih, the movement's policy was to co-opt forces loyal to Salih and to alienate those that could not be brought under control.[35] The only branch of the Yemeni military that could not, at least partially, be brought under the umbrella of the movement was the Yemeni air force.[36] Besides the co-option of regular forces, the movement has continued to recruit its own forces. As Michael Knights put it: "A mixture of indoctrination, machismo, material sustenance, and threats have kept the Huthi movement well-supplied with new fighters […]." These new forces are mainly organised in small battle groups of around five fighters, which can be moved around the country undetected by coalition forces and which are then brought to bear on different fronts across the country, joining local forces. Due to the strategic use of terrain, minefields, bunkers,

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30 Saba Net: "President issues decree to form National Salvation Government", Saba Net, November 29, 2016, https://www.saba.ye/en/news448091.htm.

31 Ansarollah: Lajna al-manāhij taqurru kutub māda al-Qur'ān al-Karīm al-mutawwira li-l-sufūf 7, 8, 9, Ansarollah, February 01, 2021, https://www.ansarollah.com/archives/408068.

32 Ansarollah: Fa"āliyya markaziyya li-l-marākiz al-sayfiyya bi-muhāfaza 'Amrān, August 06, 2019, https://www.ansarollah.com/archives/268269.

33 Yemen Press: Man huwa al-'allāma al-jadīd alladhī 'ayyanahu al-Hūthiyūn muftī li-l-Diyār al-Yamaniyya khalaf li-l-Shaykh al-'Amrānī. In: Yemen Press, April 11, 2017, https://yemen-press/news94720.html.

34 Al Jazeera: al-Yaman…hizb al- makhlū' yarfudu hay'at al-Iftā' al-Hūthiyya. In: Al Jazeera, April 14, 2017, https://www.aljazeera.net/news/reportsandinterviews/2017/4/14.

35 Knights, Michael: The Houthi War Machine: From Guerrilla War to State Capture. In: CTC Sentinel 11/2018, p. 18.

36 Knights, Michael: Gulf Coalition Operations in Yemen (Part 2): The Air War. Washington Institute for Near East Policy, March 25, 2016, https://www.washingtoninstitute.org/policy-analysis/gulf-coalition-operations-yemen-part-2-air-war.

caves, and intricate zig-zag pattern trench systems, the movement is able to defend large swathes of territory with comparatively few fighters.[37] In general, and this includes the movement's unmanned aerial vehicles (UAV) as well as unmanned surface vehicles (USV) discussed below, the movement's weaponry is not very sophisticated, consisting mainly of "Cold War equipment, with the addition of limited quantities of entry-level modern weapons systems, provided by a Tier 2 regional power [*i.e.* Iran]."[38]

Albeit driven back from the south of the country by coalition forces by 2016[39] and unable to take Ma'rib after a two-year campaign between 2020 and 2022, the fighting has ground to a stalemate,[40] and the movement's military capabilities, its sophisticated use of soft power and the retention of an at least rudimentarily working administration have left the movement solidly in power over wide parts of upper Yemen.

For the Yemeni population in general, the effects of war, which entered its eighth year in late March 2022, has been a disaster. With the economy in tatters, the Yemeni Riyal has drastically declined in value, while the price of imports has risen sharply due to the blockade the Saudi led-coalition imposed on Yemen.[41] Starved of vital commodities such as medicine, food and fuel, the Yemeni population, primarily in the regions controlled by the movement, is now suffering what the UN described as the currently worst humanitarian disaster in the world.[42] The situation is further aggravated by the emergence

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[37] Knights: The Houthi War Machine, pp. 18-20; quote on p. 18.

[38] Spencer, James: Hybrid Warfare – Lessons from the Saud-led Coalition's Intervention in Yemen 2015-2020. In: Hamidaddin, Abdullah: The Huthi Movement in Yemen: Ideology, Ambition, and Security in the Arab Gulf, London 2022, p. 248.

[39] Almeida, Alex and Michael Knights: "Gulf Coalition Operations in Yemen (Part 1): The Ground War". Washington Institute for Near East Policy, March 25, 2016, https://www.washingtoninstitute.org/policy-analysis/gulf-coalition-operations-yemen-part-1-ground-war.

[40] International Crisis Group: Truce Test, pp. 1-2.

[41] For the humanitarian situation and the effects of the blockade see: UN Security Council: Letter dated January 26, 2018, pp. 41-43, Lackner: Yemen in Crisis, pp. 65-66 and Gebrekidan, Selam and Jonathan Saul: In blocking arms to Yemen, Saudi Arabia squeezes a starving population. Reuters, October 11, 2017. https://www.reuters.com/investigates/special-report/yemen-saudi-blockade/.

[42] United Nations: Humanitarian crisis in Yemen remains the worst in the world, warns UN, February14, 2019, https://news.un.org/en/story/2019/02/1032811.

of a sprawling war economy, in which all sides of the war engage,[43] as well as frequent violations of international humanitarian law and human rights, such as the use of child soldiers and sexual violence, and the destruction of objects indispensable for the survival of the civilian population.[44]

Ideology[45]

The ideology of the Huthi movement is grounded in the ideas of Husayn al-Huthi. As mentioned before, al-Huthi was strongly influenced by the political developments in the early 2000s. In his opinion, the *umma* had grown weak by abandoning the "true" precepts of Islam and now was on the verge of becoming completely subjugated by the West, which he mainly equated with the US and Israel. What the *umma* needed was therefore to return to what he called the *thaqafa al-qur'aniyya* (Quranic culture), an all-encompassing form of Islam primarily based on the Quran.[46] For al-Huthi, Zaydism's claim that the *ahl al-bayt* were designated to rule society was an integral aspect of a society adhering to this Quranic Culture. The *ahl al-bayt* should live up to their responsibility and rule, or at least guide, the *umma*.[47]

One – if not the most – dominant and enduring aspect in al-Huthi's lectures is his anti-imperialism, which mainly revolves, as mentioned, around the issue of the Israeli-Palestinian conflict and the so-called War on Terror. Al-Huthi frequently argued that the US and Israel wanted to rule and exploit the Muslim world and that the War on Terror was the means to achieve that goal. Since the meaning of "terrorism" would always be extended, Muslim

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[43] Sana'a Center for Strategic Studies: Beyond the Business as Usual Approach: Combatting Corruption in Yemen. No place November 2018, pp. 26-43.

[44] For a comprehensive account of this aspect of the conflict see: UN Human Rights Council: Situation of Human Rights in Yemen, Including Violations and Abuses since September 2014. 2019, passim and Mundy, Martha: The Strategy of the Coalition in the Yemen War: Aerial Bombardment and Food War. No place September 20, 2018, passim.

[45] For a more thorough overview see: Haykel: The Huthi Movement, passim, Schmitz, Charles: Huthi Visions of the State: A Huthi Republic with an Unofficial Imam. In: Hamidaddin, Abdullah: The Huthi Movement in Yemen: Ideology, Ambition, and Security in the Arab Gulf. London 2022, pp. 235-258, Weissenburger: The Zaydi revival, passim and Brandt, Marieke and Alexander Weissenburger: Hūthīs. In: Daftary Farhad (ed.): Encyclopaedia Islamica, Leiden 2021, passim.

[46] See for example: Husayn al-Hūthī: al-Thaqāfa al-Qur'āniyya. Sa'da 2002.

[47] See for example: Husayn al-Hūthī: Mas'ūliyyat ahl al-bayt. Sa'da 2002.

countries would never be able to fulfil the demands of the US, which would lead to their invasion.[48] Al-Huthi often used "Christians" and "America", as well as "Jews" and "Israel", interchangeably, which allowed him to connect them to Islamic scripture. For him, it was especially "the Jews" who were able to wield influence over global politics through their alleged control over the media[49], and in general, the lectures have a distinctly antisemitic bent. After Husayn al-Huthi's death during the Sa'da wars, the movement adopted a less confrontational tone. In order to appeal to as large an audience as possible, the movement primarily presented itself as a popular movement in defence of faith and fundamental citizen rights.[50]

With their rise to power and the beginning of the Saudi-led intervention, the movement began to incorporate Saudi Arabia into its anti-imperialist propaganda. The kingdom was portrayed as a compliant and ruthless executer of the Western aggression against Muslims and Islam.[51] The Yemeni population, on the other hand, was standing steadfastly against this aggression and holding up the virtues of Islam, the movement argues. The Yemeni population was thus not portrayed as lacking in faith anymore, but along the lines of the *hadith* that "faith and wisdom are Yemeni" (*al-iman Yaman wa-l-hikma Yamaniyya*), as a truly Islamic society standing up against injustice, thereby serving as example for the rest of the *umma*.[52] Since then, the movement has somewhat dialled down on its demands that the *ahl al-bayt* should rule – probably also because most of the higher echelons of the movement are dominated by them anyways – still insist on the leading role that they should play. Never, despite frequent allegations to the contrary, have the Huthis declared a new Imamate in Yemen.[53]

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[48] See for example: Husayn al-Hūthī al-Sirākh fī wajh al-mustakbirīn. Sa'da 2002. pp. 6-7.

[49] See for example: Husayn al-Hūthī Yawm al-Quds al-'Ālamī, p. 8.

[50] Salmoni: Regime and Periphery, pp. 231-234, Brandt, The Huthi Enigma, pp. 166-177.

[51] See for example: 'Abd al-Malik al-Hūthī: Kalima bi-dhikrā istishhād al-Imām Zayd bn 'Alī 'alayhi al-salām 1442H, September 14, 2022, https://www.alforgan.net/head/speeches/5/145.

[52] See for example: 'Abd al-Malik al-Hūthī: al-Sayyid 'Abd al-Malik al-Hūthī fī khitāb 'al-īmān yamān' fī liqā' ma'a shakhsiyyāt wa-ijtimā'iyya wa-mas'ūliyīn fī al-dawla bi-l-jāma' al-kabīr, December 21, 2019, https://www.almasirahnews.com/48067/.

[53] Weissenburger: The Zaydi revival, passim.

On the other hand, in a document entitled *al-Ru'iyya al-wataniyya* (The National Vision), the movement sets out a long-term strategy to establish a democratic, republican state, based on Islam and the sharia.[54] Interestingly, the National Vision does not lay out the role of Abd al-Malik al-Huthi, which has led some observers to the plausible conclusion that the movement envisages a model similar to the one in Iran, where the state apparatus is presided over by the Supreme Leader.[55] The movement's ideology, however, does not contain references to the *wilayat al-faqih* (the Guardianship of the Jurist), the concept underlying the office of the Supreme Leader. While Husayn al-Huthi held Ayatollah Khomeini in high esteem, his admiration seems to have primarily resulted from Khomeini's anti-Western stance and the fact that he successfully established an Islamic order in Iran.[56] The movement now largely abstains from such declaration of open admiration, yet clearly portrays itself as an integral part of the so-called "Axis of Resistance".[57]

Iran, Saudi Arabia and the regional ramifications of the conflict

From its appearance in the early 2000s, the Huthi movement has been accused of being an Iranian proxy. While the regime has paddled that narrative in order to attempt to curry favours with the US and Saudi Arabia by pandering to their supposed strategic regional interests, there is almost no evidence to support such claims for the first years of the conflict.[58] The narrative has, however, helped to elevate the local conflict into the spheres of what Gause[59] termed the "New Middle East Cold War" between Sunni and Shi'a entities. For initially pragmatic reasons rather than out of real conviction,[60] Saudi Arabia has jumped upon the narrative and continues to frame the

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[54] Majlis al-Siyāsī al-A'lā: al-Ru'iyya al-wataniyya li-binā' al-dawla al-Yamaniyya al-hadītha. No place 2019, pp. 20-29.

[55] Almahfali: How Iran's Islamic Revolution.

[56] Brandt: Hūthīs.

[57] See for example: Ansarollah: al-Mu'ādila al-tārīkhiyya al-jadīd fī sirā' ma'a Isrā'īl fī qalb al-mihwar, October 27, 2021, https://www.ansarollah.com/archives/472117.

[58] Hill, Ginny: Yemen Endures: Civil War, Saudi Adventurism and the Future of Arabia, London 2017, p. 194, Brandt: Tribes and Politics, pp. 203-205.

[59] Gause; Gregory F.: Beyond Sectarianism: The New Middle East Cold War, Brookings 2014. https://www.brookings.edu/research/beyond-sectarianism-the-new-middle-east-cold-war/.

[60] Brandt: Tribes and Politics, pp. 204-205.

Huthis as Iranian proxies, often accusing the al-Huthi family of having secretly converted to 12er Shi'ism.[61]

While Saudi Arabia's intervention from 2015 onwards seems to have been partly fuelled by the fear of Shi'ite encirclement,[62] or at least by an uneasiness about the strengthened regional importance of Iran,[63] the intervention came at a time of a generally more assertive regional political stance of the kingdom after the death of King Abdullah in 2015. This strategy is widely attributed to the personal ambitions of the former minister of defence and now crown prince, Muhammad b. Salman,[64] manifesting itself not only in the war in Yemen but also in the Lebanese prime minister's forced abdication in 2017, in the Qatar crisis[65] and in the killing of Jamal Khashoggi 2018. The combination of a severe underestimation of Huthi capabilities[66] and the acquiescence of the US, which attempted to restore its relationship with Saudi Arabia after the signing of the Joint Comprehensive Plan of Action (JCPOA, mainly referred to as "Iran nuclear deal") with Iran,[67] led Saudi Arabia and its allies of the coalition, supported by the US, the UK and to a

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61 For an example from al-'Arabiyya: Hādhā 'Abd al-Malik al-Hūthī dhirā' Īrān fī al-Yaman. In: al-'Arabiyya, December 04, 2017. https://www.alarabiya.net/arab-and-world/yemen/2017/12/04.

62 Worth, Robert F.: Unrest Encircles Saudis, Stoking Sense of Unease. In: The New York Times, February 19, 2011, https://www.nytimes.com/2011/02/20/world/middleeast/20saudi.html.

63 Bruck, Gabriele vom: How the past casts its shadows: Struggles for ascendancy in northern Yemen in the post-Salih era. In: Bruck, Gabriele vom and Charles Tripp (eds.): Precarious belonging: Being Shi'i in non-Shi'i worlds. London 2017, pp. 292-293.

64 Al-Rasheed, Madawi: King Salman and his Son: Winning the US, Losing the Rest. In: Al-Rasheed, Madawi (ed.): Salman's Legacy: The Dilemmas of a New Era in Saudi Arabia. Oxford 2018, pp. 235-250; Lackner: Yemen in Crisis, p. 54.

65 Bruck, Gabriele vom: From Yemen to Lebanon, Saudi Arabia's Dubious Offensives. Orientxxi, May 02, 2018. https://orientxxi.info/magazine/from-yemen-to-lebanon-saudi-arabia-s-dubious-offensives,2433.

66 Riedel, Bruce: Yemen war turns seven, Brookings, March 24, 2022. https://www.brookings.edu/blog/order-from-chaos/2022/03/24/yemen-war-turns-seven/.

67 Farea, al-Muslimi: The Iran Nuclear Deal and Yemen's War: An Opportunity for EU Statecraft. No place November 2018. https://sanaacenter.org/publications/analysis/6665, Lackner: Yemen in Crisis, p. 88.

lesser extent France and Germany,[68] into a war, which was expected to last no more than a few weeks.[69]

Despite the mentioned claims to the contrary, Iranian support only became obvious with the Saudi entry into the sixth Sa'da war in late 2009 and especially in the wake of the Arab Spring, as Iran sought to gain a new foothold abroad as the future of the Assad regime in Syria appeared less than certain.[70] Another reason for Iran's interest in Yemen is certainly Yemen's geostrategic importance. Since the opening of the Habshan-Fujairah oil pipeline around the Strait of Hormuz between the Arabian Peninsula and Iran in 2012 and the expansion of the capacity of the East West pipeline, connecting Saudi Arabia's eastern oilfields with the Red Sea and announced in 2019,[71] Iran's position at the Strait of Hormuz has been weakened. By gaining a foothold in Yemen, at the maritime chokepoint of the Bab al-Mandab Strait between Yemen and the Horn of Africa, Iran would regain some of its former geostrategic standing as it would be in a position to severely disrupt international trade and communication.[72]

As an estimated three thirds of the oil exports through the Strait of Hormuz go to the Asian market,[73] which means that, if some of the oil destined for these markets had to be shipped from the Red Sea, it would have to pass the Bab al-Mandab Strait. It seems that this is one reason for Saudi Arabia to use the war to secure a foothold in Yemen's eastern-most province al-Mahra, which would permit the building of a long-planned pipeline connecting Saudi Arabia's oil provinces in the Gulf with the Arabian Sea, thus bypassing both

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[68] For a brief overview see: Lackner: Yemen in Crisis, pp. 84-91, Bruck: The Past Casts a Shadow, p. 294.

[69] Riedel: Yemen war turns seven.

[70] Terril Andrew W.: Iranian Involvement in Yemen. In: Foreign Policy Research Institute 58/2014, p. 435, Brandt: Tribes and Politics, pp. 207-208.

[71] Global Data: Expanded East-West Pipeline will provide limited protection for Saudi Arabia, September 12, 2019, https://www.globaldata.com/media/oil-gas/expanded-east-west-pipeline-will-provide-limited-protection-for-saudi-arabia/.

[72] Most of the submarine communications cables connecting Asia, Africa and Europe, pass through the Bab al-Mandab Strait. For a map of global submarine cables, see: BBC: Where are the world's undersea cables? December 15, 2017, https://www.bbc.com/news/technology-17340700.

[73] EIA: The Strait of Hormuz is the world's most important oil transit chokepoint, June 20, 2019, https://www.eia.gov/todayinenergy/detail.php?id=39932.

the Bab al-Mandab and the Strait of Hormuz. Despite initial efforts, it seems, however, that the project was abandoned by 2021.[74] The other reason for Saudi Arabia's presence in al-Mahra is to prevent the smuggling of weapons from Iran to the Huthis.[75]

In 2018, UN concluded that the most probable way of the Burkan-2H rockets reaching the Huthis was indeed via the Arabian Sea and the land route through al-Mahra. Most likely[76] originating from Iran, the weapons seem to have been transported to Yemen in parts and then assembled locally.[77] Besides the Burka-2H, the movement, at least in the time immediately after 2015, used Scud-B and Scud-C type missiles from the inventory of the Yemeni army.[78] In addition to ballistic missiles, the Huthis have become increasingly proficient in their use of UAVs (unmanned aerial vehicles) for combat and reconnaissance purposes. While the technology and some of the components also appear to originate from Iran, the movement seems to have begun to enhance Iranian designs and produce components domestically. While using suicide drones in the beginning, the movement now also employs reusable, payload-carrying combat UAVs.[79] In addition, the movement uses Iranian-manufactured sea mines[80] and, after employing C-802 anti-ship missiles, has substituted them with USVs (unmanned surface vehicles) by now.[81] With all this weaponry allowing the movement to strike targets hun-

[74] Abuzaid, Yehya: Has Riyadh Woken up from Its Al-Mahra Pipe Dream? Sanaa Center for Strategic Studies, December 12, 2021, https://sanaacenter.org/publications/analysis/16042.

[75] Coombs, Casey: Al-Mahra: Where Regional Powers Define Local Politics, Sanaa Center for Strategic Studies, December 18, 2020. https://sanaacenter.org/publications/analysis/12284.

[76] In 2018, a UN inquiry found that, while finding company logos consistent with an Iranian arms company in the wreckage, there was "no evidence as to the identity of the supplier, or any intermediary third party." UN Security Council: Letter dated January 26, 2018, p. 30.

[77] On more information on the Burkan-2H, see: Loc. cit.

[78] Ibid, p. 27.

[79] Conflict Armament Research: Evolution of UAV's employed by Huthi forces in Yemen. London 2020, passim; UN Security Council: Letter dated January 26, 2018, p 32.

[80] UN Security Council: Letter dated January 26, 2018, pp. 32, 34.

[81] Spencer: Hybrid Warfare, p. 242.

dreds of kilometres inside Saudi territory, including Riyadh,[82] it should be kept in mind that since the beginning of the intervention, Saudi airstrikes outnumber Huthi airstrikes almost twenty to one.[83]Additionally to supplying technology and weapons to the Huthis, Iran supplies the movement with diplomatic backing as well as with military and organisational training.[84]

Despite Iranian support, the Huthi movement is no Iranian puppet. It is thus not controlled by Iran[85] and has defied Iranian advice in the past, most notably by taking Sana'a in 2014 and Aden in 2015.[86] According to the International Crisis Group, some Iranian officials consider the Huthis too independent and uncontrollable to be reliable allies.[87] In essence, the Crisis Group continues, "[The engagement in the war in Yemen] has been a low-cost way of harming Saudi Arabia, and keeping it preoccupied on the Arabian Peninsula and on the defensive."[88] While the exact extent of the influence is not known, the consensus amongst specialists on Yemen is that Iran's footprint in Yemen is smaller than often portrayed and that the alignment is primarily based on a shared geopolitical – in this case anti-imperialist – agenda,[89] which is also evident from the discussion of the movement's ideology above.

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[82] Bruce Riedel: Why are Yemen's Houthis attacking Riyadh now? March 30, 2020, https://www.brookings.edu/blog/order-from-chaos/2020/03/30/why-are-yemens-houthis-attacking-riyadh-now/.

[83] Annelle Sheline: The Yemen War in Numbers: Saudi Escalation and U.S. Complicity. Quincy Institute for responsible Statecraft, March 2022, https://quincyinst.org/report/the-yemen-war-in-numbers-saudi-escalation-and-u-s-complicity/.

[84] Clausen, Maria-Louise: More than a Proxy - The Huthis as a Non-State Actor with a Foreign Policy? In: Hamidaddin, Abdullah: The Huthi Movement in Yemen: Ideology, Ambition, and Security in the Arab Gulf. London 2022, p. 275 and Knight: The Houthi War Machine, p.18.

[85] Clausen: More than a Proxy, p. 276.

[86] International Crisis Group: Iran's Priorities in a Turbulent Middle East, Brussels April 13, 2018, p. 23.

[87] Loc. cit.

[88] Ibid, pp. 23-24.

[89] Juneau, Thomas: Iran's policy towards the Houthis in Yemen: A limited return on a modest investment. In: International Affairs, 92/2016, p. 659 and Clausen: More than a Proxy, pp. 278-279.

Conclusion

The preceding pages have given an overview of the Huthi movement, its root, ideology, drone programme and relationship with as well as importance for other regional state actors. After emerging in the early 2000s as a local resistance movement in the Yemeni periphery, the movement soon grew into one of the most important political actors in Yemen. The attractivity of the movement's ideology – a blend of Zaydi revivalist ideas with common Islamist topics, such as the conception of Islam as the all-encompassing system and its need to fight against imperialism and for social justice – in combination with the government's heavy-handed approach to the insurgency means that the movement has continuously gained ground. The movement used the uncertainty after the fall of the Salih regime to enter an alliance with the former president and began to expand its territorial reach. After falling out with Salih, which resulted in the former president's death, and losing some of the territories it had initially gained, the Huthis have eventually remained in control of wide parts of the west of the country, including the capital. Facing little resistance from within Yemen, the main adversary of the movement is Saudi Arabia at the head of a coalition of several other Arab countries. While the Saudi blockade of imports to Yemen as well as airstrikes have led to a major humanitarian crisis, which is only exacerbated by Huthi mismanagement and human rights violations by all actors in the conflict, the movement is firmly in power at the time of writing. With the war at a stalemate and the movement having taken control of the religious sphere, the media as well as the military, and both state and educational apparatuses, have been receiving support from Iran as part of the so-called "Axis of Resistance", which gives us little ground for hope for a sudden transfer of power away from the movement.

Iran's relations with Yemen: Ideological and strategic aspects

Walter Posch

Although Iran's relations with Yemen can be traced back centuries, they have never been part of a common historic narrative, strong enough to serve as the basis for a political alliance. This holds true for Imperial Iran as well as for the Islamic Republic. Thus, the historic presence of the Zaydi sect of Shi'ism in the Caspian provinces and the fact that Zaydism is the prevalent Shi'ite confession in Yemen is a well-known fact but without political relevance in Iran.[1] An exception can be made for the high Shi'ite clergy, the *marja'iyya*, in Iraq in early 1921, when they recognised Faysal, son of Husayn, the *sharif* of Mecca, as King of Iraq, who was a scion of the Banu Hashim and therefore of the Prophet's extended family. Decades later in the 1990s, the same line of reasoning could be found in Richard Perle's strategy paper "A clean break," prepared for Israeli Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu.[2] Writing under the impression of Saddam Hussein's dictatorship in Iraq (and perhaps the failed Shi'ite uprising in 1993), Perle suggested that the King of Jordan could have some "ideas" regarding the Iraqi Shi'ites because he "hails from the Prophet's family". Yet the Iranians did not bestow too much importance on either position.

At the beginning of the 2000s, in the wake of the US-led intervention in Iraq, the political role of the Shi'ite confession in relation to Iranian strategic interests was discussed in several publications. François Thual's 1995 book on Shi'ite geopolitics was one of the few to mention Yemen and the Zaydites as an element of what he understood to be Shi'ite strategy.[3] His book was republished in 2002, and a Persian translation followed in 2008. Back then, the

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[1] See for instance Mohammad Kazem Rahmati, Miras-e farhangi-ye Zeydiyan-e Iran va enteqal-e an beh Yaman. In: Tarikh-e Iran, 63/5 Winter 1388/2010, pp. 73-101.

[2] Richard Perle (et al), A Clean Break: A New Strategy for Securing the Realm, Washington DC 1996, https://web.archive.org/web/20140125123844/http:/www.iasps.org/strat1.htm.

[3] François Thual, Géopolitique du chiisme, Paris 1995 (2. Auflage 2002) pp. 101-105; Zhe'upulitik-e shi'eh, übersetzt von Katayun Basser, Paris 1998, pp. 111-116.

Iranian embassy in France paid some attention to it. Yet the Iranian interest focussed on nominal Shi'ite groups like Turkey's Alevites and similar heterodox branches of 12er Shi'ism, but not in Yemen. This changed with the outbreak of the crisis in Yemen and the outbreak of the civil war in 2015. Even so, confessionalism would not dictate Iran's course of action, but geopolitics would.

Iranian geostrategy

With the revolution victorious, Iran faced the same dilemma as any post-revolutionary regime, namely how to reconcile revolutionary fervour with strategic realism and national interests. Iran's Islamists developed a principle called "expedient interests for the regime" (*maslahat-e nezam*), meaning that ideological bias must not destroy the overall system. In its geostrategy, Iran applies a simple 4x3 formula, namely the combination of four ideological postures with three geographic entities.[4] These are:

- traditional Shi'ism, where Iran has to play the role of patron to all Shi'ites worldwide;
- traditional Iranian nationalism driven by national interests;
- revolutionary political Islam in the sense of Khomeini, which the Iranians portray as non-sectarianist but which anyone else understands as radical Shi'ite;
- and *tiers-mondialisme*, i.e. the ideology of the 3rd World or the global South which originates in anti-colonial movements of the 1920s and was a *cause célébré* of the anti-imperialist Left in the 1970s and later.

The Iranians apply the said four principles pragmatically – maybe opportunistically – to three partly overlapping geographic regions: Iran's immediate neighbourhood, the wider Middle East, and the Global South. On occasions, it is hard to tell whether the Iranian nation states dons its ideology in order to promote strategic aims or whether the ideology draws on the resources of the Iranian nation state. The long Iran-Iraq War (1980-1988) had a twofold effect on Iran's revolutionary decision makers; first, they (rather opportun-

[4] For an in-depth analysis of the ideology-strategy nexus regarding Iran, see Walter Posch, Ideology and Strategy in the Middle East: The Case of Iran. In: Survival, September 2017, pp. 69-96.

istically) perfected the combination of ideological fanaticism for domestic mobilisation with strategic realism following the needs of the battlefield. This went so far that Iran would conclude arms deals even with Israel whilst at the same time attacking it as a mere "Zionist entity". Secondly, the concept of the "Axis of Resistance" (*mehvar-e moqavemat*) was developed.[5]

Originally, this idea was tactical in nature as it was born in the trenches: Iranian deep penetration units would cross the frontline and establish contact with the anti-Saddam Shi'ite Iraqi resistance. These actions were rather ideological in nature and served intelligence gathering more than military action. However, contacts built up back then would serve Iran well after the US toppled Iraq in 2003. After the Iran-Iraq war, the political language of said axis was adapted to formulate a broader strategic setting. Here, again, the Iranians combined an ideological framework for a contradictory political reality. With the war over, Teheran viewed Iraq as a competitor rather than as a threat, but at the same time the Iranians wanted to keep their old anti-Saddam alliance functioning. This alliance included Syria, Iran's primary partner, but also Lebanese Hizbullah, the Palestinian Islamic Jihad and Hamas; an alliance far from cordial, as all of them have complicated relations to each other. Iran has managed the inherent tensions of this ramshackle and diverse alliance by reframing the "Axis of Resistance" as a strategic tool, a kind of *tiers-mondialiste*-cum-Islamist outlet directed against Israel, whilst embracing the "Palestinian Cause". This allows Shi'ite and Persian Iran to overcome its isolation in the Arab-Sunni world, which Palestine is part of. At the same time, the Axis of Resistance, whilst outwardly anti-Israeli, unites the main anti-Saudi forces and thus strengthens Iran vis-à-vis Saudi Arabia.

[5] On the Axis of Resistance, see Walter Posch, The Third World, Global Islam, and Pragmatism. The Making of Iranian Foreign Policy, (SWP Research Paper) Berlin April 2013, pp. 25-30.

Iran and Saudi Arabia

The competition between Iran and Saudi Arabia[6] is well known. A typical Iranian take of this relationship is the following:

> "For some time now the two countries oppose [sic!] each other in regional strategic and geopolitical affairs. Until now, patience and restraint of the Islamic Republic of Iran was of the kind to prevent the region from gliding into destructive wars. [Saudi] Arabia and Iran oppose each other not only in Yemen but also on the issues of Iraq, Syria, Bahrayn, and in political fields such as the nuclear program, the economy, especially in the control of the oil price and its traditional role in OPEC." [7]

This competition goes beyond aspects of identity such as the Sunni-Shi'a divide or the ethnic difference between Arabs and Persians. It runs even deeper than mere ideological competition between the revolutionary, republican Islamic Republic of Iran and the monarchy of Saudi Arabia, although the ideological aspect has become the central element and main axis of confrontation since Iran's revolution in 1979.[8] Even so, the heart of the matter is still classic competition among regional powers. In fact, even before the Islamic revolution, when Iran and Saudi Arabia were both in the Western camp, bilateral relations were extremely competitive. For instance, Saudi Arabia refused to send representatives to the presumptuous festivities for the 2,500-year celebrations of Iran's monarchy in 1972.

Whilst Saudi Arabia and Iran avoided direct confrontation after the revolution, their competition was aggressive enough to affect the whole region. Tehran perceived the Taliban's victory in Afghanistan in 1998 not only as a defeat on behalf of a Pakistani-sponsored group in the neighbouring country but also as a strategic victory for Riyadh. When in 2003 the US-led coalition toppled the regime of Saddam Hussein in Iraq and the suppressed Shi'ite-

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[6] There are several useful studies on this topic, for instance Shahram Chubin and Charles Tripp, Iran-Saudi Arabia Relations and Regional Order, (Adelphi Paper 304) London 1996.

[7] Ali Jamali, Barrasi-ye ta'sir-e jang-e 'Arabestan dar Yaman bar amniyat-e Jomhuri-ye Eslami-ye Iran. In: Majalle-ye Siyasat-e Defa'i, 25.100 Autumn 1396/2018, pp. 153-196.

[8] See for instance Saleh al-Mani', The ideological Dimension in Saudi-Iranian Relations. In: Jamal p. al-Suwaidi (ed.): Iran and the Gulf. A Search for Stability, The Emirates Center for Strategic Studies and Research, Abu Dhabi 1996, pp. 153-176, 157, 158.

Arab majority came to power in Baghdad, many followers and supporters of the Iranian Supreme Leader Ali Khamenei were among them and quickly staffed key ministries such as the Ministry of the Interior. Thus, Saudi Arabia saw the toppling of the Iraqi dictator two years after the toppling of the Taliban in Afghanistan not as the elimination of a radical leader and an American success but as a victory for Iran. In the following years, Iran's basic assumption for the region, namely the fall of all secular regimes by the ballot or the bullet, came true. What the West erroneously dubbed as "Arab Spring", Iran – equally erroneously – called an "Islamic Awakening," namely the break-down of dysfunctional, mostly secular, highly militarised dictatorships. Therefore, the Iranians hoped for policy changes in their favour.

Two policies would prevent this from happen. The first was one centred on Egypt and the Muslim Brotherhood. Initially, from the 1950s onwards, Iran's Islamists had good relations with the Muslim Brotherhood, and from the 1990s onwards, one of the Brotherhood's most important offshoots, Hamas, was Teheran's ally. Yet Tehran's hopes were dashed when Turkey and Qatar embraced the Muslim Brotherhood to the chagrin of Saudi Arabia, making Iran a much less appealing partner for the Brotherhood. The outbreak of the civil war in Syria further weakened Tehran's standing with the Muslim Brotherhood due to Iran's continuous support for the Assad regime. At about the same time, Saudi Arabia successfully managed to frame Iran's "Axis of Resistance" as a "Shi'ite crescent" further isolating Iran in the region. Finally, Riyadh gained the strategic initiative when it helped to topple the Muslim-Brotherhood-led government of Egypt and paved the way for a staunch nationalist and secularist, military-based new government, thus cutting Turkey's and Qatar's roles in the Arab world to their natural size, whilst Iran was becoming more and more enmeshed in the tangles of Syria. It was in the context of Iran losing and Saudi Arabia gaining the initiative in which the situation in Yemen demanded more attention from both sides.

Thomas Juneau[9] underscored the impact of Saudi Arabia's military intervention in Yemen on the Huthis' standing in Iran. By 2015, his argument goes, "[T]ies between [the] Islamic Republic and the armed groups based in northwest Yemen were growing but limited. Yet by early 2021 the Huthis had

[9] Thomas Juneau, How War in Yemen Transformed the Iran-Houthi Partnership. In: Studies in Conflict and Terrorism, 2021, pp. 1-22.

become one of Iran's most important partners in the constellation of no-state armed groups […]".[10] According to the same author, there were limited contacts prior to 2004, although some Zaydi scholars studied in Qom in the 1980s and 1990s.[11] This assessment is correct as far as military and intelligence relations are concerned. However, while not the defining element in Iranian strategic decision-making, the ideological factor still plays an important role and helps to explain the relationship between the two entities. Thus, before we discern the geostrategic aspects of Iranian-Yemeni relations, we have to assess their ideological side.

The ideological dimension

One reason for Iran's initial reluctant behaviour was its – illusionary – hope for a greater role of Yemen's 12er Shi'ites. Immediately after the revolution, Tehran expected the emergence of a home-grown 12er Shi'ite community in Yemen. This was not pure fantasy, because the revolution positively affected Yemen's scattered 12er Shi'ites communities, who would congregate and reorganise. It is fair to assume that most of them originated from other countries. However, in the years following the 1979 revolution, Yemeni converts (*shi'eyan-e rahyaftegani*) from various confessions became the majority among the country's 12er Shi'ites. Located around the city of Mareb, the majority of these converts were intellectuals, physicians, professionals, clerics and academics. Yet the existence of such a small group of 12er Shi'ites in Yemen inspired by the Islamic Revolution, which raised some hopes among certain circles in Tehran, was strategically insignificant, because in demographic terms Yemen's 12er Shi'ites remain a *quantité négligeable*. Politically and culturally, can be deemed close to the *Jarudiyya*, the very branch (*ferqeh*) of *Zaydism* which is closest to the 12er Shi'ites.[12] For instance, just as the 12er Shi'ites do, the *Jarudiyya* rejects the legitimacy of the caliphs before Imam Ali, whereas all other *Zaydi* branches – *Sulaymaniyya, Jaririyya, Butriyya* and *Salihiyya* – accept them and are therefore widely regarded as the Sunna's fifth

[10] Juneau, art.cit., p. 1.
[11] Ibid.
[12] Hoseyn Ahmadi-Sefidan/Moulud Sa'idi Athar, Barrasi-ye kaneshha-ye siyasi-ye goruhha-ye shi'i dar Yaman. In: Motale'at-e siyasi-ye jehan-e eslam, vol. 10.1, 1400/2021, pp. 107-128, here pp. 112, 117, 118.

"*madhhab*".[13] According to a widely held but erroneous view among Iranian scholars, the Huthis belong to the *Jarudiyya*. Therefore, most Iranian authors would argue that the Huthis' ideological closeness to the Islamic Republic was a foregone conclusion.

However, the very point that Iranian authors make is the alleged revolutionary nature of Iran's 12er Shi'ite confession. Hence, so their reading of events goes, Zaydi Yemeni scholars who came to Qom to study would become politicised with a clear regional political edge as soon as they read the works of Khomeini. The most important of Yemeni scholars to study in Qom was undoubtedly Sayyid Badr al-Din al-Huthi. Iranian authors insist that he was heavily (*shadidan*) under the influence of Khomeini and other leaders of the Islamic revolution and their political thinking. Hence, according to some Iranian authors, Badr al-Din al-Huthi "stood up against Wahhabism under the inspiration (*elhamgiri*) and thinking (*tafakkor*)" of the Iranian revolutionaries.[14] Sayyid Badr al-Din was "a great and high rank *marja*" (*marja'-e bozorg va aliqadr)* in his own right who published several books, including a 12-volume *tafsir* of the Quran.[15] However, there is no proof that Badr al-Din al-Huthi had converted to 12er Shi'ism or that he promoted Khomeini's political views, as his son Husayn al-Huthi would in later years.[16] After his death, Husayn would continue his father's political work. Husayn's most influential tool were his *malazim* "speeches", in which he popularised some of Khomeini's political views, but he never promoted the Iranian concept of *velayat-e faqih* and stressed his *Zaydi* identity. Even so, the Iranians credit him for spreading 12er Shi'ite views among the *Zaydis* in region of Sa'da.[17] Yet, one must not overlook the fact that Husayn al-Huthi spent years in the 1990s in Sudan pursuing Islamic studies. Hence, he was exposed to many radical Islamist ideologies and trends, most of them very different from his own *Zaydi*

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[13] Türel Yılmaz Şahin/Damla Kocatepe, İran'ın Güvenlik Politikasında Yemen'in Rolü: Tarihsel ve Mezhepsel Bir Degerlendirme. In: KMU Sosyal ve Ekonomik Araştırmalar Dergisi, 24(42), 2022, pp. 45-61, here pp. 49, 50.

[14] Ahmadi-Safidan/Sa'idi-Athar, art.cit., p. 122.

[15] Ibid.

[16] Bernard Haykel, The Huthi Movement's religious and political ideology and its relationship to Zaidism. In: Abdullah Hamidaddin (ed): The Huthi Movement in Yemen. Ideology, Ambition and Security in the Arab Gulf, London New York 2022, pp. 17-25, here p. 20.

[17] Ahmadi-Safidan/Sa'idi-Athar, art.cit., p. 123.

tradition. Among them were not only jihadist trends as promoted by Al-Qaida and similar groups but also the writings of Khomeini.[18]

According to another quasi-official view in Iran, the Islamic revolution may positively affect the mentality and identity of those who embrace it.[19] As all revolutionaries hope for, this impact would result in a new revolutionary consciousness, consisting of the return to one's own self or roots, support for the oppressed (*mazluman*), fight against Zionism, religious populism (*mardomsalari-ye dini*), quest for justice, wish for independence, support for freedom movements, Islamic resistance, and messianic expectation (*mahdaviyat va entezar*).[20] Furthermore, so the argument goes, the revolutionary mind-set would transform all Shi'ite communities in Arab countries from "forgotten Muslims" to politically cognisant and self-confident actors embracing a "revolutionary culture" (*farhang-e enqelabi*). Said "culture" is nothing but "Iran's revolutionary soft power", which is deeply rooted in religious Islamic convictions (*e'teqadat*).[21] The "export" (*sodur*) of Iran's revolutionary culture to Muslim, especially Shi'ite, countries would automatically result in laying the base for an Islamic mentality and political ideology.[22] Husayn al-Huthi was the perfect example of this when he created the slogan "Allahu Akbar, death to America, death to Israel, hate for the Jews, triumph for Islam".[23] This slogan was first heard on 17 January 2002.[24] Despite all the similarities with the Iranian slogans, there is an important difference: the explicit curse of the

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[18] Haykel, art.cit., pp. 20, 21.

[19] This is the argument of Piruz Hashempur/Ali Mohammad Haqiqi, Rabeteh-ye enqelab-e eslami-ye Iran va mahvar-e moqavemat dar hoviyat-bakhshi. In: Pazhuheshha-ye siyasi-ye jehan-e eslam, 10.14 Winter 1399/2021, pp. 211-242.

[20] Hashempur and Haqiqi, art.cit., p. 212.

[21] Ibid, p. 221; Iran has a vast literature on "soft power" (*eqtedar-e narm*) and "soft war" (*jang-e narm*), all of which is derived from Joseph Nye and was translated into Arabic, in order to serve the needs of Lebanese Hizbullah and other sympathisers. For an adaption to the Yemeni context, see Alexander Weissenburger, The Soft War and the Past: The Huthi Movement's Use of historical narratives as source of legitimacy. In: Hamidaddin, op.cit., pp. 57-76.

[22] Hashempur/Haqiqi, art.cit., p. 221.

[23] Ahmadi-Safidan/Sa'idi-Athar, p. 123; Hashempur/Haqiqi, art.cit., p. 230: *Allahu akbar, al-maut l-amrika, al-maut l-Isra'il al-la'na 'ali-l-Yahud al-nasr li-l-islam*.

[24] Mohammed Almahfali, Transformation of Dominant political Themes from the founder to the current leader of the Huthi-Movement. In: Hamidaddin, op.cit., pp. 37-55, here p. 43.

Jews, which does not exist in Iranian revolutionary sloganeering because official Iran insists to be anti-Zionist, not antisemitic. Even so, the Iranians give themselves due credit for having provided the "core" (*asl*) of the slogan.[25]

In the end, the Iranians identify five points that Iran's Islamists bestowed on the Yemeni Huthi movement: xenophobia (*bigane-satizi*), meaning the rejection of Israel and the USA,[26] acceptance of Khomeinism,[27] political activism[28] organising cultural and social organisation in the spirit of the Islamic revolution,[29] revitalisation of Zaydism, and the spread of 12er Shi'ism. Finally, they cite a pseudo-historic argument when they refer to Iran as the origin of everything Shi'ite in Yemen: "The Iranians had played an undeniable role in bringing Islam to the people of Yemen and attracting them to the [12er] Shi'ite confession."[30] In other words, according to the Iranian's view the Huthis' embrace was inevitable as it was historically determined.

However, historically 12er Shi'ism was not a revolutionary ideology; on the contrary, it was an ideology embracing patience and enduring suffering until the "promised day" (*yavm-e ma'hud*) of the appearance of the Mahdi. The politicisation and revolutionisation of Iranian Shi'ism would start with the Khomeinist movement and its precursors and related currents.[31] The *Zaydis*, on the other hand, look back upon a long tradition of violent resistance against injustice and unjust rulers.[32] The difference lies in the concept of the *mahdi* and the *emam*, which includes an imperative for supporting anyone who

[25] Hashempur/Haqiqi, art.cit., p. 230.
[26] Ibid.
[27] Ibid, p. 231.
[28] Ibid, p. 233.
[29] Ibid, p. 234.
[30] Ibid, p. 236.
[31] Other than Khomeini, Ne'matollāh Salehi Najafabadi, a popular cleric familiarised traditional Shi'ism with revolutionary thinking in Iran, see Evan Siegel, The politics of Shahid-e Jawid. In: Rainer Brunner/Werner Ende (eds), The Twelver Shia in Modern Times, Religious Culture and Political History, Leiden – Boston – Cologne 2001, pp. 150-178.
[32] Yılmaz-Şahin/Kocatepe, art.cit., p. 49.

credibly fights injustice.[33] The logical result of such a disposition is a call for uprisings. Hence, rather than understanding Iran as the source and initiator of the Huthis' political thinking, it may have well been the other way round, as the *Zaydis*, Badr al-Din Huthi and his son Husayn would have deliberately looked for a revolutionary tradition. Therefore, they would embrace the anti-imperialist ideology of Khomeinism rather than 12er Shi'ite theology. It is also remarkable that Iran and Khomeini figure prominently in the speeches of Husayn but are negligible in the discourse of his brother Abdulmalik, who succeeded him when he was killed in 2004. This is in spite of Iran's stronger involvement in Yemeni affairs and its increasing military, political and economic aid for the Huthis.[34]

Iran and Yemen in the region

Like everyone else, Iranian analysts stress the important geostrategic position of Yemen as a gateway from the Indian Ocean to the Red Sea and from the Mediterranean and the Persian Gulf to the Horn of Africa. They are also well aware of the importance of the Bab al-Mandab waterway for the Sumed pipeline and the Suez channel, as well as of its importance for Saudi Arabia's interests – the Saudis control several strategically important smaller islands belonging to Yemen and, according to the Iranians, would therefore never allow Huthi presence. Iran justifies its interest in the Bab al-Mandab with another aspect: the waterway's importance for Israeli security and power projections.[35] Western analysts may disagree with this point; however, it is remarkable that Teheran needs to bring Israel into the equation.

Concerning Iran's relations with Yemen, one can say the following: before the Islamic Revolution of 1979, imperial Iran eschewed close relations with both North and South Yemen. The only engagement in the region was with the Sultanate of Oman, when in 1963 Iran helped to suppress the Dhofar insurrection. After the revolution, the president of North Yemen, Ali Abdullah Salih, was the first to congratulate Khomeini. Yet, with the outbreak

[33] The differences between the two confessions are well analysed through the concept of *mahdi* by Seyyedeh Fatemeh Hoseyni Mirsafi and Seyyed Abdollah Daneshi, Bazkhvani-ye jaygah-e mahdaviyat dar tahaqqoq-e hokumat-e 'adl az manzar-e Zeydiyeh. In: Faslnāmeh-ye 'elmi-pazhuheshi-e entezar-e mou'ud, 71 Winter 1399/2021, pp. 51-68.

[34] Almahfali, art.cit., pp.47-9.

[35] Jamali, art.cit., pp. 165-168.

of the Iran-Iraq war in 1980, Salih would quickly side with Arab Iraq in accordance with GCC policy and even send troops to support the Baathists. South Yemen too welcomed the new revolutionary regime in Tehran, and both sides showed some goodwill, especially since the South was neutral on Iran's side during the Iran-Iraq war. After the long war and the unification of the two Yemens, Tehran and Sana'a signed several cultural and economic agreements, but relations never really developed, mainly because Salih valued the relations with Saudi Arabia and the GCC countries more.[36] When Iran embraced Yemen's civil society protests from 2010 onwards, relations with Salih deteriorated. Furthermore, the important role of the Huthis alerted Saudi Arabia, which understood their success to be increasing Iranian influence. When Salih's successor Mansur Hadi wanted to ameliorate relations with Iran, he met with the fierce resistance of the GCC.[37] This, in turn, caused Tehran to intensify its efforts regarding Yemen. Typically, for Iran it had to fit into a broader constitutional and analytical frame.

According to Article 10 of the Iranian constitution, which sketches out the principles of Tehran's foreign policy, Iran has to observe three political and strategic aims:

1. Increasing and developing the economy, and preserving national security and territorial integrity;
2. Defending the Muslims and supporting liberation movements and hostility towards Israel;
3. Stabilising Islamic societies according to Shi'ite principles.

It goes without saying that the Huthis perfectly fulfilled all three points of Iran's principled foreign policy. But in the end, it was Tehran's assessment of regional developments that necessitated increased Iranian involvement in Yemen, namely reading the "Arab Spring" as an "Islamic Awakening" and understanding said awakening as the beginning of waning Western influence in the region. In addition, in light of Riyadh's alleged support for radical Sunni groups like Al-Qaida, Tehran decided to risk confrontation with Saudi Arabia, which it might have avoided under normal circumstances.[38] Thus,

[36] Ibid, p. 173.
[37] Ibid, p. 174.
[38] Ibid.

relations with the Huthis were almost automatically elevated to the strategic level. This does not really come as a surprise, because Iran shares land and sea borders with fifteen countries but has no natural friends and allies, which is why it cultivates relations with resistance movements throughout the region.[39] With the continuation of the conflict, Iran's main assumption, the decrease of Western and pro-Western influence in the region and the rise of revolutionary, pro-Iranian populist Islamism, has turned out to be wrong. Thus, Tehran is stuck in Yemen for two reasons: first, the Iranians want to prove themselves as a regional power capable of extending its influence. Ideological aspects such as Iran's support for the resistance front, [40] the Islamic awakening,[41] and the spread of revolutionary Islamist thinking[42] merely serve as support of its strategic position. Hence, Saudi Arabia's resistance is equally a strategic necessity. It is also the second reason for Iran's engagement, because it allows Tehran to confront Riyadh with little military engagement but still achieves high political yields.

Taking this situation as a point of departure, Iranian scholars[43] have inferred four possible scenarios:

1. Continuation: the most likely scenario is the continuation of the current tragic affairs, because the parties involved have been incapable of finding common ground, let alone a viable peace plan. On the contrary, tensions between Saudi Arabia and Iran are actually expected to increase, and involved parties such as Ansarollah are not yet exhausted.[44]

[39] Iran counts the following organisations and resistance groups among its friends: Shi'ite groups in Iraq, Bahrain, Lebanon, Shi'ites and other enemies of the Taliban in Afghanistan, Zaydis in Yemen, Kurds of Iraq and the Palestinians. Jamali, art.cit., p. 175.
[40] Jamali, art.cit., p. 185.
[41] Ibid, p. 186.
[42] Ibid, p. 187.
[43] Mohammad Reza Hatami/Alireza Beygi, Chashm-andaz-e jang-e Yaman va peyamadha-ye amniyati-ye an bara-ye Jomhuri-ye Eslami-ye Iran. In: Faslnameh-ye pazhuheshha-ye beynolmelali*,* 38 Autumn 1399/2021, pp. 65-90.
[44] Hatami/Beygi, art.cit., p. 79.

2. Dialogue: this would be possible if the international community finally decided to solve the crisis via dialogue. There are several points worth considering because they should be resolved beforehand. For instance, a dialogue only makes sense for Tehran if the international community recognises Iran as "a country influencing Yemeni affairs", thus legitimising not only its presence but its strong involvement. It is not understandable why Saudi Arabia should consent to such a proposition, considering that the point of the whole war was to come back to the *status quo ante*.[45]
3. Dissolution: Yemen could again be divided into a Northern and a Southern state. Such a scenario may become likely when Saudi Arabia realises that it cannot achieve its objectives in any other way.[46] Iran would see a Saudi-monitored or -instigated dissolution as a threat to its interests, because Tehran has to assume that Riyadh would control all strategically important geographic choke points and use this position against Iranian interests.[47]
4. Referendum: this is the most unlikely scenario of all, because it would necessitate serious political preparation and administrative groundwork. Besides, Iranians are convinced that their followers would come out strongest in any referendum, and Saudi Arabia would resist this.[48] Interestingly, Iranian scholars hardly ever ask what Teheran's reaction would be if a referendum yielded results other than those expected.

These scenarios have remained valid even after the historic declaration of March 10, 2023, when Saudi Arabia and Iran declared their willingness to mend fences and to normalise relations. As welcome as this declaration is in principle, there is no indication of a detailed and workable plan for bringing peace to Yemen, although chances for a dialogue would exist.

[45] Ibid, p. 81.
[46] Ibid, p. 83.
[47] Ibid, p. 84.
[48] Ibid, pp. 84, 85.

Why ignoring state fragmentation will worsen human security in Yemen

Dorothea Günther, Mareike Transfeld

Introduction

That Ansar Allah forcibly took control of the Yemeni capital in September 2014 was a watershed moment, triggering the military intervention of a coalition led by Saudi Arabia in March 2015 and casting the country into a brutal war. At the time, transitional President Abd Rabbuh Mansour Hadi and his government were widely seen as lacking legitimacy by Yemenis. Not only had his two-year term already expired, but he and his government were also not able to effect tangible changes for a people which had been hoping for real political and economic improvements since the country-wide protests in 2011. Yet, the takeover of Ansar Allah came as a shock, with many Yemenis fearing its repercussions. What was framed by Ansar Allah as the completion of the "2011 youth revolution", to many others constituted a coup d'état. Since the group took control of Sana'a, Ansar Allah, an armed group from the north of Yemen, began seizing control of state institutions across their area of control. The intervention of the Saudi-led military alliance in March 2015 claimed officially to be seeking the restoration of the "legitimate" or internationally recognised government in the Yemeni capital and the withdrawal of Ansar Allah.

Since the beginning of the war in Yemen, the UN peace process has had limited success in furthering peace efforts in the country. The peace process aims to re-establish the Hadi government in the capital, to achieve the withdrawal of Ansar Allah from the capital and other cities that the group has occupied since 2014, and finally, to re-initiate the political process as outlined by the Gulf Coordination Council initiative. However, the status quo on the ground demonstrates that it is difficult for the UN-led peace process to

achieve its initial goals.[1] After eight years of war, Ansar Allah today controls the entire north-west of Yemen. It was Ali Abdallah Salih's alliance with Ansar Allah which enabled the latter to take over Yemen's security sector with relative ease after they had violently taken control of the capital Sana'a in September 2014 and occupied national-level state institutions. The takeover was facilitated by Salih's loyalists, who, after the former president's resignation following the 2011 country-wide protests, still held relevant positions in security-sector institutions across the country. Territories under the control of the Internationally Recognised Government of Yemen (IRG) hence had to improvise when rebuilding security frameworks from scratch.

The entirely different contexts in which security sectors evolved throughout the years of the war are now reflected in a fragmented state, divided by so much more than the frontline between Ansar Allah and its adversaries. This fragmentation has had detrimental effects on human security. In the context of Yemen's fragmented state, human rights and well-being are not guaranteed for individuals and communities. The situation in Yemen has been described as the world's worst humanitarian crisis. 80% of the population are said to depend on humanitarian aid. What is more, the disrespect for human rights and for the rule of law is blatant. De facto authorities as well as the Yemeni government have demonstrated little interest in the well-being of the Yemeni people. While Yemen has never had a particularly good human-rights track record, the fragmentation of the state has exacerbated the humanitarian crisis and has allowed for an unprecedented atmosphere of impunity. Not only are all conflict parties accused of war crimes, but individual members of militaries, militias and other armed actors are also responsible for human rights violations, while conflict parties have been made responsible for obstructing aid. Thus, these actors have an active role in what has been coined the world's worst humanitarian crisis.

[1] Salisbury, Peter: The International Approach to the Yemen War: Time for a Change, October 2020. https://www.yemenpolicy.org/the-international-approach-to-the-yemen-war-time-for-a-change/; Transfeld, Mareike: Die fragwürdige Rolle der UN in Jemen. In: Vereinte Nationen, 2/2018, pp. 79-84.

Ibb: Peaceful takeover by Ansar Allah

In the context of Ansar Allah's military expansion in the north, the local ruling elite of Ibb[2] agreed on a deal, thereby handing over control without resistance as early as in October 2014. This makes sense when seen in the governorate's cultural and historical context: even though the governorate is predominantly Shafi'i, Zaydi families settled in Ibb, connecting its social structure with that of the north. This, coupled with the network of Salih within state institutions, allowed not only Ansar Allah to take control swiftly and without the use of force, but it also meant that resistance against the northern Ansar Allah was far less self-evident. Because Ansar Allah prioritised controlling formal structures, with the goal of being perceived as a legitimate state actor, Ibb experienced the strengthening of state security institutions, while social actors, such as tribal leaders, were weakened. This created conditions in which the state apparatus could become increasingly repressive.

Key positions in the state were immediately replaced by Ansar Allah members, with supervisors (*mushrifun*; sing. *mushrif*) appointed to all state positions (e.g., ministers, governors, institutional directors, school administrators) and ordered to study administrative processes before they eventually took over control themselves. Another priority of Ansar Allah was to marginalise sheikhs to prevent them from uniting against the group. Applying a systematic political strategy based on divide-and-rule, they offered some of them high-ranking military positions and then punished the ones refusing to cooperate; Clearly, the sheikhs who accepted the offer, and thus effectively allowed Ansar Allah to control their actions, faced accusations from within their tribal confederations. Consequently, sheikhs and other informal security providers lost their traditional role.[3]

From 2016 to 2017, the Ansar Allah-Salih alliance further institutionalised control by forming the so-called National Salvation Government in Sana'a in November 2016. Since the alliance with Salih collapsed in December 2017,

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[2] Transfeld, Mareike/Shuja al-Deen, Maysaa/al-Hamdani, Raiman: Seizing the State: Ibb's Security Arrangement after Ansarallah's Takeover, June 2020. https://www.yemenpolicy.org/seizing-the-state-ibbs-security-arrangement-after-ansarallahs-takeover-2/.

[3] Ibid.

the group's focus has shifted towards suppression of opponents. This shift has led to the persecution and the purge of Salih's supporters, including once-prominent social figures and tribal leaders losing their position of privilege, and, finally, Ansar Allah assuming full control over state institutions in Ibb by shifting the supervisors from informal posts into government jobs. Ansar Allah began to effectively keep police from sustaining justice and instead had them prioritise the pursuit and imprisonment of political opponents, which consequently caused a deterioration of the police's image according to Yemen Policy Center (YPC) surveys from 2019.[4]

Ansar Allah's security framework in Ibb is as effective as it is vulnerable: it is questionable how long its base – loyalists with insufficient expertise in administrating state institutions and providing effective security – and its enforcers – suppressed aqils and police officers – as well as the civil society, which is suffering from absence of reliable law enforcement while being deprived of any human rights, will stay stable and calm. Formal state positions and political roles increasingly overlap inside Ansar Allah, which further marginalises local elites and tribal groups.[5] While the position of Ansar Allah has not been seriously threatened, it needs to be mentioned that Ansar Allah have faced "rebellion from within their own ranks as well as from tribes and communal groups opposed to their rule".[6] In April 2023, after a local activist was killed by authorities, protests erupted in Ibb against Huthi rule, with observers ranking the potential for further protest in the governorate as high.

Aden: Southern Resistance Emerged Amidst Collapsed Security Sector

After Ansar Allah had taken over Sana'a in September 2014, Aden was declared the interim capital in February 2015. Thus, Aden remained in the sphere of IRG control. However, the trajectory of fragmentation of the security sector in Aden demonstrates how non-state actors hijacked the security sector from the state hierarchy, leading to a situation in which security

[4] YPC, Security Perceptions Survey, 2019.
[5] Carboni, Andrea/Nevola, Luca: Inside Ibb: A Hotbed of Infighting in Houthi-Controlled Yemen, October 2019. https://acleddata.com/2019/10/03/inside-ibb-a-hotbed-of-infighting-in-houthi-controlled-yemen/.
[6] Ibid.

actors repress media and activists in the absence of the rule of law. In Aden, President Salih had placed particularly loyal officials in positions in the security sector to keep control over the city which was home to the Southern Independence Movement. As high-ranking officials sided with the Ansar Allah takeover, and troops deserted their posts to support the anti-Huthi resistance, the security sector collapsed, creating a security vacuum that was filled by the local resistance.[7] The local resistance is rooted both in the local presence of the Islah party and the southern independence movements, which since the unification of Northern and Southern Yemen in 1990 resisted marginalisation by the northern elite. The movements gained momentum in 2011 in the context of the country-wide protests against the Salih regime and eventually called for the re-establishment of southern independence. In the face of the incursion of the Ansar Allah-Salih alliance into Aden in 2015, what was once a peaceful movement transformed into an armed resistance, the so-called Southern Popular Resistance *(al-Maqawama al-Sha'biyya*).

When President Abd Rabbuh Mansur Hadi initiated the rebuilding of security institutions in 2016/2017, he relied on the Islah party as a supporting force. Despite representing various components of the Islamist spectrum, the Islah party is widely considered to be the country's branch of the Muslim Brotherhood. The relationship between Hadi and the Islah party grew close after the transitional period 2012; during the Ansar Allah takeover, the party's networks within the security sector had remained loyal. However, since the UAE, as a member of the Saudi-led military alliance intervening in the country after March 2015, became increasingly involved in rebuilding the security sector in the South, Hadi had to bow to the UAE's desire to cooperate with southern forces rather than with the Islah party. This is because the UAE sees Islah as part of the regional Muslim Brotherhood movement. Within the UAE, the Islah party is considered an illegal opposition, and thus,

[7] Saleh, Fatima/al-Sharjabi, Ahmed: Institutional Prerequisites for the STC "Coup" in Aden and Perspectives on the Jeddah Deal, October 2019. https://www.yemenpolicy.org/institutional-prerequisites-for-the-stc-coup-in-aden-and-perspectives-on-the-jeddah-deal-2/; Transfeld, Mareike/al-Iriani, Mohamed/Sultan, Maged/Heinze, Marie-Christine: Local Security Governance in Yemen in Times of War. The Cases of al-Hudayda, Ta'iz and Aden, April 2021. https://www.yemenpolicy.org/wp-content/uploads/2021/04/YPC-CARPO-Local-Security-Governance-in-Yemen-in-Times-of-War-final.pdf, p. 53.

in 2014, the UAE declared the regional Brotherhood movement a terrorist organisation. Consequently, Hadi not only integrated fighters affiliated to the southern movement into the National Army[8] but also appointed officials of the southern movement into key state positions: Shallal Ali Shay'a, who became chief of police, is but one example.[9] Likewise, when the UAE was building security institutions in its efforts to restore security in Aden, it favoured officials affiliated with the southern movement and created the Security Belt, Support & Backup Brigades, which today are all loyal to the Southern Transitional Council (STC).[10]

In May 2017, the STC was formed as a proto government for a future independent south, claiming to speak for all southern Yemenis. However, the STC's founding members come from the most radical spectrum of the southern movement, which demands full independence for the south within the borders of pre-1990. With officials loyal to the STC in key state positions, the council was gradually able to take control of the security sector in and around Aden. For example, with the Chief of Police loyal to the STC, the council began building its own parallel Security Committee, which is a committee comprising all heads of security agencies represented in the governorate and serving the Governor with regard to all questions concerning security. The STC Committee brought together all security actors that had become loyal to the STC, allowing the STC to cement its dominance of security governance. At the same time, it left the IRG in the hitherto official committee without real influence and with a lack of legitimacy, thus reinforcing the fragmentation of the state.[11] With the IRG security structures weak, riddled with confusing hierarchies and orders of command, there was plenty of space for the STC to take control.

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[8] Saleh/al-Sharjabi: Institutional Prerequisites for the STC "Coup" in Aden.

[9] Transfeld/al-Iriani/Sultan/Heinze: Local Security Governance in Yemen in Times of War, p. 57.

[10] Bin Othman, Shaima/Transfeld, Mareike: The State of the Police in Western Yemen, January 2020. https://www.yemenpolicy.org/the-state-of-the-police-in-western-yemen/; Transfeld/al-Iriani/Sultan/Heinze: Local Security Governance in Yemen in Times of War, p. 53.

[11] Transfeld/al-Iriani/Sultan/Heinze: Local Security Governance in Yemen in Times of War, pp. 57 and 67.

After clashes between the STC and IRG forces in January 2018, the STC launched its effort to seize Aden for the second time in the summer of 2019. Once the STC pushed IRG forces out of the city, with various military camps declaring their loyalty to the STC, the southern council declared self-rule. The move demonstrated clearly that the STC would not simply share power with the IRG but instead lay claim to the territory itself, thus becoming the de-facto government of Aden. Even the Riyadh Agreement, which the Saudi government mediated in November 2019 in order to reunify the IRG and the STC, only led to a very hesitant rapprochement: although STC troops were subsequently paid for by the Saudi-funded IRG and a new joint national government was formed in December 2020, the two entities never united, with chains of commands remaining separate.[12] Although the level of conflict between the IRG and the STC has declined significantly since then, clashes continue to occur in the city, with factions of the STC and the wider southern movement competing for control of land and resources. With the absence of the rule of law, armed factions act in an atmosphere of impunity, with the arrest and disappearance of oppositional figures and activists on the rise. The city is also plagued by frequent assassinations, creating an atmosphere of fear and adding to the repressive atmosphere.

Ta'izz: Appearing as IRG territory but under de-facto control of the Islah party

The governorate of Ta'izz has been divided between Ansar Allah and IRG control since 2015. Much of the provincial capital Ta'izz is under the control of the IRG. After several years of political infighting between multiple local armed groups operating under the banner of the IRG, the Islah party has come to dominate the security sector in the city, leading to its political domination. Islah's dominance in Ta'izz can be traced back to 2011, when Salih's security forces violently repressed the protesters in the city and an Islah-dominated oppositional alliance, alongside with some generals, stepped in under the guise of defending the protesters.[13] Even though unity is relatively strong in the current security sector, political and territorial division/fragmentation remains an issue: positions in state institutions are held by security and military leaders affiliated with the Islah-Party, an alliance between mili-

[12] Ibid. pp 53-55.
[13] Ibid. pp. 38 and 51.

tary leaders affiliated with Nasserite Party and the Salafi militia, and members of the GPC – all of them competing for power.[14]

Just as it was the case in Aden, Ansar Allah attempted to capture Ta'izz with the support of the military and political party network of former President Salih. However, Ta'izz political parties next to local tribes have historically been active, and because Ansar Allah has no historical, social or cultural roots in central Yemen, where Ta'izz is located, a strong local armed resistance was mobilised in the city. As early as in April 2015, the Coordination Council for the Popular Resistance Command emerged, composed of the most important political and military figures of the resistance and consequently dominated by Islah-backed fighters.[15] Ground battles in Ta'izz destroyed much of the city. State institutions and frameworks collapsed, while lawlessness, hunger and criminality increased.[16] Especially in resistance-controlled Ta'izz, lower-ranking police officers joined the Ansar Allah-Salih alliance or deserted their posts and ran for safety, which is why the police sector collapsed.[17] The resulting security vacuum has been used by non-state actors to expand their influence in the security sector, also because the IRG has officially integrated some of the armed groups into the security structures – originally in order to gain control over them.[18]

However, it quickly became evident that instead of being embedded in clear hierarchies, the integrated actors still prioritise their loyalties to political parties or military leaders over their affiliation to state institutions. These fault lines were ready to be exploited by regional actors who were trying to influence the power dynamics in the city. For instance, the UAE began to support local Salafi groups opposing the Islah party, thus driving a wedge into the anti-Ansar Allah resistance.[19] In 2018, Governor Ameen Mahmoud implemented a security campaign which, according to security officials interviewed

[14] Ibid. p. 35.
[15] Sultan, Maged/Transfeld, Mareike/Muqbil, Kamal: Formalizing the Informal. State and Non-State Security Providers in Government-Controlled Taiz City, July 2019. https://www.yemenpolicy.org/formalizing-the-informal-state-and-non-state-security-providers-in-government-controlled-taiz-city/, pp. 16-19.
[16] Ibid. pp 14 and 21.
[17] Ibid. p. 11.
[18] Ibid. pp. 13, 22 and 24.
[19] Ibid. p. 8.

in Ta'izz, improved security. Although rated as a success, these security campaigns were viewed by the opposition as an attempt to rid the city of non-state actors, particularly Salafi groups supported by the UAE. Between October 2018 and July 2019, tensions between Islah and the Salafi Abu al-Abbas Brigade escalated, ending with the eviction of the latter and the Islah party emerging as a main player in many state security institutions and thereby contributing to political stabilisation, according to local civil society and security figures.[20] Nevertheless, given the continued fragmentation and competition amongst political groups in the city, infighting and violent clashes between components of the Ta'izz security sector still continue in the city. Since 2018, the National Resistance Forces under the command of nephew of former President Salih, Tariq Salih, have emerged on the West Coast. Supported by the UAE, the NRF began to challenge the position of Islah in Ta'izz by means of development and governance projects.

State fragmentation negatively impacts human security

The fragmentation of the state as described above has been detrimental to human security. The fact that the legitimate use of force is distributed among multiple security actors generally poses a major risk to public security, especially to vulnerable groups. The same goes for non-state actors who have established their power monopoly to such a degree that they do not have to fear any sort of resistance or law-enforcement. On the one hand, this has created an atmosphere of impunity where human rights violations go uninvestigated and unpunished. YPC observations between January and April 2019 proved that formal army groups get away with crimes such as robbery, violence against women and children, and murder.[21] The situation is even more complex because "the line between state and non-state actors cannot

[20] Sultan/Transfeld/Muqbil: Formalizing the Informal, p. 2; Transfeld/al-Iriani/Sultan/Heinze: Local Security Governance in Yemen in Times of War, p. 35f.; Sultan, Maged/al-Sharjabi, Ahmed: Ripple Effects from Yemen's South Threaten Stability in Taiz, September 2019.
https://www.yemenpolicy.org/icsp_eu_researchdebrieftaiz2019sept13; YPC interviews and focus groups with civil society and security figures, Taiz, between February 2018 and July 2019.

[21] Sultan/Transfeld/Muqbil: Formalizing the Informal, p. 20; Transfeld/al-Iriani/Sultan/Heinze: Local Security Governance in Yemen in Times of War, p. 44.

be easily drawn":[22] a lack of uniforms, the integration of non-state actors and unqualified civilians blur this line. On top of that, the status of many non-state actors as part of resistance protects them from being held accountable.[23] On the other hand, fragmenting territory and governance has cut communities off from vital resources and humanitarian aid.

Human Rights and Gender in a Fragmented State

All parties to the conflicts have been accused of human rights violations, which have been carefully documented by multiple local human rights organisations. For instance, Mwatana for Human Rights investigated acts of torture and enforced disappearance of detainees between May 2016 and December 2019. After having conducted at least 2,566 interviews with former detainees, witnesses of abuse, relatives of detainees, activists, and lawyers, the NGO holds evidence for at least 1,605 cases of arbitrary detention, 770 cases of enforced disappearance, and 344 cases of torture committed by multiple parties of conflict: Ansar Allah (904 arbitrary or abusive detentions; 353 cases of enforced disappearance; 138 cases of torture and 27 deaths in detention), the IRG (282/90/65/14) as well as UAE-backed forces (including STC; 19/327/141/25).[24]

In contrast to such cases of human rights violations, the more specific pattern of impunity can be drastically exemplified by the issue of sexual violence against children in Yemen. Owing to the sensitivity of the issue, there are still no verified figures on the topic. However, four cases of child rape in Ta'izz, investigated by Amnesty International 2019,[25] offer a glimpse into what in fact is a structural issue with devastating consequences for numerous child victims. According to AI reporting, affected families often fear to report the incidents when the suspects are politically aligned with the Islah-party, which

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[22] Sultan/Transfeld/Muqbil: Formalizing the Informal, p. 19.

[23] Ibid. p. 20.

[24] Mwatana for Human Rights: In the Darkness. Abusive Detention, Disappearance and Torture in Yemen's Unofficial Prisons, June 2020. https://mwatana.org/wp-content/uploads/2020/06/In-the-Darkness.pdf, p. 16.

[25] Amnesty International: Yemen: Ta'iz authorities must tackle child rape and abuse under militia rule, March 2019. https://www.amnesty.org/en/latest/press-release/2019/03/yemen-taiz-authorities-must-tackle-child-rape-and-abuse-under-militia-rule/.

dominates the military and political institutions in the city. Despite that, the aforementioned four cases have been directly reported to the Criminal Investigations Department in Ta'izz; still, only two civilian suspects have been detained, while militia suspects have not been arrested.

Notwithstanding, women are clearly treated differently than men in Yemeni society since they tend to be perceived as physically and emotionally weak and, consequently, should be protected and controlled – partly for their own safety and partly driven by the concept of family honour. These circumstances can lead as far as men going to jail on behalf of a guilty woman and women being prevented from filing a complaint by her relatives.[26] Since female migrants and refugees are excluded from this framework and usually cannot afford to pay financial fines, they often end up with long prison terms, being locked up with their children. Moreover, even in places where we know special female police exist, especially in Aden, there have been increasing reports about security institutions posing a threat to women, arresting them "without charges or based on false accusations, such as espionage."[27] In the context of state fragmentation, the treatment of women by security actors also differs. In April 2022, Ansar Allah introduced a rule according to which women are not allowed to travel without a *mahram* (a male relative). Although no such rule was implemented outside of Ansar Allah territory, in some tribal areas under IRG control soldiers and tribesmen at security checkpoints likewise began asking women for the presence of a *mahram*.

A cross-cutting issue among security institutions is the fact that gender perspectives are almost never taken into account. According to YPC findings, this is due to a "lack of funding, conservative social norms and restrictive policies from governorate level Security Departments" as they "prevent local police stations from recruiting women."[28] Tellingly, in 2010, only 2,685

[26] Transfeld/al-Iriani/Sultan/Heinze: Local Security Governance in Yemen in Times of War, pp. 11f.; Heinze, Marie-Christine: Women's Role in Peace and Security in Yemen, 2016. https://carpo-bonn.org/wp-content/uploads/2016/12/Heinze-Womens-role-in-peace-and-security-in-Yemen-Literature-review.pdf, p. 5.

[27] Transfeld/al-Iriani/Sultan/Heinze: Local Security Governance in Yemen in Times of War, p. 13.

[28] Bin Othman/Transfeld: The State of the Police in Western Yemen.

women were part of Yemen's police force[29] – a number which most probably worsened rather than improved throughout the war. This deprives women of a trustful official to whom they can confidentially report crimes; hence, they commonly "prefer not to go to the police because they do not feel safe at police stations."[30] That again causes a bias in documented crimes, insinuating that there were no gender differences regarding security concerns. Interestingly, this could be one reason for the complete disregard shown towards unique female security concerns and requirements noticeable among security actors.[31] Instead, when asked about these concerns, most of the interviewed police officers simply highlighted that they see women as an equal part of society and thus do not treat them differently.[32]

How fragmentation impedes humanitarian aid when it is being left out of the equation

With 80% of the population requiring some form of humanitarian support, Yemen is often described as the world's worst humanitarian crisis. What is also often mentioned in the discussion is that the crisis in Yemen is man-made and not natural. Especially at the beginning of the war, the communities' ability to access food, medicine and other basic resources was drastically impacted by the land, air and water blockade erected by the Saudi-led military coalition. While the blockade had the goal of preventing weapons shipments from reaching Ansar Allah, it ultimately made imports difficult, which is catastrophic in a country that imports up to 90 percent of its food needs. With the introduction of the UN inspection mechanism, the blockade has loosened at ports, allowing food and medicine to enter the country once again. However, given that the government and Ansar Allah authorities have paid public-sector salaries only irregularly, a majority of Yemeni households are unable to buy the foodstuff and medicine that is available. The war has also exacerbated Yemen's water crisis. With water basins located near frontlines or in military areas laid bare, the amount of water available is decreasing rap-

[29] Al-shurtat al-nisayiyat tursid al-iirhabiiyn fi alniqat al'amniat waealaa madakhil al-mudun al-rayiysia. In: Al-Methaq, October 14, 2010, http://www.almethaq.net/news/news-17831.htm.

[30] Bin Othman/Transfeld: The State of the Police in Western Yemen.

[31] Ibid.

[32] Transfeld/al-Iriani/Sultan/Heinze: Local Security Governance in Yemen in Times of War, p. 11.

idly. What is more, women and children, who are often responsible for fetching water, are forced to walk long distances to water wells, sometimes through areas mined by conflict parties. In Ta'izz, children who fetch water are at risk of being shot at by snipers.[33]

Certain areas in Yemen have become very difficult to access because conflict parties block roads for military or economic reasons, using military vehicles or landmines. Either conflict parties choose to close roads to prevent the opponents from moving their military vehicles and prepare for offences, or roads are simply blocked because they are close to active frontlines. Furthermore, the ability of conflict parties to control roads allows them to collect taxes and check the identification of individuals crossing between the territories. However, this also impacts the ability to transport aid to locations that are closed off. Ta'izz is a prime example of this. The city has been under a near-full siege since 2015, with all but one road leading in and out of the city closed. For this reason, all commercial goods and humanitarian aid needs to be transported into the city via an unpaved road that winds itself through the central Yemeni mountains for 5 to 7 hours before reaching its destination. Before the siege, transporters only needed 15 minutes to reach the same area. Even though local mediators approached the issues on humanitarian grounds and attempted to mediate road openings, the conflict parties' interests are too entrenched and interconnected with national issues for them to improve road access to Ta'izz. In addition, there have been efforts from Ansar Allah as well as Saudi Arabia to influence the distribution of food aid in a way that benefits areas under their control or influence. Although those efforts have been pushed back by UN agencies and NGOs collectively,[34]

[33] Sam For Rights and Freedoms: Sniper Horror. A Human Rights Report Documenting Human Rights Violations related to Sniper Attacks in Yemen, November 2021. https://samrl.org/pdf/en/SinperhorrorEN.pdf, p. 38; Yemenis rally around 9-year-old girl shot in the head by Houthi sniper. In: The New Arab, August 18, 2020, https://www.newarab.com/news/yemenis-rally-around-9-year-old-girl-shot-houthi-sniper.

[34] Sowers, Jeannie/Weinthal, Erika: Humanitarian challenges and the targeting of civilian infrastructure in the Yemen war. In: International Affairs, 97/1, 2021, pp. 157-177, here p. 175.

armed networks still benefit economically from transit charges and, frequently, even instrumentalise aid delivery politically.[35]

Humanitarian organisations are caught in the middle of the multiple authorities, which have emerged due to the fragmentation of the state. A mapping-out and better understanding of the fragmented nature of the Yemeni state and the relevant local actors would have helped to understand how to negotiate with those in power; still, most decisions regarding the Yemen response are being taken at a central level by a handful of interlocutors. This approach blocks alternative contacts from growing their leverage and keeping aid workers from engaging with interlocutors on the ground.[36] As a consequence of this centralised operating from a distance (mostly from Sana'a and Aden) and even though it is the second best-funded response worldwide,[37] aid is not even reaching the most vulnerable, "especially women, people with disabilities and those belonging to lower social classes."[38] In fact, a vast majority of aid recipients refer to aid as inappropriate for their needs, and humanitarian aid workers, whether international staff or Yemeni, have expressed similar scepticism.[39] An area-based approach that, instead of neglecting and avoiding the fragmented institutional structures, interacts with them and coordinates "horizontally rather than vertically" could be more effective, key informants say.[40] For instance, World Food Program staff have reported about their work in Ibb that access had to be negotiated with four different groups, one of them being the Saudi-supported acting governor, a second

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35 Alterman, Jon B.: Aid and Conflict: Pitfalls in Yemen, August 2018. https://csis-website-prod.s3.amazonaws.com/s3fs-public/publication/180820_Alterman_Yemen_FINAL.pdf; Elayah, Moosa/Gaber, Qais/Fenttiman, Matilda: From food to cash assistance: rethinking humanitarian aid in Yemen. In: Journal of International Humanitarian Action, 7/11, 2022, pp. 2 and 8.

36 Vuylsteke, Sarah: When Aid Goes Awry: How the International Humanitarian Response is Failing Yemen, October 2021. https://sanaacenter.org/files/When_Aid_Goes_Awry_00_Executive_Summary_en.pdf, p. 13.

37 Ibid.

38 Ibid. pp. 5 and 8.

39 Ibid. p. 8; Danish Refugee Council: For Us but Not Ours. Exclusion from Humanitarian Aid in Yemen, 2020. https://www.humanitarianresponse.info/sites/www.humanitarianresponse.info/files/documents/files/for_us_but_not_ours-short_version-final_drc.pdf.

40 Vuylsteke: When Aid Goes Awry, p. 13.

one being Ansar Allah in control of entry checkpoints. Whilst such obstacles and blockages are common among all parties to the conflict, one WFP staff member complained they are particularly underreported when caused by non-Huthi-forces.[41]

Conclusion

Next to Ansar Allah, several local groups and political parties, such as the Southern Transitional Council (STC) or the Islah party, emerged as quasi-state actors, controlling parts of the country's security sector and territory. Even though the IRG began rebuilding security institutions in 2017, after seven years of war, fragmentation has today reached every institutional level. The result of this fragmentation is detrimental to human security. Not only does the fragmentation impact on the humanitarian situation, making it extremely difficult for communities to reach resources and humanitarian aid; but the fragmentation has also created an atmosphere of impunity, in which the actors responsible for community safety bring insecurity and violate human rights. As demonstrated in this paper using the security sectors in Ibb, Aden and Ta'izz as case studies, the fragmentation of the Yemeni state has progressed so much that a return to a unitary nation state seems out of reach. A new status quo of de facto power distribution has been established. While these actors may shift in terms of power and alliances, the fragmentation runs so deep that past attempts at unifying armed actors into single structures have failed.

Ignoring these actors, their interests and grievances is detrimental to Yemen's future and human security in the country. All actors have created new realities in their territories, on the one hand at least providing some kind of security framework (e.g., coping with a low budget), on the other establishing spaces of unquestioned impunity (e.g., cases of unsanctioned child rape). Even though each party is questionable and ambivalent in its own way: if human rights organisations and relevant political stakeholders keep overlooking these decentralised and fragmented structures, they are risking an overrule of local needs and struggles and missing the chance to constructively build on working security frameworks already in place.

[41] Sowers/Weinthal: Humanitarian challenges and the targeting of civilian infrastructure, p. 174.

Women's participation and the politics of war and peace in Yemen

Ewa K. Strzelecka

Traditionally, women have been viewed as victims of conflicts and associated with pacifism in juxtaposition to the male culture of violence and war. More recent studies have challenged these gender-based assumptions. They recognise the more active role of women in both wars and conflict resolution. Women have played a significant role in national liberation movements, revolutionary struggles, revolts and armed conflicts across the world.[1] Literature has documented cases of female participation in military training, intelligence, violence, combats, torture, suicide missions, looting and trafficking as well as food production, logistics, humanitarian response, nursing and other support services during the war.[2] At the same time, many studies have made visible the centrality of women's agency in peacebuilding. Scholars have identified a strong link between the durability of peace and the political inclusion of women.[3] There is evidence that female activists' participation increases public representation and brings their social knowledge and gender-sensitive expertise to the negotiation table, thus improving the legitimacy of the agreements reached and increasing the chances of a more inclusive and equative culture of peace.[4]

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[1] Moghadam, Valentine: Gender and Revolutions. In: John Foran (ed.): Theorizing Revolutions. London 1997. Strzelecka, Ewa: Women in the Arab Spring: the construction of a political culture of feminist resistance in Yemen. Madrid 2017./Strzelecka, Ewa: A Political Culture of Feminist Resistance: Exploring Women's Agency and Gender Dynamics in Yemen's Uprising (2011-2015). In: Marie-Christine Heinze (ed.): Yemen and the Search for Stability, New York 2018.

[2] Rajivan, Anuradha and Ruwanthi Senarathne: Women in armed conflicts: Inclusion and exclusion. UNDP, 2011.

[3] Krause Jana, Werner Krause and Piia Bränfors: Women's Participation in Peace Negotiations and the Durability of Peace. In: International Interactions, 44 (6)/2018), pp. 985-1016. Domingo, Pilar, Rebecca Holmes, Alina Rocha Menocal and Nicola Jones: Assessment of the Evidence of Links between Gender Equality, Peacebuilding and Statebuilding: Literature Review. London 2013.

[4] Bell, Christine: Text and Context: Evaluating Peace Agreements for their Gender Perspective. UN Women 2015.

Exploring dimensions of women's agency and actions has put the spotlight on the role of women as fundamental to the functioning of the war machine and the building of durable peace. However, women are also considered a particularly vulnerable group in conflict situations. They are frequently exposed to a higher risk of gender-based violence, marginalisation, exclusion, and discrimination. Yemen is no exception in this matter. Before the war since 2014/2015, Yemen was already one of the lowest-ranking countries in all global indices related to gender equality and women's empowerment. The current war has affected this even more, with a gender gap estimated to be 90% or more regarding economic, education, health and political criteria in 2018.[5] Yemen ranked 155th out of 156 countries in the World Economic Forum's Global Gender Gap Report in 2021.[6] Yemeni women have experienced all forms of discrimination and marginalisation, both before and during the war. Many have suffered from sexual violence, forced marriage, trafficking and difficulties in accessing education, health care services and decent jobs. Security concerns, the destruction of infrastructure and separation from male relatives during the war have significantly affected their socioeconomic condition and personal safety.[7] Six months after the eruption of the war, incidents of sexual and gender-based violence have increased in Yemen by over 60 per cent.[8] Human rights violations and the use of sexual violence as a weapon of war have been reportedly used by all sides of the conflict, including the forces loyal to the Saudi-led coalition and the internationally recognised Yemeni government, as well as the pro-Huthi groups.[9] Yemen's war has produced more than 71,000 refugees and asylum seekers, and more than 3.62 million internally displaced persons.[10] Women (24%) and children (54%) prevail among the internally displaced in Yemen. In contrast,

[5] WEF: Global Gender Gap Report 2018. World Economic Forum 2018.

[6] WEF: Global Gender Gap Report 2021. World Economic Forum 2021.

[7] ICRC: Women & Armed Conflicts and the Issue of Sexual Violence. Brussels 2014.

[8] UNSC: Report of the Secretary-General on conflict-related sexual violence, S/2018/250, March 23, 2018.

[9] UNSC: Final Report of the Panel of Experts on Yemen, S/2020/326, January 27, 2020. UNSC: Final Report of the Panel of Experts in Yemen, S/2021/79, January 22, 2021. UNSG: Conflict-related sexual violence: Report of the United Nations Secretary-General, July 17, 2020. UNHRC: Situation of human rights in Yemen, including violations and abuses since September 2014, A/HRC/45/6. September 28, 2020.

[10] UNHCR: Global Trends Forced Displacement in 2019. 2020. https://www.unhcr.org/globaltrends2019/.

conflict-induced out-migration has a predominantly male character. Men comprise more than 51% of the Yemeni refugees and asylum seekers, while women make up 22% and children 27% of this group.[11]

A scrutiny of the gender power dynamics in the current context of Yemen provides a better understanding of the ways in which violence and conflict affect women's participation and contribute to the deterioration of their rights and freedoms. On the one hand, women have been marginalised in decision-making and political leadership. On the other, they have been largely mobilised for political support of the new regimes and conflict parties. From a formal, political perspective, they have become instrumental in the quest for legitimacy and the reproduction of patriarchal power. From a political-process approach within social-movement theory, women's participation in social and political change is considered a more complex and dynamic phenomenon. The empirical literature on political participation suggests that exposure to armed conflict generally increases the civil and political activism of victims and conflict survivors in the post-war era.[12] Scholars further argue that the victims of violence are in general resilient.[13] Previous studies have also reported that women frequently enter more public roles in wartime.[14] Their political mobilisation during conflict includes active involvement in civil society organisations, humanitarian work, conflict resolution efforts,

[11] UNHCR: Refugee Data Finder. 2021. https://www.unhcr.org/refugee-statistics/download/?url=GWpo10.

[12] Bellows, John and Edward Miguel: War and Local Collective Action in Sierra Leone. In: Journal of Public Economics, 93 (11-12)/2009, pp. 144-57. Blattman, Christopher: From Violence to Voting: War and Political Participation in Uganda. In: American Political Science Review, 103 (2)/2009: 231-47. Punamäki, Raija-Leena, Samir Qouta, and Eyad El Sarraj: Relationships between Traumatic Events, Children's Gender, and Political Activity, and Perceptions of Parenting Styles. In: International Journal of Behavioral Development, 21 (1)/1997, pp. 91-109.

[13] Masten, Ann S.: Ordinary Magic: Resilience Processes in Development. In: American Psychologist, 56 (3): 2001, pp. 227-38.

[14] Fuest, Veronika: 'This Is the Time to Get in Front': Changing Roles and Opportunities for Women in Liberia. In: African Affairs, 107 (427)/2008, pp. 201–24. Goldin, Claudia: The Role of World War II in the Rise of Women's Employment. In: American Economic Review, 81 (4)/1991, pp. 741-756.

and grassroots-level peace initiatives.[15] Research further shows that female collective representation in different organisations, government and legislature generally has a positive effect on the content of policy outcomes[16], women's external efficacy[17] and the duration of post-conflict peace.[18] In the case of Yemen, very little research has been done so far to investigate how the uprising of 2011, post-revolutionary violence and civil war have transformed women's political participation and affected their involvement in collective actions. This chapter attempts to bridge this gap by analysing the dynamic processes of women's participation in civil society and political life in the unstable context of long-term conflict, war and humanitarian crisis in Yemen.

Women's political participation before 2011

The dominance of men in leadership positions has been an enduring feature of Yemen's politics for years, with significant consequences on gender policies and women's rights. Although the Republic of Yemen was constituted in 1990 as a democratic state that guarantees equal political and civil rights to all, women and other disenfranchised groups did not receive a fair share of the same. Prior to the unification of Yemen in 1990, North Yemen granted women full suffrage in 1962, while South Yemen did so in 1967,

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[15] Rohwerder, Brigitte: Conflict and gender dynamics in Yemen. Brighton 2017. Tripp, Aili Mari: Women and Power in Postconflict Africa. Cambridge 2015. Berry, Marie: From Violence to Mobilization: Women, war, and threat in Rwanda. In: Mobilization: An International Quarterly, 20 (2)/2015, pp. 135-156. Anderson, Miriam: Windows of Opportunity: How Women Seize Peace Negotiations for Political Change. New York 2016.

[16] Schwindt-Bayer, Leslie and William Mishler: An Integrated Model of Women's Representation. In: Journal of Politics, 67/2005, pp. 407–28. Wängnerud, Lena: Women in Parliaments: Descriptive and Substantive Representation. In: Annual Review of Political Science, 12/2009, pp. 51-69.

[17] Atkeson, Lonna Rae, and Nancy Carrillo: More Is Better: The Influence of Collective Female Descriptive Representation on External Efficacy. In: Politics & Gender, 3 (1)/2007, pp. 79-101. Barnes, Tiffany and Stephanie M. Burchard: 'Engendering' Politics: The Impact of Descriptive Representation on Women's Political Engagement in Sub-Saharan Africa. In: Comparative Political Studies, 46 (7)/2013, pp. 767–90.

[18] Bell, Christine: Text and Context: Evaluating Peace Agreements for their Gender Perspective. UN Women, 2015. Shair-Rosenfield, Sarah and Reed Wood: Governing Well after War: How Improving Female Representation Prolongs Post-conflict Peace. In: The Journal of Politics, 79 (3)/2017, pp. 995-1009.

shortly after proclaiming the country's independence.[19] However, the Yemen Arab Republic (North Yemen) never had any female representation in parliament, whereas the People's Democratic Republic of Yemen (South Yemen) did. North Yemen had a parliamentary election in 1988 in which no women were allowed to run. In South Yemen, women won seven of 111 parliamentary seats in 1978 and eleven seats in the 1986 general elections.

After the unification of Yemen, a multiparty system was established. Then, general elections were held three times. Women voters in the parliamentary elections were on the rise from 18% in 1993, 27% in 1997, to 42% in 2003. At the same time, there was a decline in female candidates for MPs: from 42 women candidates in 1993 to 19 in 1997 to 11 in 2003. The result of the last parliamentary elections 2003 was one woman only of a total of 301 MPs. The local elections, on the contrary, witnessed an increase in the number of female candidates, from 120 in 2001 to 133 in 2006. However, the success rate decreased from 31.7% to 25.8% as more female candidates ran in the 2006 local elections, and elected women remained at the same number of 38 seats in both elections. The last competitive presidential elections were held in 2006. Four women applicated to run, but none of them eventually qualified as an official candidate. They did not receive the required endorsement of 5% of the MPs present at the joint sitting of Yemen's two-house parliament. In the presidential elections of 21 February 2012, the ballot offered only one candidate – Abd Rabbuh Mansur Hadi, former Vice President of Yemen. Although there was only one candidate in the race, the 2012 elections were seen as a critical step to legitimise the Gulf Cooperation Council Initiative and its Implementation Mechanism for the Transition Process in Yemen.

Yemeni women have constantly been under-represented in politics and decision-making positions. On the eve of the 2011 uprising, there was only one female MP out of 301 (0.3%) and two women (1.8%) in the Shura Council (Consultative Council) comprised of 111 members appointed directly by the president. The 2006 local elections resulted in 38 women being elected out of a total of 6,817 representatives (0.5%). Two women became ministers out

[19] Al-Sakkaf, Nadia: Yemeni women's involvement, representation, and influence in political parties and components. Amman (Office of the Special Envoy of the Secretary-General for Yemen), 2021.

of 33 ministers in total (6.1%) in Ali Abdallah Salih's government. Only 241 women filled a total of 6,945 senior positions in public administration (3.6%).

It is worth noting that three months before the 2006 elections, Yemeni political parties and leaders agreed to introduce voluntary party quotas.[20] None of them, however, applied a suggested minimum quota of 15 per cent for the participation of women in the elections. With the political crisis between the government and the opposition, the general elections, originally set for 2009, were postponed to April 2011. As part of the agreement on electoral reform, parties eventually agreed to change the system from first-past-the-post to a proportional list, which is considered particularly beneficial for women's representation. However, no evident preparation work was completed to implement electoral reforms. The elections preparatory commission, set up in July 2009, was eventually reduced to an eight-member committee with no female members. In January 2011, mass protests against President Salih's 33-year rule flooded the streets of Yemen and paralysed the preparations for elections. Political and civic reform movements found their confluence in a revolutionary front aimed at a radical change in the power structure.

Women and the 2011 uprising

Women, along with the youth of Yemen, were the principal initiators and organisers of the first revolutionary demonstrations against the regime of President Salih. Although some of them were members of political parties, they took to the streets to protest against the authoritarian system as independent activists, following their own civic initiatives mobilised through social media and informal networks. Moreover, women's participation in the uprising was not casual and momentary but resulted from the pre-existing elements of a political culture of resistance and opposition. For example, in 2007 Tawakkul Karman, one of the initiators and leaders of Yemen's revolution, started organising regular sit-ins and demonstrations in front of Yemen's parliament near Tahrir Square in Sana'a. She, along with many other members of civil society, had demanded reforms from the government for years; but as the promises of change were not implemented, their positions became radicalised. The overthrow of the Tunisian and Egyptian presidents

[20] Al-Sakkaf, 2021, op. cit.

by popular uprisings in early 2011 gave momentum to the Yemeni protest movement. Inspired by the Arab Spring, Yemeni activists shifted their strategies away from calling for reforms to demanding immediate radical change towards the abolition of President Ali Abdallah Salih's regime and the transformation of its power system. The perception of the state as unjust and inefficient reached such a level that the revolution was considered by the people to be the only solution to the prolonged political crisis and social and economic hardship.

The main goal of the Yemeni uprising, shared by the youth and women's rights activists, was to establish a democratic and civil state, which would promote lasting development, human rights and social justice. Although there were always groups of women who aimed to articulate the specific demands of gender equality and justice within broader revolutionary goals, most protesters assumed that their struggles for democracy, dignity and human rights would automatically provide all citizens, women and men alike, with equal rights and justice when victory was achieved. The women and youth-driven protest movements created their own culture, evidenced by "emerging societies" in revolutionary camps, such as Change Square in Sana'a and Freedom Square in Ta'izz. These areas of the cities became "liberated zones," considered to be free from oppression and domination. At the beginning of the uprising, these zones served as training grounds for democracy and as vehicles of cultural transformation and social change. Within these areas, there was a certain amount of permissiveness with the breaking of taboos concerning the role of women and gender relations. Women were encouraged to participate actively in all revolutionary activities and fight side by side with men against the regime and for democratic change. They both took part in front-line actions and worked behind the scenes. In this way, they played both leading and supportive roles. They organised marches, led demonstrations, documented events, spread the news through social media and blogs, gave workshops and talks, formed coalitions, made decisions, prepared art programmes, chanted slogans, nursed the wounded, provided food, raised funds, lived and slept outside in tents in the revolutionary squares (camps), just like the men. Their massive mobilisation at the beginning of the uprising was seen as a positive input and was vital to ensuring the victory of the revolution.

The short-lived liberalisation of patriarchal norms was driven mainly by the values and behaviours of the emerging youth culture. The rapid transformation of gender relations at this stage of the revolution was possible, at least in part, because of "the absence of elders with a stake in maintaining tradition and kin group hierarchies."[21] In time, however, this trend was reversed by more conservative attitudes when the tribal, political, military and religious elites joined and established control over the revolutionary squares. The patriarchal leaders rapidly co-opted positions of power within the anti-government movement and re-established their influence over the gender dynamics of the uprising. Consequently, women and youth perceived that their revolution had been "hijacked." Resisting their marginalisation at that stage of the uprising, women activists constructed a Declaration of Women's Demands in April 2011, in which they outlined their vision and requests in the revolutionary and post-revolutionary processes. They prioritised a high level of female representation in all decision-making positions during the revolution, and in the political transition and the building of a new state. Unfortunately, the impact of that document was not forceful enough to make an appreciable change during the uprising, but its political ideas concerning a 30-per-cent quota for women made a difference and reflected the main priorities of the women's struggle for justice and rights during Yemen's short-lived political transition and the following period of war and peace-making.

National dialogue process in political transition

Women's prominent participation in Yemen's revolutionary movement drew them into public life and ensured their meaningful representation and voice at the National Dialogue Conference (NDC). The NDC lasted for ten months (March 2013 – January 2014) and became a landmark in the consensus-building process for the future of Yemen. Women were granted 28 per cent of the 565 delegates representing a broad spectrum of different social and political parties and groupings. Women's involvement in the NDC was a significant step towards building a new democratic socio-political order but was not without challenges. Coming from disenfranchised and underrepresented groups, new political actors, such as women, were now expected to engage on an equal footing with political, tribal and religious elites, who have

[21] Bernal, Victoria: From warriors to wives: contradictions of liberation and development in Eritrea. In: Northeast African Studies, 13 (3)/2001, pp. 129-54.

traditionally embodied power and authority in the Yemeni political arena. Despite the procedural rule prescribing equal participation, there were attempts to exclude women from the centres of power and to sabotage their gender interests and full representative rights. Political activists, however, tried to resist and challenge those power dynamics, standing up for equal rights.

It is noteworthy that the percentage of women in the NDC is the highest figure of female political representation in the modern history of Yemen. The NDC members with a feminist background made a significant difference in the conference's outcomes. Drawing on alliances with other political and social actors, and supported by the international community, they were able to win their long-standing battles against conservative opposition over women's rights and freedoms. As a result, the recommendations of a 30-percent quota for women, child marriage ban, establishment of a minimum age for marriage of 18 years for both sexes, as well as ensured protection laws against all forms of discrimination and gender-based violence against women were heatedly discussed and eventually approved as an NDC outcome. Women were reaffirmed as equal citizens with full civil, political, economic, social and cultural rights. Attention was paid to women's access to education, literacy programs, human development, health care, welfare, justice, employment, and personal and cultural freedoms. In addition, recommendations for better protection of women's rights during childhood, motherhood, widowhood and old age, as well as a promise of development in rural areas were included in the NDC Final Document.

The NDC Final Document, published in January 2014, laid the foundation for Yemen's new constitution and legal framework. Following its recommendations, the Draft Constitution of January 17, 2015 included the most progressive socio-political changes for women's empowerment and gender justice that any other Yemeni constitution had ever enshrined. Nevertheless, the constitutional controversies, mainly related to the division of Yemen into six federal regions, triggered a renewal of conflict. The Huthi rebels (Ansar Allah) deployed the threat of violence to impose their political priorities. Although they did not formally oppose progressive gender reforms and feminist agenda at that time, their power-grab in 2014/15 unsettled the democratic transition and created an additional concern about the future of Yemeni women.

Huthi takeover in Northern Yemen

After the Huthis' takeover of the capital in September 2014 and the government in Sana'a in 2015, a more conservative approach to women's rights, gender hierarchies and civil liberties was adopted. There were significant changes in women-state alliances to better fit the Huthis' power interests and their concept of social, religious and tribal stratification. The new policies aimed at remodelling gender relations and reinforcing a sectarian and caste-like dynamic in Yemen. An interplay of gender, caste, religion and class as well as personal loyalty to a new regime became a critical determinant of women's access to political participation. Mostly drawn from Hashemite families, women and girls were largely mobilised for political support of the Huthis. Their role, however, was relegated to a secondary and subordinate position. Only a small number of elite women loyal to the Huthis and their allies came to occupy positions of certain relevance in the new administration.

Many women working for the new regime became part of a repressive and confrontational form of political engagement, established to discourage other women from opposing the Huthi leaders and their regressive gender policies. For example, the all-female militia, the so-called *Zaynabiyyat*, formed an intelligence apparatus directed specifically at women. They aimed at recruiting new female members and participating in security forces and moral policing. Soon, they became infamous among human rights activists and the opposition for suppressing women's protests and enforcing gender segregation policies and the ultraconservative rules of dressing and public behaviour. According to the UN reports, *Zaynabiyyat* were used to perpetrate violence, injustice and abuse against other women.[22] Their participation was documented in ideological indoctrination, order maintenance in female prisons, searching women and houses, arbitrary arrest and detention of women, looting, sexual assault, beatings, torture and facilitating rape in the Huthis' detention centres.[23]

The Huthi leaders have been seeking to remodel Yemeni society according to their precepts and religious ethos. After their power grab, they started

[22] UNSC, 2020, op cit., pp. 9, 10, 44, 62.
[23] UNSC, 2020, op. cit., pp. 10, 62.

updating the already conservative Yemen's gender policies with stricter rules. A very narrow interpretation of Zaydi Shi'a Islam has been used to impose stricter codes of dressing, moral order, segregation between men and women (*ikhtilat*), banning women from certain jobs, and limiting family planning access and utilisation. Beauty centres, fitness clubs, clothing stores and coffee places for women have been raided and many eventually were closed by the Huthi authorities. Since 2015, women in certain tribal areas allied with the Huthis have been banned from having parties and celebrations after the Maghrib prayer, bringing cameras to wedding halls, hiring male bands and singers at their women-only celebrations, and working for international organisations. The Huthi gender-based regulations have been announced through circulates, edicts, *fatwas* (religious verdicts), Friday prayer sermons, ministerial directives, cultural programmes, educational curricula and employment directives. Noncompliance with the new rules and obligations was sanctioned with fines and other punishments such as intimidation, arrest, interrogation, torture, humiliation, kidnapping and sometimes imprisonment of defiant women. The threat of criminal persecution has been politically motivated in many cases to discourage women activists and their families from making further opposition attempts.[24]

Gender, armed conflict and peace processes

Displacement, gender-based violence, threats of safety, higher rates of pregnancy and child marriage, restrictions in freedom of movement, deprivation of recourses, poverty, distress and more difficult access to services such as nutrition, education healthcare, electricity, water and sanitation have been among challenges women are facing in war-torn Yemen today.[25] The armed conflict has led to the disintegration of the fundamental structures of the state and significantly affected the promotion and protection of women's rights and their gender interests. Since Yemen's former President of Abd Rabbuh Mansur Hadi and government went into exile in 2015, the mainte-

[24] UNHRC: Situation of Human Rights in Yemen, including violations and abuses since September 2014, A/HRC/42/CRP.1, September 03, 2019. Mina Aldroubi and Ali Mahmood: Dozens of Yemeni girls and women face secret Houthi trials on false prostitution charges. In: The National, May 02, 2019. Samia Al-Aghbari: Abduction, torture, ransom, stigma: How female Houthi militias silence women in Yemen's war. In: Almasdar Online, December 29, 2019.

[25] Rohwerder, 2017, op cit., pp. 2-3.

nance of law and order as well as other forms of authority on the ground has been concentrated in the hands of various factions, including the Huthi rebels, the southern separatist movement and other militant groups such as Al Qaeda in the Arabian Peninsula. The influence of tribes, militias and Islamist extremists has reinforced patriarchal norms and predominantly male-dominated structures of power. For example, since the Huthi rebels consolidated their grip over large parts of Yemen in 2014/2015, a very narrow interpretation of Islam has been applied to govern public morality and private space in the areas under their control. Normative masculinity and femininity have been defined through a specific understanding of Zaydi Shi'a Islam and ancestral traditions. The Huthi male leaders strengthen their privileges and power through religious nationalism, militarism and their lineage legitimacy traced to Prophet Mohammed. They wield their control over women's lives and bodies by hindering, among other issues, women's access to abortion and the use of contraceptives.

A resurgence of ultraconservative ideology and tendencies that reinforce gender hierarchies and masculine domination in Yemen includes Islamic militant groups and allied tribes. Even the traditionally progressive political parties, such as the Yemeni Socialist Party, did not opt for the implementation of gender quotas in their share of power within the latest government formations and peace talk delegations.[26] Yemen's last cabinet, announced on December 18, 2020, left out women for the first time in two decades. On April 7, 2022, President Hadi delegated power to an eight-member Presidential Council, which consists of men only. Currently, there are no women members in Yemen's Parliament – the one woman elected in 2003 passed away a few years ago.[27] No women were represented or participated in the Riyadh Agreement negotiations held between the internationally recognised government of Yemen and the Southern Transitional Council (STC) in Saudi Arabia in 2019. Even Yemen's Delegation to the 80th session of the Committee on the Elimination of Discrimination against Women was headed by a man – the Deputy Minister of the Ministry of Legal Affairs and Human Rights. Those trends marked a reversal with respect to the small gains in

[26] Al-Sakkaf, 2021, op. cit.
[27] Ibid.

women's political representation made during Yemen's short-lived transition to democracy between 2012 and 2014.

The situation of war and politico-geographical fragmentation of political parties has paved the way for women's marginalisation in the main political events and peace processes since 2015.[28] Women have been almost excluded from the U.N.-sponsored peace talks. In the six rounds of peace negotiations, Yemeni women made up only 4 per cent of delegates in Stockholm in 2018 and 12 per cent of delegates in the 2016 talks in Kuwait.[29] The Huthi delegation has not included any women among its members so far. The UN's efforts to support women in peace-making have been channelled mainly through the consultative mechanisms: Yemeni Women's Pact for Peace and Security (TAWAFAQ), established by the UN Women in 2015, and Women's Technical Advisory Group (TAG), created by the Office of the Special Envoy of the Secretary-General for Yemen (OSESGY) in 2018. Women from those networks were invited as observers and advisors to participate in unofficial discussions at the UN-brokered peace talks.

Even though Yemeni women remain largely unrepresented at the table where key decisions about post-conflict recovery and governance are made, they have been active in bringing about peace.[30] Women's rights activists have been actively advocating for the implementation of a 30-per-cent quota for female inclusion in the peace talks and have led many initiatives to advance a feminist peace agenda. A number of new organisations (Peace Track Initiative, Women's Voices for Peace, National Reconciliation Movement, etc.) and networks (Group of the Nine Network, Women Solidarity Network, etc.) have been established in and outside the country in support of

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[28] Ibid.

[29] CFR: Women's participation in peace processes: Yemen. 2019. https://www.cfr.org/womens-participation-in-peace-processes/explore-the-data.

[30] Heinze, Marie-Christine and Marwa Baabbad: Women Nowadays Do Anything: Women's Role in Conflict, Peace and Security in Yemen. Saferworld/CARPO/YPC, 2017. Awadh, Maha and Nuria Shuja'adeen: Women in Conflict Resolution and Peacebuilding in Yemen. UN Women, 2019. Heinze, Marie-Christine and Sophie Stevens: Women as Peacebuilders in Yemen. Social Development Direct and Yemen Polling Center, 2018. Zabara, Bilkis and Sabria Al-Thawr: The Role of Women in Post-Conflict Yemen, In: Amat Al Alim Alsoswa and Noel Brehony (eds.): Building a New Yemen: Recovery, Transition and the International Community. London 2021, pp. 97-118.

women's efforts to pursue a more just, inclusive and durable peace. Grassroots women's organisations have also been particularly active in developing local peace initiatives as peacekeepers, advocates for peace, mediators, counsellors, relief workers, policymakers and educators.[31]

Conclusions

The critical analysis of gender dynamics discussed in this chapter aims to portray the complexity of women's participation in Yemen's political and public spheres in recent years. Women activists participated in Yemen's uprising (2011-12) and the National Dialogue Conference (2013-2014), but they have been largely excluded from decision-making in the ongoing war that broke out in 2014/2015. Patriarchal use of violence has proved to be an efficient instrument of social control and political oppression and has been able not only to challenge the democratisation of Yemen but also to interfere with women's empowerment and their enforcement of human rights and gender justice. The critical factors of security and developmental concerns as well as predominantly patriarchal structures of power, among other issues, has put obstacles in the way of the feminist agency.

The situation of war and conflict has not only upheld gender inequalities and reproduced gender hierarchy in the country, but it has also shaped women's participation in a significant way. Many human rights activists have been forced to flee the country to continue their political activities from exile. They are involved in transnational networks to advocate for a feminist peace agenda and gender justice. On the flip side, women have also been largely mobilised inside the country for political support of the new regimes and played an important role in the reproduction of conservative ideology and patriarchal power structures. In addition, the current situation in Yemen has pushed many women into taking up new roles and responsibilities at the grassroots. With men serving as soldiers and potentially dying in combat, many women have become the new heads of households and assumed activities that were previously male-dominated. They have been recruited at a large scale by the Huthis, for example, to serve as an all-female militia to

[31] Agbajobi, Damilola: The Role of Women in Conflict Resolution and Peacebuilding. In: Richard Bowd and Annie Barbara Chikwanha (eds.): Understanding Africa's Contemporary Conflicts. Addis Ababa 2010, pp. 233-254.

enforce conservative gender policies and suppress the opposition. High-violence locations have also been fertile ground for peace and community activism led by women.[32] By moving from a theoretical figure of patriarchy and exclusion to an analysis of dynamic processes of women's participation, the relation between dominant patriarchal culture and women's agency has been key to understanding continuity and change, and the ways social transformation has been conceptualised, produced, resisted, negotiated, and experienced in Yemen in the last years.

[32] Hadzic, Dino and Margit Tavits: Wartime Violence and Post-War Women's Representation. In: British Journal of Political Science, 51 (3)/2021, pp. 1024-39.

Al-Qa'ida and Islamic terrorism in Yemen

Alexander Weissenburger

Introduction

At least since the terrorist attacks on the *USS Cole* in 2000, besides the bombings of the US embassies in Kenya and Tanzania 1998, one of the largest pre-9/11 terrorist attacks attributed to al-Qa'ida, Yemen was widely seen as a breeding ground for Islamist terrorism. While it is certainly true that the perception of the danger of terrorism in and from Yemen was frequently overblown,[1] it is also true that many plots turned out unsuccessful only because of bad luck or incompetency on the side of the jihadis, not because of the success of efforts of counter terrorism. Had the Yemeni al-Qa'ida branch succeeded in blowing up an airliner bound for the US or in killing the Saudi deputy minister of the interior, Yemen's international reputation would have suffered even more. Also internally, the presence of al-Qa'ida had repercussions other than the violence it brought upon the country. Yemen became drawn into the "War on Terror", which significantly affected the country as a whole. By moving closer to the US and using external support to sideline other domestic power brokers, Salih alienated large parts of the Yemeni population,[2] contributing to the downfall of the regime in the Arab Spring.

This article will be primarily concerned with the history of terrorist activity in Yemen as well as with the ideology and attraction of terrorist groups in Yemen and thus investigate the dynamics serving as the legitimation for drawing Yemen into the "War on Terror". While the terrorist organisation Islamic State gained a foothold in Yemen, it was primarily al-Qa'ida that made a lasting impact. Throughout its more than 30 years of history in the country, al-Qa'ida appeared in different guises and under different names. Especially before the founding of al-Qa'ida in the Arabian Peninsula

[1] On this see also: Lackner, Helen: Yemen on Crisis: Autocracy, Neo-Liberalism and the Disintegration of the State. London 2017, p. 135.

[2] Seitz, Adam C.: Ties that Bind and Divide: The 'Arab Spring' and Yemeni Civil-Military relations. In: Lackner Helen (ed.): Why Yemen Matters: A Society in Transition. London 2014, pp. 60-61.

(AQAP) in 2009, al-Qa'ida in Yemen was for much of the time less a centralised organisation than a cluster of separate cells, in many cases directed from the outside. For the sake of brevity, however, this article will refer to these different iterations collectively as al-Qa'ida, or AQAP. In general, the aim of the following pages is to give a short overview. The article will therefore abstain from introducing original research and rely on the academic standard literature.

The early years of jihadism in Yemen

Usually, the advent of modern-day Islamic terrorism dates back to the 1980s and the jihad in Afghanistan. Clerics all over the Islamic world called on young men to join the US-funded fight against the Soviet army. Yemen was no different. By the second half of the 1980s, scores of young Yemenis had gone to join Osama bin Laden and Abdallah al-Azzam in Afghanistan and across the border in Pakistan. President Ali Abdallah Salih had sanctioned the recruitment of fighters, and as the Soviet army retreated in 1989, he allowed these fighters – after their sojourn in Afghanistan frequently referred to as "Afghan-Arabs" – to return.[3]

Many of these Afghan-Arabs grouped around Tariq al-Fadhli, the scion of a powerful family in the south who had fought in Afghanistan and acted as Bin Laden's deputy in Yemen. After the unification of Yemen, al-Fadhli's men became notorious for their attacks on socialist leaders in the south. At the same time, in December 1992, Bin Laden ordered another cell of loyalists to carry out an attack on US troops, which used Aden as a base for their operation in Somalia. After this first al-Qa'ida attack on Yemeni soil failed as miserably as many more to come, the socialist leaders of the south tried to root out terrorist cells. Those of the jihadis who were not imprisoned fled north, where Abu Ali al-Harithi, another Afghanistan veteran, emerged as the new leader of the jihadis.[4]

As war broke out with the remnants of the socialist state in the south in 1994, Salih called for the support of the jihadis, promising them the implementa-

[3] Johnsen, Gregory D.: The Last Refuge: Yemen, al-Qaeda and the Battle for Arabia. New York 2013, pp. 7-22.
[4] Ibid, pp. 16-33.

tion of sharia rule. Ali Muhsin al-Ahmar, a powerful military commander, distant relative and close associate of President Salih, marched south with the army, flanked by the jihadis led by al-Fadhli, who according to some accounts is his brother-in-law and had been made a colonel in the Yemeni army. After taking control of the south, Salih reneged on his promise to implement religious law; al-Fadhli was appointed member of the Shura Council, the upper house of the Yemeni parliament, and the jihadis in the south were once again leaderless.[5]

The next time jihadism became a prominent issue again was in the late 90s with the appearance of the Aden-Abyan Islamic Army, which was founded by Afghanistan veteran Zayn al-Abidin al-Midhar. Al-Midhar had opposed the participation in Salih's war against the south, and now that jihadis became aware that they had been essentially taken in by Salih, they threw in their lot with al-Midhar. Weary of the growing influence of the US in the region after they had left Aden in 1993, the movement plotted to attack several Western targets in Aden in what became known as the Christmas plot of 1998. The attacks failed, and most of the members of the group were imprisoned. Al-Midhar was later executed.[6] Never more than "a few handfuls"[7], and ultimately unsuccessful, the group was the first Yemeni group to be associated with jihadi activities in the West. By mainly communicating with the public via statements published by Abu Hamza al-Masri, the Imam of the Finsbury Park Mosque in London who knew al-Midhar from his time in Pakistan and Afghanistan and who is now imprisoned in the US – among other things – for his supportive role in the 1998 attacks,[8] the group certainly contributed to the widely held view of Yemen as an unstable country, riddled by terrorist violence. What came next, however, dwarfed all the attention Yemen had received through al-Masri.

While it is not quite clear what happened to the rest of the Aden-Abyan Islamic Army after the botched Christmas plot, it appears that its members

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[5] Johnsen: The Last Refuge, pp. 39-52; also Brandt, Marieke: The Global and the Local: al-Qaeda and Yemen's Tribes. In: Collombier, Virginie/Roy, Olivier (eds.): Tribes and Global Jihadism. Oxford 2017, p. 120.

[6] Johnsen: The Last Refuge, pp. 58-64.

[7] Ibid: p. 59.

[8] BBC: Abu Hamza profile. In: BBC, January 09, 2015. https://www.bbc.com/news/uk-11701269.

joined other al-Qa'ida cells, including the one that Bin Laden had sent to execute an attack against US naval presence in Aden. On October 12, 2000, a boat filled with explosives and steered by two al-Qa'ida members tried to sink the *USS Cole*, a US destroyer. While the ship stayed afloat, the explosion tore a large hole into the side of the ship, killing 17 and wounding 39 of the ship's crew.[9]

Less than a year later, the attack against the *Cole* was overshadowed by the events of September 11. For joining the US's "War on Terror", Yemen was brought back into the fold of the West, from where it had been cast out after refusing to endorse UN Security Council Resolution 678, demanding Iraq's withdrawal from Kuwait in 1990. Consequently, Yemen received large amounts of US aid in the form of money and military equipment.[10] While the Yemeni regime began to round up suspected jihadis in order to comply with US demands, the al-Qa'ida cell around al-Harithi continued to perpetrate several smaller attacks, including an attack on the oil tanker *MV Limburg* on October 6, 2002, resulting in one dead sailor, a damaged ship, and an oil spill. After al-Harithi was killed roughly a month after the *Limburg* attack in the first drone strike on Yemeni soil, al-Qa'ida in Yemen fell into disarray.[11]

Al-Qa'ida's second generation in Yemen

With the threat of al-Qa'ida contained for the moment, the US began to make their support for Yemen contingent upon the promotion of good governance. As Salih was unable to deliver, the US and the World Bank cut back on their funding at the end of 2005. In February 2006, around two dozen al-Qa'ida members managed to break out of prison.[12]

Salih had always upheld a sort of tacit agreement with the jihadis that more or less posed that if inner-Yemeni stability was not threatened, anti-terror

[9] Johnsen: The Last Refuge, p. 65-73; United Nations Security Council: Islamic Army of Aden. United Nations, no date. https://www.un.org/securitycouncil/sanctions/1267/aq_sanctions_list/summaries/entity/islamic-army-of-aden; Kendall: Contemporary Jihadi Militancy, p. 2.

[10] Johnsen: The Last Refuge, p. 179.

[11] Ibid, pp. 107-132.

[12] Ibid, pp. 182-195.

measures would be relatively lax.[13] As seen in the case of the 1994 civil war, the regime also did not shy away from working together with jihadis. The Political Security Organisation, one of Yemen's secret services, was notorious for harbouring many former jihadis within its ranks,[14] with one scholar even suggesting that young men joined the jihad mainly to be recruited into the organisation.[15] Now, bereft of foreign funding, Salih is commonly assumed – including by the US administration at the time – to have turned to the jihadis again and assisted in their escape or at least turned a blind eye to it.[16] In the end, the US's practice of paying regimes to fight terrorism rather than seeking profound reform had an unfortunate implication; it had "created a series of perverse incentives for President Salih, as experience has taught him that foreign governments will offer more money with fewer strings attached if the threat posed by Yemeni militancy is credible,"[17] as Phillips puts it.

Roughly a year after the prison break, one of the escapees, Nasir al-Wuhayshi, took over the leadership of the group. Al-Wuhayshi was of Yemeni tribal descent, had fought in Afghanistan during the invasion of Afghanistan 2001 and served as personal secretary of Bin Laden. He restructured al-Qa'ida in Yemen, recruiting young men, preferably of tribal background, and set up a centralised command structure with local commanders. Whereas the first generation of al-Qa'ida before Salih's crackdown had a great number of Yemenis born to foreign workers abroad within its ranks, this second generation was grounded more strongly in Yemen.[18] In general, the group – as will be described in more detail below – now began to increasingly incorporate local issues into its generally anti-Western agenda. Also, the group tried to

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[13] Bonnefoy, Laurent: The Shabab, Institutionalised Politics and the Islamists in the Yemeni Revolution. In: Lackner Helen (ed.): Why Yemen Matters: A Society in Transition. London 2014, p. 91.

[14] Johnsen: The Last Refuge, pp. 54, 183.

[15] Lackner: Yemen in Crisis, p. 55.

[16] Phillips, Sarah: Yemen and the Politics of Permanent Crisis. London 2011, p. 43; Johnsen: The Last Refuge, p. 195; see also Brandt: The Global and the Local, p. 111.

[17] Phillips: Yemen and the Politics, p. 139. On the same idea, see Brandt: The Global and the Local, p. 111.

[18] Johnsen: The Last Refuge, pp. 163, 208-211. On al-Wuhayshi, see: Ibid: p. 293; Kendall, Elisabeth. Contemporary Jihadi Militancy in Yemen: How is the Threat Evolving? In: Middle East Institute, Policy Paper 7/2018, p. 3.

avoid civilian victims from among the Yemeni population.[19] In general, al-Qa'ida in Yemen now focused its attacks on Western diplomatic representations and tourists, severely hampering the local tourism industry as well the Yemeni security forces.[20]

As jihadism in Yemen was on the rise, the Saudi government's more successful fight against terrorism drove several al-Qa'ida members across the border to join the local branch there. In January 2009, al-Qa'ida in the Arabian Peninsula (AQAP) was formed, merging the Yemeni al-Qa'ida branch with the new Saudi arrivals. The group's outreach was becoming increasingly international, soon gaining it the dubious reputation with the US as al-Qa'ida's most dangerous branch.[21] The group committed an unsuccessful attack on the then-Saudi deputy minister of the interior, Muhammad b. Nayif, with the terrorist famously hiding the bomb in his rectum, in August 2009; another unsuccessful attack on a passenger airliner bound for Detroit, with the terrorist hiding the bomb in his pants; and a third unsuccessful attempt to blow up two cargo airplanes bound for Chicago followed in December 2009 and February 2010, respectively.[22]

AQAP took advantage of the political turmoil in the wake of the Arab Spring and captured territory in the south-western provinces of Shabwa and Abyan. The movement had rebranded itself as *Ansar al-Shari'a* (the Partisans of the Shari'a) and established a short lived "emirate". In February 2012, Abd Rabbuh Mansur Hadi became president and started to take strong action against the jihadis in order to prove himself. In June 2012, after roughly a year in power, the jihadis were driven out by the Yemeni army – that part of the army loyal to the internationally recognised government, to be precise.[23] With the territorial gains of the Huthi movement in late 2014 and early 2015, AQAP saw a chance to expand its influence again. It joined the fight against the Huthis and – again under the label *Ansar al-Shari'a* – established a foothold in the province of Hadhramaut.[24] Eventually, the group came to rule

[19] Brandt: The Global and the Local, p. 123.
[20] Johnsen: The Last Refuge, pp. 222, 230-231, 264; Lackner: Yemen in Crisis, p. 90.
[21] Phillips: Yemen and the Politics, p. 28.
[22] Johnsen: The Last Refuge, pp. 235-268.
[23] Al-Jamal, Abdulrazzaq: Al-Qaeda's Decline in Yemen: An Abandonment of ideology amid a Crisis of Leadership. Sana'a Center for Strategic Studies, September 2021, p. 7.
[24] Ibid: pp. 11-12.

over the whole province, de-facto establishing a state under their leadership between 2015 and 2016. According to Johnsen, AQAP had two wings, one for domestic and one for international operations.[25] Whereas the international branch has lost most of its importance since then, AQAP claims responsibility for the Charlie Hebdo attack in January 2015.[26] Since then, AQAP's international appeal has greatly dwindled due to the greater international appeal of IS.[27]

The domestic branch, however, has fared little better. In 2015, al-Wuhayshi was killed in a drone strike, and in early 2016, UAE forces drove AQAP back.[28] After that, the decline continued. According to Kendall, it was the combination of increasing counter terrorism measures, in many cases drone strikes, a fading support base due to declining acceptance by the local population, weak leadership and communication problems that led to the fragmentation of the group.[29] In addition, AQAP made a new enemy, the Islamic State in Yemen (ISY), which put additional strain on the organisation.

ISY had appeared in November 2014, with several jihadis swearing allegiance to Abu Bakr al-Baghdadi, the self-styled caliph of IS. The group emerged as an opponent to the Huthi movement yet soon found itself entangled in a fight with AQAP. By the end of 2018, the majority of ISY strikes targeted AQAP rather than any other faction.[30] Unlike IS in Syria and in Iraq, ISY failed to attract wider support in Yemen and never controlled any territory. While, as will be shown in more detail in the next subchapter, AQAP took active steps to integrate into Yemeni society, ISY alienated the population with its doctrinal intransigence and excessive brutality.[31] Since February 2022, ISY appears to have been more or less inactive.[32]

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[25] Johnsen, Gregory D.: Trump and Counterterrorism in Yemen: The First Two Years. Sana'a Center for Strategic Studies, February 2019, p. 10.

[26] Polke-Majewski, Karsten [et al.]: Drei Tage Terror in Paris. Die Zeit, February 15, 2015. https://www.zeit.de/feature/attentat-charlie-hebdo-rekonstruktion.

[27] Johnsen: Trump and Counterterrorism in Yemen, p. 10.

[28] Kendall: Contemporary Jihadi Militancy, pp. 4, 14.

[29] Ibid: pp. 9-15.

[30] Johnsen: Trump and Counterterrorism in Yemen, p. 10.

[31] Brandt: The Global and the Local, pp. 126-128; Kendall: Contemporary Jihadi, pp.18-21.

[32] United Nations Security Council: Twenty-ninth report of the Analytical Support and Sanctions Monitoring Team submitted pursuant to resolution 2368 (2017) concerning ISIL (Da'esh), Al-Qaida and associated individuals and entities, S/2022/83, p. 14.

AQAP, on the other hand, has lost much of its former strength, yet continues to maintain a solid presence in the southern and eastern parts of the country[33] and "remains the most combat-ready terrorist group in Yemen."[34]

Ideology and Appeal of al-Qa'ida

If one looks at al-Qa'ida's activity in Yemen as described so far, it becomes apparent that the group was primarily active in the south of the country. While the reasons for this do not seem to have been given much thought by researchers, it is perhaps best explained by the specific religious and social situation in Upper Yemen.

In religious terms, the north is strongly defined by Zaydism and, more recently, also quietist Salafism. While it may be argued that the step for a Zaydi to adopt Sunni extremism is a larger step than for a person raised with Sunni Islam,[35] it should also be noted that, as will be shown later, much of al-Qa'ida's appeal lay not in its religious but in its political positions, many of which strongly resemble the Huthi movement's stances on the same issues. In other words, al-Qa'ida may not have been that attractive in the north. Also, Muqbil al-Wadi'i, the eminent figure of Yemeni Salafism and the founder of the famous Salafi centre Dar al-Hadith in Dammaj, fervently and vocally opposed Bin Laden and terrorism in general,[36] further spoiling the religious environment for the jihadis.

With regard to the social situation in the north, it is important to highlight the strong influence of tribalism and the general absence of larger cities, which means an absence of anonymity. Whereas the tribal regions in the north are often described as lawless due to their weak penetration by state institutions, the region is in fact governed by an intricate system of tribal rules and laws, making it next to impossible to simply hide among the local population. While jihadis frequently found refuge among the northern tribes, whether through pre-existing kinship ties, marriage or most often by being

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[33] Ibid, p. 13.

[34] United Nations Security Council: Twenty-eighth report of the Analytical Support and Sanctions Monitoring Team submitted pursuant to resolution 2368 (2017) concerning ISIL (Da'esh), Al-Qaida and associated individuals and entities, S/2021/655, p. 12.

[35] Brandt makes this argument with regards to Yemeni Isma'ilis and al-Qa'ida, Brandt: The Global and the Local, p. 116.

[36] Bonnefoy, Laurent: Salafism in Yemen: Transnationalism and Religious Identity. London 2011, pp. 90-95.

granted asylum, their safety was contingent upon them subordinating to the interests of their protectors.[37] Although tribalism in and of itself is often seen as conducive to terrorism,[38] the realities on the ground are much more complex. Jihadis are tolerated only if the presence of jihadis happens to be beneficial to the interests of the tribe.

Before the collapse of the Yemeni state in the wake of the Arab Spring, tribes profited from the presence of jihadis in their ranks as it increased the threat they were able to project and thus their political leverage. As Brandt puts it, "[B]y granting refuge to jihadis (the more dangerous the better), lamentably neglected and marginalized tribes on the periphery of the state's interest seized the chance to move finally into the government's central focus of attention."[39] This dynamic quite obviously parallels the aforementioned unintended consequences of US support for Yemen's fight against al-Qa'ida in the framework of the "War on Terror:" making any kind of support, attention, prestige, etc. primarily contingent upon the containment of terrorism, creates an incentive to continue to harbour terrorists.

Also, in the south, where the tribal system had been weakened as a matter of socialist policy[40] as well, the spread of AQAP and al-Qa'ida in general was facilitated by an alignment of interests rather than by brute force. Here, too, the group used existing kinship ties and marriage to gain acceptance from the tribes. Departing from strictly religious narratives, AQAP began to frame its positions in the traditional style and vocabulary of the tribes.

According to Elisabeth Kendall,

> AQAP was also mindful to invoke and praise the glorious history and courage of various tribes in statements, videos, poems, and nashids, or anthems. It positioned its contemporary jihad as a simple continuation of the warlike prowess of tribal forefathers who fought independence battles against British colonialists in the 1960s.[41]

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[37] Brandt: The Global and the Local, pp. 112-113.

[38] Lackner: Yemen in Crisis, pp. 141-142.

[39] Brandt: The Global and the Local, p. 114. The same argument is made by Phillips, Sarah: What Comes Next in Yemen? Al-Qaeda, the Tribes, and State-Building. Carnegie Endowments for International Peace, Middle East Program, 107/March 2010, p. 6.

[40] Dresch, Paul: A History of Modern Yemen. Cambridge 2000, pp. 121-122.

[41] Kendall: Contemporary Jihadi Militancy in Yemen, p. 7.

The movement became increasingly adept at spreading its message online, and in January 2008, *Sada al-Malahim* (*The Echo of Battle*), the organisation's journal run by a young Saudi jihadi named Nayif al-Qahtani, published its first issue.[42] With the turn towards an increasingly localised agenda with the second generation of al-Qa'ida fighters in the latter half of the 2000s onwards, domestic issues became integrated into the anti-imperialist agenda of the organisation. At its most basic, AQAP's agenda is perhaps best described as political ideology, which "link[s] the suffering of ordinary Yemenis to the injustice of the regime and the complicity of the West,"[43] framed in a religious register. Employing the language of social justice, AQAP denounced the Yemeni government for the oppression, the sinking standard of living, corruption and mismanagement.[44] In lieu of the corrupt local regimes, AQAP called for the installation of a caliphate on the territory of Yemen and Saudi Arabia.[45]

The fact that the grievances addressed by AQAP were in essence the same as those that gave rise to the Arab Spring demonstrations in 2011 and 2012 may serve as an indication for the broad purchase these narratives – probably less so, however, the political solution offered – had among the population. To put word into action, AQAP started local development programmes to fix the broken infrastructure. Already in 2009, members of al-Qa'ida provided education in remote areas,[46] and after the Arab Spring, particularly during their reign in Hadhramaut 2015-2016, AQAP made this development programme a priority. As Kendall found, 56% of AQAP's tweets from 2016 were dedicated to developmental work alone. Funded largely by the huge revenues it was able rake in through taxes and looting banks, the movement was able to fund the renovation of schools, roads, and bridges and to equip hospitals.[47] In line with the appeal to the sympathies of the local population via the improvement of living conditions, AQAP dialled down on the most extreme and alienating aspects of jihadi violence. AQAP used corporal punishment, including stoning and other forms of killing, less frequently than ISIS and abstained from highlighting the brutality of such acts. Contrary to

[42] Johnsen: The Last Refuge, pp. 220-221.
[43] Phillips: Yemen and the Politics, p. 29.
[44] Ibid: pp. 29, 29.
[45] Phillips: What Comes Next in Yemen, p. 3.
[46] Johnsen: The Last Refuge, p. 256.
[47] Kendall: Contemporary Jihadi Militancy, p. 8.

the practices of ISIS, there were no mass beheadings, and executions in general were rare.[48] Compared to the carnage going on in other parts of the country, the territory under AQAP control was relatively quiet and safe.[49]

A consistently strong factor for recruitment lies in US drone strikes. Every academic publication dedicated to the Yemeni jihadi phenomenon known to the author – even those which otherwise do not go into great detail on the organisation's ideology or practices of recruitment[50] – highlights the importance of American interference in what are perceived to be the internal affairs of the country for the credibility of the movement's anti-imperialist narratives. Whereas already Salih's siding with the US in its "War on Terror" and the consequent rounding up of suspected terrorists caused considerable popular resentment,[51] it was the increasingly frequent aerial attack, by cruise missiles and drones, that alienated people from the US and consequently the Yemeni government, which tolerated these killings. On the other hand, the frequent changes in leadership caused by the strikes certainly had a detrimental impact on al-Qa'ida's ability to establish stable and efficient internal structures.

In order to mitigate the strike's blowback in terms of popular opposition, the strikes were initially kept secret[52] or claimed by the Yemeni government as their own.[53] Media reports and inconsiderate slips, for example when a high-ranking US official mentioned a successful strike to the media, however, rendered such attempts futile.[54] While it appears that there were at least short-term successes in disrupting jihadi activity in the country – for example when the killings of al-Harithi in November 2002 and al-Wuhayshi in 2015 threw al-Qa'ida into disarray or when several midlevel commanders, includ-

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48 Bayoumy, Yara/Browning, Noah/Ghobari, Mohammed: How Saudi Arabia's War in Yemen has Made al Qaeda Stronger. Reuters, April 08, 2016. https://www.reuters.com/investigates/special-report/yemen-aqap/.

49 Loc. Cit.; Kendall: Contemporary Jihadi Militancy, p. 8.

50 Interestingly, the most extensive study on jihadism in Yemen, Gregory Johnson's "The Last Refuge: Yemen, al-Qaeda, and the Battle for Arabia," hardly pays attention to the movement's ideology.

51 Johnsen: The Last Refuge, p. 135.

52 Ibid: p. 123.

53 Hudson, Leila/ Owens, Colin p./Callen, David J.: Drone Warfare in Yemen: Fostering Emirates Through Counterterrorism? In: Middle East Policy, 19/2012, p. 147.

54 Johnsen: The Last Refuge, p. 123.

ing al-Qahtani, the man behind *Sada al-Malahim*, were killed in early 2010[55] – the estimated number of al-Qa'ida fighters in Yemen rose from 300 to more than 1,000 between 2009 and 2012.[56] According to UN estimates, by 2018 this number had risen to 6,000-7,000.[57]

As the number of fighters rose, so did that of the drone strikes. Especially the first year of the Trump administration in 2017 saw an upsurge in aerial strikes as well as in ground raids. According to Lackner, a cautious reading of available data suggests that between 2009 and 2016, at least 668 people were killed.[58] Due the opaque character of the US drone programme, solid numbers are hard to come by. Details about the strikes are usually not disclosed,[59] and the US seems to follow a policy that counts fatalities as terrorists as long as they are not proven to be civilians.[60] In a country with various warring factions, not all of them terrorists, and where most men, particularly with a tribal background, habitually wear automatic rifles as a sign of honour, distinguishing between terrorists and ordinary civilians becomes difficult, especially from afar. An investigation of the Associated Press uncovered that the hunt for one top-level AQAP leader, Qasim al-Raymi, alone resulted in 66 civilian casualties.[61] AQAP was quick to capitalise on the anger of the population.

A good example of the local dynamics unleashed by civilian casualties is a cruise missile strike in December 2009, which hit a Bedouin camp in Abyan. While the Bedouins had taken in members of al-Qa'ida as guests, the camp had been mistaken for an al-Qa'ida training site while it was actually filled with civilians. Amnesty International concluded that the strike cost the lives

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55 Ibid: pp. 122, 132, 263-264.

56 Ibid: p. 265.

57 United Nations Security Council: Twenty-second report of the Analytical Support and Sanctions Monitoring Team submitted pursuant to resolution 2368 (2017) concerning ISIL (Da'esh), Al-Qaida and associated individuals and entities. S/2018/705, p. 9.

58 Lackner: Yemen in Crisis, p. 58.

59 Michael, Maggie/ al-Zirky, Maad: The hidden toll of American drones in Yemen: Civilian deaths. Associated Press, November 14, 2018. https://apnews.com/article/yemen-dirty-war-ap-top-news-al-qaida-international-news-jamal-khashoggi-9051691c8f8a449e8bb6fd684f100863.

60 Johnsen: The Last Refuge, p. 141.

61 Michael: The hidden toll of American drones in Yemen.

of 14 terrorists and 41 innocent persons, more than half of them children. The Yemeni government claimed to have conducted the attack on the "training site" itself, and when after the strike the press uncovered missile fragments bearing marks that indicated their US provenance, popular protests broke out. Al-Qa'ida managed to use this protest of thousands of tribesmen as a platform for anti-American rhetoric and alleged that 58 civilians had been killed.[62] This example is highly indicative of the corrosive effects of the US drone campaign as well as of the pattern of AQAP using the killing of civilians to distance the population from the government and give credibility to its anti-American and anti-Western narratives, which has been repeated over and over.[63] As the eminent Middle East reporter Patrick Cockburn put it shortly after the attack on the Bedouin camp,

> The real strength of al-Qa'ida is not that it can "train" a fanatical Nigerian student to sew explosives into his underpants, but that it can provoke an exaggerated US response to every botched attack. Al-Qa'ida leaders openly admitted at the time of 9/11 that the aim of such operations is to provoke the US into direct military intervention in Muslim countries. In Yemen the US is walking into the al-Qa'ida trap.[64]

With the outbreak of the civil war in 2015, AQAP positioned itself as a bulwark against the Huthi movement. Framing the conflict as a fight against the Shi'ite northerners' attempts to subdue the south, AQAP positioned itself as a group of fighters for southern independence as well as of protectors of true faith.[65]

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[62] Amnesty International: Wikileaks cable corroborates evidence of US airstrikes in Yemen. Amnesty International, December 01, 2010. https://www.amnesty.org/en/latest/press-release/2010/12/wikileaks-cable-corroborates-evidence-us-airstrikes-yemen/; Johnsen: The Last Refuge: pp. 252-257.

[63] For an example after a US ground raid in 2018, see Johnsen: Trump and Counterterrorism in Yemen, pp. 6-7.

[64] Cockburn, Patrick: Threats to Yemen prove America hasn't learned the lesson of history, The Independent, December 31, 2009. https://www.independent.co.uk/voices/commentators/patrick-cockburn-threats-to-yemen-prove-america-hasn-t-learned-the-lesson-of-history-1853847.html.

[65] Kendall: Contemporary Jihadi Militancy, pp. 7-8, see also Al-Jamal: Al-Qaeda's Decline, p. 10.

Conclusion

Over three decades, Islamic terrorism has been an important factor in Yemeni politics and the lives of the people affected. From the jihad in Afghanistan to the "War on Terror" to the chaos of the civil war, the fortunes of terrorism were always tightly corresponding to the wider international and domestic political circumstances. Additionally, terrorist organisations became increasingly proficient in terms of organisation and their dealing with the population. Especially AQAP has also shown a strong ability to learn from past mistakes and failures. While the fortunes of terrorist organisations in Yemen seem to be fading at the time of writing, their past resilience and the volatile political situation in the country make it appear far from improbably that this trend could reverse itself in the future.

List of important abbreviations

Al-Qa'ida in the Arabian Peninsula ..... AQAP

Front for the Liberation of Occupied South Yemen .....FLOSY

Gulf Cooperation Council ..... GCC

General People's Congress..... GCP

Internationally Recognised Government ..... IRG

Islamic State in Yemen .....ISY

National Dialogue Conference ..... NDC

National Liberation Front .....NLF

People's Democratic Republic of Yemen .....PDRY

Presidential leadership Council..... PLC

Republic of Yemen..... RoY

South Arabian League.....SAL

Supreme Political Committee .....SPC

Southern Transitional Council.....STC

United Arab Emirates ..... UAE

United Nations.....UN

Yemen Arab Republic..... YAR

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Despite the intervention of an international coalition, the Huthi movement has remained in power in large parts of the northwest of the country. This publication highlights the role of Saudi Arabia in this conflict. It approaches the conflict constellation from a historical perspective on the one hand and complements about the political implications of a lack of humanitarian security and discusses the aspects of the recognisable state fragmentation in the country. It also highlights the role of the Islamic Republic of Iran in the Yemen conflict and outlines the ideological connections behind it, developing possible scenarios for the future. It highlights the entity of the Huthis, their ideology and origins, and in other articles also the role of women and the quality of terrorist components in the conflict area.

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