

CLASH OF IDEOLOGIES, CIVIL WAR AND THE RISE OF HOUTHIS IN YEMEN: THE IMPLICATIONS OF REGIONAL AND INTERNATIONAL ACTORS

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ABSTRACT

Yemen, a country located at geo-strategic nexus of international trade routes, is beleaguered by a civil conflict and has descended into one of the most severe humanitarian crises witnessed in contemporary history. The civil strife, which erupted in March 2015 as widely documented, has intensified due to the engagement of multiple international actors, each pursuing divergent political agendas and advancing respective strategic interests. This article, in this regard, aims to explain how the diverging ideologies eventually precipitated the emergence of an armed political faction—the Houthis. While the article acknowledges the significance of internal dynamics in a civil conflict, it also underscores that the role of overriding international stakes must not be undermined. To understand the intricate web of interests and strategic objectives, the article examines historical context and the role of local, regional, and international actors. It

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aims to unravel the intricacies of the conflict to provide a comprehensive understanding of the underlying dynamics in the hope to pave a way for the potential solution through reconciliation of various stakeholders involved in the conflict.

Keywords: *Yemeni Civil War, humanitarian crises, Houthis, geopolitical interests, international actors, strategic objectives*

ÖZ

İDEOLOJİLERİN ÇATIŞMASI, İÇ SAVAŞ VE YEMEN'DE HUSİLERİN YÜKSELİŞİ: BÖLGESEL VE ULUSLARARASI AKTÖRLERİN ETKİLERİ

Yemen, uluslararası ticaret yollarının jeostratejik kavşağında yer alan bir ülke, iç savaşla mücadele etmekte ve çağımızın en ağır insani krizlerinden birine sürüklenmiştir. Mart 2015'te patlak veren ve geniş şekilde belgelenen iç çatışma, farklı siyasi gündemler yürüten ve kendi stratejik çıkarlarını ilerletmeye çalışan birçok uluslararası aktörün dahil olmasıyla şiddetlenmiştir. Bununla birlikte, Yemen'in karşı karşıya olduğu karmaşıklık mevcut çatışmanın ötesine geçmekte, ülkenin onlarca yıldır karşılaştığı zorlukların bir güç mücadelesini yansıtmaktadır. Bu makale, güncel dinamikleri kapsamlı bir şekilde anlamayı kolaylaştırmak için, tarihsel itici güçlerin zengin bir değerlendirmesini sunmaktadır. Bu çalışma, farklılaşan ideolojilerin zamanla silahlı bir siyasi fraksiyonun—Husilerin—ortaya çıkmasına nasıl yol açtığını irdeleyecektir. Ayrıca, bölgedeki etki mücadelesi ve böylece farklı fraksiyonlara çeşitli yabancı güçlerin desteği, çatışmanın diplomatik yollarla çözülmesine yönelik çabaları engellemekte ve böylece çatışmanın devamına katkıda bulunmaktadır. Makale, bir iç çatışmada iç dinamiklerin önemini kabul etmekle birlikte, baskın uluslararası payların rolünün göz ardı edilmemesi gerektiğini de vurgulamaktadır. Çatışmanın karmaşıklıklarını çözmeyi ve çatışmaya dahil çeşitli tarafların uzlaşması yoluyla potansiyel bir çözüm için zemin hazırlamayı amaçlamaktadır.

Anahtar Kelimeler: *Yemen İç Savaşı, insani krizler, Husiler, jeopolitik çıkarlar, uluslararası aktörler, stratejik hedefler*

1. Introduction

Yemen is situated at southwestern part of the Arabian Peninsula, with the Arabian Sea to the south and the Red Sea to the west; the importance of this geography cannot be emphasized enough. It has been at the intersection of world trade routes and its significance has come to the fore recently with the ongoing war in Gaza since October 7th, 2023. Besides its strategic significance, it is

economically attractive as an oil producer with several offshore oil and natural gas deposits. However, for almost a decade, Yemen has been wracked by the civil war that originated from a domestic power struggle. The convergence of various geopolitical interests and competing agendas of regional and global powers has plunged the country into a devastating humanitarian crisis and rendered the conflict intractable. The current literature on Yemeni Civil War lacks considerable attention to Yemeni society, hence the aim of this article is to highlight the fragility of Yemeni society through a comprehensive analysis of the rise of Houthis as a political force and their historical roots. In light of this, the article offers a rich evaluation of the underlying societal dynamics while also touching upon the political, and strategic drivers of the current civil war. In addition, the article postulates that Yemen's delicate societal fabric over the course of centuries rendered it fragile, however with the onset of international intervention, Yemen devolved from a fragile to a broken state. Although main focus of this article is the clash of ideologies and rise of Houthis in Yemen, a brief analysis of external dynamics is imperative to provide a holistic view of the conflict.

The introduction section is followed by the conceptual framework which discusses a brief literature review of the theories applied to analyze the external dynamics. The third section provides a comprehensive analysis of Yemen's historical experiences both from religious and societal perspective. This section is more of a historical analysis, thus devoid of specific theoretical framework and is intentionally longer as it is pivotal for understanding the current situation. It is divided in two sub-sections; the first part focuses on how various Islamic ideologies gained ground in Yemeni society and how they differed from one another. To understand the intricacies of current conflict, one must understand the inherent complexities that lie at the very core of the Yemeni society. The second sub-section explains how these diverging ideologies and their exploitation by political forces eventually culminated in the rise of a political armed group, the Houthis. The third section concludes with the argument that these experiences rendered Yemen a fragile state, an analysis supported by weak state literature. The fourth section contends that with the onset of international intervention, Yemen's status plunged from a fragile state to that of a broken state. It discusses external power intervention including both regional and extra-regional actors. Unlike historical analysis, this section focuses on current geopolitical dynamics and neorealist theoretical framework helps to assess these developments better. The

quest for regional domination turned Yemen a battleground for the playout of geopolitical rivalry between Saudi Arabia and Iran through their respective support to local actors, analyzed through neorealist theory of offensive realism. Furthermore, overriding international stakes and involvement of extra-regional actors in the conflict are elucidated using the theory of internal conflicts and international actors. This section also seeks to highlight the forgotten victims of war, the innocent Yemeni civilians, who paid a huge price in terms of breakdown of civilian infrastructure and starvation. The last section of the article summarizes the main findings and also includes the recent developments in the wake of Israeli-Palestinian war as it has had tremendous impact on Yemen as well.

2. Conceptual Framework

Yemen's civil war, initially a contest for power among local actors, escalated into a broader regional conflict influenced by external forces, often characterized as part of the Middle East's Cold War dynamics. The external intervention can be studied from two perspectives- regional and global. Regionally, the geopolitical rivalry between Saudi Arabia and Iran manifests through their support for competing factions in Yemen's ongoing civil conflict. This rivalry has been the subject of analysis for several decades under the frameworks of balance of power and regional hegemony pursued through proxy warfare. While both frameworks are pertinent for examining this intricate relationship, offensive realism in IR provides a more robust explanation for the increasingly aggressive involvement of the respective stakeholders.

Offensive realism, as introduced by John Mearsheimer in his seminal work entitled "The Tragedy of Great Power Politics," contextualizes the political interests and shifts in power dynamics that propel the ambitions of competing actors to acquire power (Mearsheimer, 2001). He asserts that competition for power does not end after its acquisition, rather powerful countries become obsessed with this pursuit, eyeing for hegemony. Offensive realism is different from its defensive counterpart as the former assumes states as inherently power-seeking, aggressive, and unsatisfied with the status quo, thus engaging in inter-state competition while the latter assumes states as seeking survival and security through balance of power. Mearsheimer posits that the rise of a powerful state poses a threat to other states, leading them to form alliances against it, thereby perpetuating the incessant quest for power. Mearsheimer (2001) contends that the

anarchic nature of the international system prevents the maintenance of a status quo and compels states to continually seek greater power in their pursuit of hegemony.

In this regard, offensive realism fits well to the case of regional geopolitical rivalry between Iran and Saudi Arabia, however for the case of international intervention from well beyond the Middle Eastern borders, it is more of a question of balance of power and checking on other superpowers so as to not let them gain an upper hand in regional politics. Hence, to analyze international intervention, this article considers John Stedman's theory of International Actors and Internal Conflicts. Stedman (1999) postulates that internal conflicts in a country have several layers and external factors. Although these conflicts begin as domestic struggle, they devolve into full scale civil wars when internal weaknesses are exploited by international actors to advance their respective interests (Stedman, 1999). He describes their actions as unintended and intended where a faulty judgment owing to incomplete assessment of the situation is categorized as unintended and specific assistance to advance specific action by a group is intended action. Since Yemen's geography lies at the heart of international trade routes, Yemeni conflict garnered enormous attention and thus intervention, in form of both intended and unintended actions, from both the region and also the international system, i.e. the superpowers. Stedman (1999) highlights a grave potential danger of external interventions, underlining that oftentimes external actors lack accurate on-ground information, making faulty judgements, inadvertently targeting civilians, and fueling escalation. Stedman also explains the prolongation of such interventions by the fact that the gain from conflict intensification in form of resource exploitation, weapons trade, among other benefits to external actors, often outweighs the benefits from no-conflict case.

3. Historical Analysis: A Fragile State

The clash of different ideologies on political, ethnic, religious, and geographical grounds has entrenched deep divisions within Yemeni society over centuries, rendering it a fragile state. The absence of authentic political affiliation has created a power vacuum that various actors are attempting to fill in in order to advance their respective interests. The control of Yemen's territory is divided among three dominant actors- the *de-facto* internationally recognized government

(backed by Saudi Arabia) controlling oil-rich provinces of Marib and Hadramout, the United Arab Emirates (UAE)-backed Southern Transitional Council (STC) controlling Aden, the economic capital of Yemen and the Houthis controlling the capital Sanaa that hosts the most critical state institutions and telecommunication companies (Sameai, 2023). To understand the foothold of these actors in Yemen, it would be noteworthy to assess the evolution of Political Islam, a major ideological force in Yemen. The following section discusses various ideologies that emerged in the region after the expansion of Islam. Although the divisions in Islam manifested early on, they have been mainly institutionalized over the course of past two centuries. In this light, clash of ideologies focuses mainly on Salafism, Wahhabism, and Zaydism. The next sub-section explains manifestation of Houthis as the political defenders of Zaydism.

3.1 Clash of Ideologies

Islam, as a religion, experienced a significant schism into Sunni and Shiite branches in its nascent period. Following the demise of the last Prophet of Islam, Prophet Muhammad, a contentious debate over the rightful succession of leadership within the Islamic community led to the formation of two distinct groups: Sunnis and Shiites. Sunnis, forming one faction, acknowledged the four Rashidun caliphs as the legitimate leaders of Islam after the demise of Prophet Muhammad (Su, 2022). In contrast, the Shiites asserted that Ali, the prophet's closest male relative, was the rightful first successor. This bifurcation gave rise to the Sunni jurisprudential schools –the *Shafii*, *Hanbali*, *Maliki*, and *Hanafi*– each with divergent interpretations of Islamic law and *Hadith*, fostering varied political movements like Salafism and Wahhabism, and inciting the genesis of entities, such as the Muslim Brotherhood (*Al-Ikhwān al-Muslimīn*). The Shiite branch also comprises multiple sub-sects including Zaydi, Twelver, Ismaili, and Alawite, and has seen its political expression through groups such as Hezbollah and the Houthis. Such sectarian divisions are not exclusive to Islam; for instance, Protestant Christianity features an array of denominations including Presbyterian, Methodist, and Congregationalist. The Shiite spectrum further branched out due to allegiances to Ali's descendants, particularly his sons Hassan and Hussein. The Houthis, pivotal to the discourse at hand, are aligned with the Zaydi faction of Shiite Islam (Abdulmajid, 2022). To thoroughly comprehend the ideological clashes, the nuances within political Islam, and the ascendancy of the Houthis in

Yemen, an appreciation of the historical backdrop and core doctrines shaping these ideologies is indispensable.

Salafism, a movement within Sunni Islam, emerged in the waning years of the 19th century, primarily as a countermeasure to Western imperial penetration in Egypt. It advocated a restoration of the foundational Islamic practices of the first three generations of Muslims—Prophet Muhammad, his companions, and their direct successors, collectively known as the Salafs (Schmitz & Burrowes, 2018). Salafism is characterized by its strict adherence to the Quran, the Sunnah, and the consensus of the Salafs, eschewing the traditional Islamic interpretive methodologies advanced by *Ulamas* and other religious authorities (Ali, 2015). The Salafist ideology vehemently promotes the unabridged application of Sharia law and categorically denounces religious innovations, including the veneration of Shrines (Trauthig, 2020). Within Salafism, there are variations: *Purists* avoid political engagement, *Activists* engage actively in politics, and *Jihadists* advocate armed struggle to restore early Islamic traditions. Salafism is particularly prevalent in the Gulf countries, with significant proportions of the populations in Qatar and the UAE identifying as Salafis, alongside notable followings in Saudi Arabia, Bahrain, and Kuwait (Izady, 2000). While some analysts perceive Salafism as an ideological backlash against imperialistic forces and Western ideologies, emphasizing its roots in the early Islamic civilization and its association with key figures of Islamic revivalism, namely Hasan al-Banna, Rashid Rida, Muhammad Abduh and Jamal al-Din al-Afghani, it is pertinent to note that contemporary Salafism that emerged in the 1960s is marked by a more traditional, stringent, and literalist interpretation of Islam. Prominent proponents in this modern expression of Salafism include Muqbil bin Hadi al-Wadi'i, Muhammad ibn al Uthaymeen, and Muhammad Nasiruddin al-Albani (Abu Khadeejah, 2017).

Wahhabism, an Islamic reformist movement, was founded in the 18th century by Muhammad ibn Abd al-Wahhab in the arid region of Najd. He criticized Sunni practices such as the reverence for saints and visits to shrines, labeling them as heretical deviations and forms of shirk (Pike, 2015). Initially met with widespread skepticism, al-Wahhab gained considerable influence by forming a strategic partnership with Muhammad bin Saud, the ruler of Ad-Diriyah and progenitor of the Saud dynasty. He convinced Saud that adopting the Wahhabi doctrine would bring “power and glory,” thus confer political legitimacy and

compliance within the kingdom (Lacey, 2010, pp. 10–11). In the aftermath of the Ottoman Empire's dissolution, the Al Saud family took control over the sacred cities of Mecca and Medina, established the Kingdom of Saudi Arabia, and disseminated Wahhabism across the Islamic heartland. The discovery of petroleum in 1939 and the ensuing financial windfall, enabled the far-reaching propagation of Wahhabism via pedagogic channels, the press, religious centers, and scholarships. This widespread diffusion bolstered the stature of Wahhabi religious scholars in educational, judicial, ethical, and religious domains during the 20th century (Kepel, 2004, pp. 61-62). While the Al Saud dynasty remains the political guardian of Wahhabism, it heavily relies on Wahhabi clerics for legitimacy, even when making pragmatically controversial decisions, such as the adoption of contemporary technologies and armaments, or entering into alliances with non-Muslim entities to consolidate power (Commins, 2009, p. 208). This dependency also extends to suppressing religious dissent against unpopular policies. Nevertheless, a series of pivotal events, including the 1979 insurrection at the Holy Mosque, the stationing of American forces in the 1991 Gulf War, the 2001 World Trade Center attacks, and the alignment with the Western bloc have significantly undermined Wahhabi credibility and sown seeds of skepticism and disaffection both within the Kingdom and across the global Islamic community (Commins, 2009, p. 156).

The distinction between Wahhabism and Salafism is often misty, as the terms are frequently used interchangeably within political and sometimes academic discourse. Nonetheless, a clear distinction exists between the two ideologies. According to Christopher Blanchard, Wahhabism is “a conservative Islamic creed originating from and centered in Saudi Arabia,” whereas he describes Salafism as “a more puritanical Islamic movement that has emerged at different times and places within the Islamic world” (Blanchard, 2008, p. 2). This suggests that Wahhabism is a more geographically and ideologically confined interpretation of the broader Salafist movement. Further refining this distinction, Lebanese political scientist Ahmad S. Moussalli asserts that Wahhabism is a specific manifestation within the Salafist framework, indicating that while Wahhabism falls under the umbrella of Salafism, the converse does not necessarily apply – not all adherents of Salafism subscribe to Wahhabi principles (Moussalli, 2009).

Zaydism represents a moderate sect within Shiite Islam that diverged from other branches during a succession dispute concerning the imamate. This sect, also known as the Fivers, supported Zayd ibn Ali, the grandson of Husayn, as the fifth *imam*. Zaydism emerged around 740 CE in Kufa, Iraq, catalyzed by Zayd's active resistance against the Umayyad dynasty. Zaydis uphold the doctrine of *hijra*, promoting emigration from regions ruled by unjust and non-Zaydi authorities.

The most prolonged Zaydi imamate, led by the Qasimids under Mansur Bi'llah al-Qasim, spanned from 1597 to 1872 CE. This era overlapped with the First Ottoman period (1538–1635) and concluded with the Second Ottoman period (1872–1918) in Yemen. Following the dissolution of the Ottoman Empire after World War I, the Qasimi Zaydi imamate was reestablished as the *Mutawakkilite* Kingdom in 1918, a regime that lasted until the revolution of 1962 (Madelung, 2022).

3.2. The rise of Houthis

The Ansarallah Movement, commonly known as the Houthi Movement, originated as a political and armed Islamic struggle in the Sa'ada province of northern Yemen during the 1990s (Alley, 2010). This movement emerged under the leadership of Hussein Badreddin al-Houthi, who was a proponent of the Zaydi branch of Shiite Islam. Initially, the movement focused on addressing issues such as economic underdevelopment, corruption, and political marginalization while advocating for a more democratic and non-sectarian governance of Yemen. The movement also positioned itself as a guardian and revitalizer of Zaydi religious and cultural values. However, the movement escalated into a violent insurgency in 2004 following the assassination of Hussein al-Houthi and several of his guards by the Yemeni military in Sa'ada (Juneau, 2016). Currently, the leadership has passed to his brother, Abdul-Malik al-Houthi. In 2003, the Houthis adopted the slogan "God is great, death to the US, death to Israel, curse the Jews, and victory for Islam," and have since utilized their media platforms to critique what they perceive as Arab collusion with US-Israeli interests (Taqi, 2015).

The historical origins of the movement are rooted deeply and dates back to the dissolution of the *Mutawakkilite* Kingdom of Yemen in 1962. As previously mentioned, Zaydi religious leaders governed Northern Yemen for almost a millennium, from 897 AD until the monarchy's dissolution in 1962 (Schmitz &

Burrowes, 2018). The Zaydi monarchy was overthrown by revolutionary military officers supported by Egypt, with additional assistance from the Soviet Union, leading to the establishment of a republic governed by an Arab nationalist administration. However, the transition to a republican state was tumultuous, resulting in an eight-year civil war in Northern Yemen that concluded in 1970. Following the republican *coup d'état*, Zaydi royalists retreated to the mountainous regions near the Saudi border and engaged in a civil war to reclaim control of Northern Yemen. During this conflict, the royalists were backed by Saudi Arabia and Israel, whereas Egypt and the Soviet Union supported the republicans. Eventually, the republicans secured victory, effectively marginalizing the Zaydi presence in Yemeni political affairs. Moreover, post the Arab-Israeli War of 1967 (Six-Day War) with Israel, Saudi Arabia reconciled its differences with Egypt. While Saudi influence in Yemeni politics persisted, Egyptian involvement waned following their defeat in the 1967 Arab-Israeli war alongside their Arab allies (Youssef, 2004).

After tumultuous political landscape and following a succession of *coups*, in 1978, Ali Abdallah Saleh, a Zaydi and a republican general, ascended to power. Known for his opportunistic leadership style, Saleh ruled, rather misruled Yemen for the ensuing 33 years. As an experienced political strategist, he adeptly utilized complex sectarian tactics and frequently altered alliances to further his objectives. It is quite challenging to encapsulate Yemen's state under his leadership, given the inconsistency of both his domestic and foreign policies. This inconsistency contributed to the rise of multiple factions and entrenched Yemen in an intractable conflict. During his tenure, Saleh established a network of tribal alliances to maintain a fragile balance of power, managing the intricate web of relationships he himself had crafted. However, after his demise, these factions pursued their distinct agendas, further complicating Yemeni politics and weakening the central government's authority. In the international arena, Saleh's policies were equally inconsistent. He supported Iraq during the 1991 Gulf War and endured a Saudi-backed civil war in 1994. His diplomatic relations with Saudi Arabia and the United States (US) were complex; initially, he opposed the US in the 1990s, but shifted to collaborate with them in the 2000s against al-Qaeda (Soufan, 2017). To establish firm control, Saleh regime harshly suppressed the Zaydis, perceiving them as remnants of the old monarchical order and a potential threat (Schmitz, 2014). In an effort to diminish Zaydi influence in the north, he played sectarian

strategies, promoting the settlement of Sunni Muslims from the Salafist and Wahhabi sects, who had ties to Saudi Arabia, in traditionally Zaydi territories (Freeman, 2009).

Post-1970s, Saudi Arabia endeavored to expand its influence in Yemen, capitalizing on the country's strategic location along key international trading routes. To fulfill its strategic aims, Saudi Arabia supported the establishment of a Salafi Wahhabi group in Sa'ada, a northern Yemeni province, with the objective of converting the local Zaydi Shia population to Salafism. This initiative was consistent with the goals of both the Yemeni and Saudi governments, which collectively contributed to the suppression of the Zaydi community. One of the most influential Salafi institutions that emerged during this period was Dar al-Hadith, an educational institute founded in the early 1980s by Muqbil bin Hadi al-Wadi, a Yemeni cleric who had studied in Saudi Arabia. Located in Dammaj, within Sa'ada Province, Dar al-Hadith played a pivotal role in promoting Salafism in the region. By the 1990s, the concerted efforts of the Yemeni and Saudi governments had effectively fortified the Salafi presence in the area. Following the unification of North and South Yemen into the Republic of Yemen in 1990, Zaydis maintained a demographic dominance in Sana'a, the capital city, as well as in the northern and western provinces, yet nationally, they were outnumbered by Salafis (Baron, 2015). The genesis of the Houthi insurgency, a grassroots movement, is widely recognized as a Zaydi backlash against the escalating Salafi influence in northern Yemen (Schmitz, 2015).

In 1994, during a southern secession attempt that escalated into a civil war, Saudi Arabia leveraged its Salafi base in Yemen to support the secession, which President Saleh ultimately suppressed (Bonney, 2010). As the political landscape evolved, the increasing Salafi sway alarmed both the Zaydis and President Saleh. In a return to his conventional tactics of factional manipulation, Saleh backed the Houthis as a countermeasure against the Salafis, endorsing Hussein al-Houthi's candidacy for parliament under his ruling party's banner. Regrettably for Saleh, Hussein al-Houthi subsequently became his adversary, culminating in an armed confrontation in Sa'ada in 2004 that led to Hussein al-Houthi's demise in September of the same year. Subsequently, the movement was renamed the Houthi movement in tribute to their fallen leader.

The period from 2004 to 2010 was characterized by sporadic clashes between the Houthi forces and the government under Saleh, culminating in six

clashes between them and an additional confrontation involving Saudi Arabia. The violence commenced in June 2004 when Yemeni security forces killed several Houthi supporters, marking a significant escalation in hostilities and contributing to the radicalization of the group (BBC News, 2004). The situation further deteriorated following the assassination of the movement's leader, Hussein al-Houthi, by government forces on September 10, 2004, exacerbating the conflict (BBC News, 2004). The leadership of the movement was then assumed by his brother, Abdul Malik al-Houthi. A subsequent round of violence in the spring of 2005, spanning March to April, resulted in an additional 1,500 fatalities. The violence resumed in early 2007 with three coordinated Houthi attacks on government facilities between January 28 and February 1, which resulted in the deaths of 22 Yemeni soldiers (Al Jazeera English, 2007). In response, the government initiated a large-scale offensive involving 30,000 troops, which led to significant casualties among both soldiers and militia members (International Herald Tribune, 2007). A ceasefire agreement, mediated by Qatar on June 16, 2007, briefly halted the hostilities. Under the terms of the agreement, rebel leaders agreed to disarm and accept exile in Qatar in return for the release of detained rebels (Al-Hajj, 2007). However, the peace was short-lived, and armed conflicts resumed in April 2008. On May 2, 2008, a devastating bombing occurred at the Bin Salman Mosque in Sa'ada during Friday prayers, resulting in the deaths of 15 worshippers, with neither side claiming responsibility (France 24, 2008). Subsequently, on August 11, 2008, the government launched Operation Scorched Earth, deploying fighter jets and tanks against the Houthis (Human Rights Watch, 2008). This military action resulted in the displacement of thousands of civilians and Houthi supporters in the northern region of Sa'ada province.

The third phase of the insurgency escalated as confrontations between the Houthis and Saudi security forces brought an international dimension to the conflict. On November 4, 2009, the Houthis reportedly attacked the Saudi border, resulting in the death of a Saudi border guard and the seizure of Jebel al-Dukhan area (Al Jazeera, 2009). In response, Saudi Arabia launched extensive airstrikes in northern Yemen the following day, which resulted in the deaths of 40 rebels. The Houthis accused Saudi Arabia of collaborating with the Yemeni government against them, while the Yemeni government charged Iran with supporting the Houthi rebellion. The Houthis alleged that the US entered the conflict in December 2009 by conducting 28 air raids in the provinces of Sa'ada, Hajjah, and

Amran (Human Rights Watch, 2013). On January 1, 2010, the Yemeni government proposed a conditional ceasefire, stipulating five terms: the Houthis' withdrawal from mountain strongholds, restoration of safe passage on roads, release of all detained civilians and soldiers, return of all military and public equipment seized by the Houthis, and evacuation from all properties held by local authorities. On January 25, Abdul Malik al-Houthi agreed to the conditional ceasefire to reduce further civilian casualties, warning that the Houthis would respond if provoked by either Yemeni or Saudi forces (Al Jazeera, 2010). Despite this agreement, the truce failed to take effect on the ground, and hostilities among the Houthis, Saudi, and Yemeni forces continued unabated.

The above analysis underscores that the violent Houthi insurgency acted as a precursor to the ensuing civil war in Yemen. Existing tensions were further compounded by the Arab Spring that swept the region by 2011, which created a power vacuum that intensified these conflicts and empowered non-state actors. For the Houthis, the Arab Spring offered a strategic window to strengthen their position by seizing government facilities. Originating from the Ansarallah movement of the 1990s, the roots of both the Arab Spring and the subsequent Yemeni Civil War of 2015 are linked to the insurgency that began in 2004.

4. Reflections of the 2011 Arab Uprisings

The Arab Uprisings or Spring that engulfed most of the countries in the Middle East and North Africa (MENA) also hit Yemen. The Arab Spring protests sprouted in Yemen on January 27, 2011, when over 16,000 demonstrators gathered in Sana'a, the capital (Irish Times, 2011). Despite President Saleh's declaration on February 3 that he would not seek re-election in 2013 nor hand over power to his son, the protesters remained unsatisfied, leading to further demonstrations on the same day (BBC News, 2011). The Houthis' involvement in the Arab Spring was marked by Abdul Malik al-Houthi's declaration of support for the pro-democracy protests on February 27, which prompted substantial numbers of Houthis to participate in protests across the North. As previously noted, the Arab Spring provided the Houthis with an opportunity to strengthen their political influence in Yemen. Their strategy was incremental, initially focusing on fortifying their base in Sa'ada Province. The Houthis engaged in hostilities with pro-government forces under Sheikh Uthman Mujalli on March 19, 2011. After nearly a week of skirmishes, they forced the local governor to

evacuate, and by March 26, 2011, they had instituted their governance in Sa'ada Province (ReliefWeb, 2011). Subsequently, on July 8, the Houthis, bolstered by their control of Sa'ada Province, initiated an expansion into the adjacent Al-Jawf Province. They faced resistance from the *Islah* (Yemeni Congregation for Reform) Party, a faction linked to the Muslim Brotherhood and purportedly supported by Saudi Arabia in Yemen (Tayler, 2011). The conflict in Al-Jawf persisted for over four months, resulting in significant casualties on both sides, including a car bombing in August that claimed the lives of 14 Houthis. By late October 2011, the Houthis had successfully taken control of Al-Jawf Province (Islam Times, 2011).

The rapid territorial expansion post-Arab Spring underscores the Houthis' capacity to leverage Yemen's instability in a bid to enhance their influence. In November, the Houthis advanced into Hajjah Province, engaging in confrontations with the pro-government Kashir and Aahm tribes. This offensive resulted in the capture of the Ash Sharaf district, providing the Houthis with access to the sea through the Midi port and control over vital highways, paving a strategic route to Sana'a. Meanwhile, on November 23, 2011, amidst this escalating conflict, President Saleh consented to a power-transfer agreement in Riyadh, brokered by the Gulf Cooperation Council (GCC). This agreement stipulated that Saleh would cede power to Vice-President Mansur al-Hadi within 30 days and, in exchange, be immune from prosecution (The Associated Press, 2011). This agreement, perceived by many protesters and the Houthis as an attempt to establish a pro-Saudi administration, did little to stabilize the region. On February 21, 2012, al-Hadi was elected president, receiving 99.8% of the vote and was sworn in amid ongoing national discord (Kasinof, 2012). The power transition, however, was marred by Saleh's continued influence and the rejection of the GCC deal by the Houthis, leading to a power vacuum. This vacuum saw various tribal groups either aligning with the Houthis or the *Islah* party, while Al-Qaeda in the Arabian Peninsula (AQAP) gained a foothold in southern Yemen. As the clashes continued in Hajjah and Al-Jawf, the Houthis aimed to consolidate their power in these provinces while also seeking opportunities and strategic alliances to advance towards Sana'a. In September 2012, amidst Anti-US protests triggered by the release of the film "Innocence of Muslims," the Houthis utilized the opportunity to disseminate their propaganda in the capital through posters. In a surprising turn of events, Saleh allied with the Houthis, his former adversaries,

united by their mutual exclusion from the GCC agreement and Saleh's desire to retain political influence.

The year 2014 marked a significant escalation in Yemen with the Houthi takeover of Sana'a, an event often referred to as the Battle of Sana'a. On August 18, 2014, the Houthis, along with pro-Saleh factions, initiated protests against rising fuel prices in Sana'a. These protests escalated into violence on September 9, 2014, when pro-Houthi demonstrators advancing towards the cabinet office were met with gunfire from security forces, resulting in the deaths of seven protesters. Intense clashes followed on September 18 between the Houthis and Sunni hardliners from the Islah Party as a result of the Houthis' attempt to take over Yemen TV. The situation reached a turning point on September 21, 2014, when the Houthis seized the government headquarters in Sana'a, leading to the resignation of Prime Minister Mohammed Basindawa and the subsequent collapse of the GCC-backed Hadi administration. This event signaled a critical juncture for Saudi Arabia, prompting an international intervention and transforming the tribal armed skirmishes into a comprehensive civil war (BBC News, 2014; Karasik, 2014).

5. International Intervention: Devolution to Broken State

While in the previous section, Yemen was analyzed as a fragile state owing to its several years of tumultuous domestic politics. In this section however, we will analyze the dynamics, particularly, the international intervention which led to the plunging of its status from fragile to broken in less than a decade. According to the 2022 Fragile State Index (FSI), Yemen is the world's most fragile state, with the highest index score of 111.7 (The Global Economy, 2022). This ranking underscore the extensive socio-economic and political deterioration within Yemen. The international intervention that worsened the civil conflict in Yemen began in 2015. After losing control of Sana'a, President al-Hadi sought to implement a new federal constitution, but his efforts were thwarted by the Houthis and Saleh, which culminated in his flight to Saudi Arabia as the Houthis attempted to arrest him. This situation precipitated an intervention in Yemen by a Western-backed, Saudi-led coalition in March 2015, comprising Kuwait, UAE, Bahrain, Egypt, Morocco, Jordan, Sudan, and Senegal, with logistical support from the USA, UK, and other Western nations. Saudi Arabia justified its intervention by citing the need to protect its southern border, restore the Hadi

government, and counter Iranian influence. The coalition initially managed to recapture Aden in the south and Marib northeast of Sana'a from the Houthis. Concurrently, amidst the turmoil, AQAP took control of Mukalla in Eastern Yemen in 2016. To counter AQAP, the UAE backed the Southern Transitional Council (STC), a group advocating for southern secession. In 2017, the Houthis launched missile attacks deep into Saudi territory. Observing the Houthis' weakened position against the Saudi-led coalition, Saleh attempted to switch allegiances. However, as he tried to flee Sana'a to possibly in a bid to collude with the Saudis, he was captured and killed by the Houthis on December 4, 2017.

The key factor that plays a pivotal role in the conflict in Yemen, civil war is the control over critical economic assets, including oil and gas extraction sites, production facilities, and essential infrastructure like ports and roads. The Saudi-led coalition has strategically targeted significant infrastructures, notably the port of Hodeidah, which is crucial for managing Yemen's aid and commercial imports (France 24, 2018). However, despite these efforts, recent reports indicate that the port continues to be under Houthi control. As a peace negotiation attempt, Stockholm Hodeidah truce was signed, unfortunately, as in case of other cease-fires and truces, it remains unimplemented (Dijkstal, 2019). In 2019, the UAE announced its plans to scale back its involvement in the coalition, yet reports suggest it remains heavily engaged, particularly through support to its allies in southern Yemen.

Since the onset of international intervention in 2015, the prolonged conflict has devastated Yemen, with approximately 80% of its population now dependent on humanitarian aid for survival, and around 100,000 fatalities reported (Yemen Data Project, 2023). Both the Houthi forces and the Saudi-led coalition have been implicated in indiscriminate attacks on civilian populations. According to the Yemen Data Project (2023), about 30% of the coalition's estimated 24,000 airstrikes have targeted civilian areas, contributing to nearly two-thirds of the civilian casualties. The United Nations Office for the Coordination of Humanitarian Affairs (OCHA, 2023) reports that over four million Yemenis are internally displaced, with an additional 280,000 seeking asylum abroad, describing Yemen's situation as the largest humanitarian crisis globally. This crisis has pushed the already impoverished nation toward famine, with 24 million of its 29 million population requiring humanitarian assistance and 20 million facing severe food insecurity. Despite continuous air raids, Saudi Arabia has

failed to secure significant ground control. Moreover, the coalition's attempts to align forces loyal to President Hadi with the Southern Transitional Council (STC) to counter the Houthis have not succeeded, further exacerbating the fragmentation among opposition groups, thus condemning Yemen to being a battlefield for proxy wars.

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6. Conclusion

The article is an attempt to foster a deeper understanding of Yemeni society and major ideological forces in the country. It evaluates various ideologies that gained ground in Yemen over the course of history. These ideologies influenced Yemen's societal fabric and became entrenched with the sectarian cards played by its opportunist administration to advance its interests. It also explains how the Houthi movement, originated as a grassroots campaign against a

corrupt regime, turned violent following the assassination of its leader in 2004, evolving as a major political force in the country. As is known, Zaydism, the doctrinal foundation of the movement, advocates for rebellion against oppression and corruption. Though the movement commenced in the 1990s with a will to reform Yemeni society and politics, it failed and now its focus has shifted to power politics. Saleh was a rival for Houthis and his removal in 2011, created an existential crisis for Yemen's Houthis which prompted a shift in the Houthi agenda.

The survival of any political group often hinges on the presence of an adversary, the same was applicable for the Houthis. Following Saleh's death in 2017, their *raison d'être* became increasingly difficult to define and their armed opposition hard to defend as the international intervention supported various local factions within the deeply divided Yemeni society. To bolster their position, Houthis seized the opportunity presented by the recent Israel-Gaza war. They mobilized popular support by targeting shipments to Israel to disrupt the war effort, a strategy that effectively united Yemenis in support of their Palestinian brethren (Al Jazeera, 2024). Their stance on the war and subsequent action at a time when no regional countries came afront to deal with the crisis was applauded by Yemeni society. However, despite the ongoing political attempts to resolve the Yemeni conflict, US retaliatory strikes against the Houthis persist and the war continues. As the Yemeni war has dragged on for a decade, the much rapidly escalating Israel-Gaza war has caught world's attention. Nonetheless, as with other wars, it is imperative to bring an end to the Yemeni war, the world risks normalizing the conflict. A thorough analysis of the underlying convoluted dynamics of the civil war is presented with the vision that it may guide policy and push the reconciliation of the stakeholders involved in these types of prolonged conflicts.

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