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The multi-layered conflict in Yemen:  
between sectarianism and geopolitical  
interests:  
An analysis of future perspectives

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# The multilayered conflict in Yemen: between sectarianism and geopolitical interests

## *An analysis of future perspectives*

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## **Introduction:**

Yemen is a country situated in the Gulf area of the Middle Eastern region as well as one of the oldest centers of civilization of the near east. It is primarily known for representing the worst humanitarian crisis of the last century. However, the roots of being such are often ignored. Therefore, the current conflict is often relegated to the rivalry between regional powers exploiting local fighters warring for domestic gains, and it comes to posing the attention on the present humanitarian catastrophe while just marginally considering the further implications of such a war.

Given it, the initial assumption of this thesis concerns an oversimplification of the Yemeni *milieu*. Thereupon, this work aims at casting some light on the geographical, ethnic, and tribal divisions which shaped and still shape Yemeni politics to acknowledge the conflict in full and evaluating the prospects for peacebuilding.

In further detail, the political contours of today's Yemen started to emerge in the 19th century with the British protectorate and the Ottoman control over the territory. At that time, Yemen was divided into the northern and the southern areas, both with their peculiarities.

However, at a time in history, foreign dominions were overcome by the Shia imams' declaration of a kingdom of North Yemen and the gaining of independence from Ottoman rule. Thus, in the sixties, it was proclaimed the Yemen Arab Republic. This process was led by a military rebellion followed by a six-year civil war in which Saudis and Egyptians backed opposite sides. Therefore, the Imamate was re-established, opening the path for re-Islamization.

Concerning the Southern shore, the People's Republic of Southern Yemen came to light in 1967. And it soon became a satellite of Moscow and Marxism.

Over these times, both the North and the South faced uprisings and protests primarily led by restive tribes. The situation changed with the end of the Cold War and the fall of the Soviet Union; subsidies to the South almost ceased, and survival proved hard to pursue. Therefore, the two territories merged in 1990 under the best auspices of the august advocator of the unitarian solution, namely the then-President Saleh. However, it happened more for pragmatic reasons than for sentimental proximity despite the several slogans praising unity.

As a matter of fact, the marriage proved troubling since the beginning as inhabitants of the two parts did not feel any signs of fraternity with the others. Hence, tensions mounted many times, and the peak was in 1994 when Saleh sent armed forces to crush a southern independence civil war.

Joint to these internal rivalries and secessionist forces, Yemen also experimented with the threat of terrorism. Starting from the 2000 AQAP, an acronym for Al Qaeda in the Arab Peninsula, an offshoot

of Al- Qaeda, expanded into the ungoverned areas of Yemen. It raised concerns and appeals to President Saleh to target terrorist groups. As a result, Saleh started targeting northern Houthis, a Zaydi Shia group amounting to around 40-45% of the population.

Moreover, the fragmentation of an already fragile country increased with the clash of the Arab uprisings in 2011. Yemenis primarily protested to end corruption and the systematic violations of human rights. More broadly, they aimed to oust the then President Saleh and his circle of elected cronies.

Genuinely, such a tense and strained climate resolved with an invitation to him to resign in favor of the then Vice President Hadi. Thus, consequently, he was charged to lead the transition. Nevertheless, he proved unable to manage it, *de facto* opening the path for the civil war.

Since the clash of hostilities, the instability within the Yemeni boundaries never stopped escalating, gradually introducing new players. Although the conflict started as a domestic one, afterward, it engaged in regional dynamics. Specifically, the regionalization of the Yemeni war occurred when a coalition led by Saudi Arabia intervened to fight the Houthis. From that moment onward, geopolitical motives shaped the environment of Yemen. They started intertwining with domestic issues remaining relevant such as factionalism, patronage politics, and tribalization.

Given this complex picture, it is undeniable that Yemen represents one of the worst contemporary conflicts in terms of human costs. Despite this, deepening the study of this war is also necessary to understand the ongoing geopolitical dynamics and the origins of a war often depicted as a proxy between Iran and Saudi Arabia without considering its original domestic nature.

Finally, this work aims at shedding some light on the Yemeni war, with a focus on both internal and external actors, to the diverse layers of the dispute and interests at stake. The final aim of the thesis is to understand the possible future scenarios and the eventuality of lasting peace, or at least stillness.

Concerning the thesis' structure, it composes of four chapters. The first section aims at contextualizing the conflict. Therefore, the analytical methodology will follow a temporal line to overview the war. Yemen's historical roots are broad and complex. Accordingly are the intertwining factors characterizing the country in the analysis. They are multiple and diverse. Thus, they deserve special attention. Thereby, the first chapter will introduce all of them. In further detail, it will investigate ethnic motives, religious identities, and territorial divisions. *In species*, the work will start from the pre-unitarian era to illustrate the reasons leading to the unitarian solution. Simultaneously, it will indagate the still unsolved questions to ease the understanding of the current troubling times. In this regard, it will cover a temporal horizon going from the early nineties until the present moment to show continuities and discrepancies with the past. The diverse layers of the conflict and the

multiple players intervening in the war are primary to understand the ruptures operated with the past and the patterns still present.

The second section will descend into the practical logic shaping the conflict by analyzing the narratives operated by the players intervening in it. Specifically, it will work on four different rhetoric: center versus periphery, old élite versus new élite, Sunni versus Shia, and the terrorist factor. Furthermore, attention will also focus on party politics and their relevance within the domestic arena. Finally, the chapter will draw recommendations about the fruitful behavior to adapt to survive politics in Yemen.

The third part will aim to describe the foreign actors operating in Yemen. In other terms, it will explain the world-systemic opening of the initial domestic conflict. This proposal will give specifics about the major ones: Saudi Arabia, Iran, The United Arab Emirates, the United States, and Russia. In addition to this, a paragraph will regard Oman inasmuch this work considers Muscat a relevant diplomatic stakeholder to end the war.

The ending paragraphs of the third chapter will naturally introduce the fourth, namely the final section focusing on the prospects for peacebuilding in the war-torn country. This analysis will move on from the previous findings, assisting them with theory. Precisely, the thesis will adopt the SMALL approach proposed by Abdi and Mason as an example to follow for peacemaking in Yemen.

Concerning the theoretical basis of the work, it will investigate the Yemeni conflict in terms of its geopolitical relevance. And as a theatre of confrontation between regional and non-regional powers. Building on its historical legacy, and in light of the recent inflamed war hitting the country, Yemen stands out as a significant arena to show diplomatic talent and peacebuilding capacities. In this regard, the thesis will include into the discourse several players intended by the research as possibly vital to resolve the conflict. It follows that the analytical purpose of the study points to assess the feasibility of peacebuilding in a war-torn country.

In light of the research question, the geopolitical approach seemed appropriate to highlight the relevance of Yemen in terms of powers logics other than for the humanitarian crisis. As a matter of fact, the country is socially and economically on the brink, and the international community's attention is attentive to it. However, this work claims this rhetoric as insufficient to tackle the situation beneficially and to improve it. Therefore, it poses in the direction of deeply exploring Yemen by using a historical and memorial level. This to giving insights into underestimated factors when it comes to the Yemeni conflict.

The strand taken into account in this work relates to the historical memory of the country. So to say, the peculiar geography and history of Yemen shape its geopolitical connotation. Moreover, this analytical perspective is primary to consider when it comes to peace initiatives. Further explaining it, the concept of Yemen dates to ancient times, thus being a material manifestation of a profound cultural and intellectual identity rather than a mere geographic agglomerate. It follows that when it comes to peacebuilding, domestic dynamics need to inform the process. Therefore, the thesis will move from an assumption standing on the need to rethink the arrangement of the Yemeni war beyond the political settlement. In other terms, this work intends to propose an analytical approach for the peacemaking of Yemen predominantly focusing on the domestic Yemeni human factor.

The theoretical part of the research has been supported by a wealth of literature on the topic. Having a temporal horizon covering a long-time span, the consultation of references has included sources from the early authors of the 1920s and 1930s and that of the more recent experts, such as Marieke Brandt, Paul Dresch, Elisabeth Kendall, and Helen Lackner.

As regards contemporary scholarship on the matter, the most influential work on the Yemeni crisis is by Helen Lackner and takes the name of “Yemen in Crisis, The Road to War”. Her contribution to the topic is relevant as she superbly traced the causes underlying the statal failure of Yemen under the inexorable pressures of neo-liberalism and regional and global rivalries, arguing them to be vital for a settlement for this conflict, and a different future of the Middle East. Brimming with erudition, her analysis stands as the best compact research of the dynamics of the explosion that turned Yemen into today’s crisis.

Equally remarkable to this thesis’ content was the work by Marieke Brandt, taking the name of “Tribes and Politics in Yemen: A history of the Houthi conflict”. It is notable for its anthropological *expertise*. It offers an account of the non-ideological origin of the Houthis’ rebellion, deeply investigating its personal and local roots. In the sense of historical anthropology, the making of this thesis also considered Paul Dresch’s “History of Modern Yemen”. His work meticulously explores the history of the country, voluntarily avoiding analyzing it. Therefore, the present thesis considered it as a good starting point for the following research.

For the part of foreign players intervening in the war, an invaluable contribution to the present analysis was provided by the Italian analyst Eleonora Ardemagni of the Italian Institute for Political Studies (ISPI), an expert of Arab military forces, and on the security of Yemen. Her analyses informed the following research of this study.

Finally, about the part on peacebuilding, the thesis served of the works by Nadwa Al-Dawsari, Asher Orkaby, and Peter Salisbury. Moreover, the study relied on the RAND Corporation analysis “Building an Enduring Peace in Yemen”.



## **Chapter 1: Framing Yemen: an overview of the country**

### 1.1 History of Yemen

Modern history of Yemen is paramount to understand the ongoing dynamics in the country as they partly stem from the past influences and boundaries set by foreign powers which dominated the Yemeni territory along time. This is a peculiar trait to underline; indeed, the borders of many Middle Eastern states have been drawn and sometimes to a high degree invented by the invaders to satisfy expansionist interests and logics. (Dresch, 2000)

In the case of Yemen, setting the scene is far more complicated with respect to neighboring states as the concept of Yemen and the feeling of being “Yemeni” dates to ancient times.<sup>1</sup> The idea of Yemen as a natural unit has been embedded in both literature and local practices (Dresch, 2000).

Conversely, the same unitarian logic has not developed in the sense of power. Indeed, during the nineteenth century the overlapping claims of the many dynasties, religious groups, and tribes have shaped the political structures of the country which resulted in a crossroad of rulers and a concentrate of struggles. In a similar context, territorial logics surrendered to imperialistic ones. Nevertheless, these multitude of actors involved as well as the infinite fights for powers by outside powers radically enhanced in the locals a will and a feeling for a single Yemeni state. As a result, the twentieth century has been largely dedicated to form the state, that was finally done in 1990<sup>2</sup>.

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<sup>1</sup> Yemen is one of the oldest centers of civilization in the Middle East, an area where an identarian dimension, urban development, a form of government, social stratification, and symbolic systems of communication were forged anciently.

<sup>2</sup> As it will later be deepened, the unification happened more for pragmatic reasons than from ideological proximity. As a result, it is easily imaginable that underground rivalries and discrepancies never ceased to exist. They were just momentarily shelved for survival motives.

This work will now proceed to illustrate how Yemen has come to unification, by retracing the stages which have led to that accomplishment. In fact, before coming to unity, the country was split into North Yemen and South Yemen, with Sanaa and Aden as respective capitals. The discrepancies between the two administrations not exclusively concerned the past. They first and foremost regarded the views on the future of the country. Furthermore, in the years around 1900 there were myriad little centers of power – hence myriad different histories (Dresch, 2000) – and a few great claimants, two of which were foreign empires. (Dresch, 2000) It was the European powers' determination which elicited an equally steadiness in other powers to thwart such efforts. (Burrowes, Wenner, 2020)

## **1.2 Fights for power: the Zaydis, the British, the Ottomans**

The presence of both the Zaydis and the Ottoman Empire in Yemen dates to centuries before the nineteenth. Nevertheless, the relevant dynamics for this work are those experimented with after the advent of Muhammad Ali and its conquest of Yemeni territories. He was the governor of Egypt. At some point in history, he subdues all the regions of Arabia, including some Yemeni towns<sup>3</sup>. (Jacoob, 2012) This event triggered a British response as they feared Muhammad Ali's threat to their position in India. As a result, the British seized Aden<sup>4</sup> until leading Ali to evacuate Yemen in 1840. Following this, the Ottomans returned to Yemen to impose their sovereignty. Nevertheless, they found themselves obliged to compromise with Imam Yahya<sup>5</sup>; he accorded to divide the highlands among him and the Ottomans. (Jacoob, 2012)

However, this friendly attitude towards a foreign power, namely the Ottomans, did not ingratiate the rebels, thus denouncing him as treacherous for the concessions done to the Ottomans. As a result of the mounting unrests and malcontents, he was discharged and replaced by a new Imam, Ali. His domain did not last for long so that after his removal the atmosphere turned tense again. Divisions between the several imams vastly increased, and rivalry rapidly grew up until the overture of the Suez Canal in 1869. In the *interim*, the Ottomans had secured their presence in the highlands, and Tihamah, despite having been forced to retire from Sanaa. (Yacoob, 2012)

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<sup>3</sup> Hudaydah, Zabid, Mukhs, and Shaykh Said.

<sup>4</sup> <https://www.iwm.org.uk/history/a-short-history-of-the-aden-emergency>

<sup>5</sup> He became the Imam of Yemen in 1918.

They had a beneficial geopolitical conjuncture to retake the highlands back; firstly, the rivalry among imams was perceived as an obstacle by the notables of Sanaa, which consequently softened their posture towards the Ottomans. Secondly, Suez was positioned strategically for their interests. The take-and-leave between Imamate and the Ottomans lasted for years. Specifically, until 1911 when the Treaty of Daan was signed.<sup>6</sup> It made a written compromise between the two. Before that date, several revolts against the imperial power occurred: in 1891, 1905, and 1911. Since then, the Ottoman presence in Yemen survived for a few years until the final departure in 1918 after WW1. (Blackburn, 1979)

### **1.2.1 British attempt of conquest of the South**

In parallel to the fights described above, the Yemeni territory also saw the British presence; as the Ottomans advanced inland, the European power went eastward and northward from Aden. The British aim was not that of adding territories and citizens to the Empire. Instead, the purpose of the continued presence in Yemen was wished to impede the Ottomans and their adversaries an advance towards the maritime routes. The British had a precise *modus operandi*, consisting in creating protectorates over many local statelets. By the early 20th century, the clashes between the British and the Ottomans along the undermarketed border posed a large problem. (Wenner, Burrowes, 2021)

Tension rose to the extent that an agreement to fix the situation was concluded in 1904. The Yemenis conceived the Anglo-Ottoman border as interference into domestic issues inasmuch it had been signed arbitrarily to impose jurisdiction over a historical-geographical and ethical well-defined territory, namely Yemen, without asking the consent of the locals. As a result of this tense climate, and after the departure of the Ottomans after World War I, the legitimacy of the border gradually vanished.

Following the Ottoman debacle, the northern part of Yemen became administrated by the Imam Yahya Mahmud al-Mutawakkil. He tried to resuscitate Zaydi claims to “historic Yemen”<sup>7</sup> which

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<sup>6</sup> The Treaty of Daan had the purpose of ending the clashes between the Imams and the Ottomans by living a greater autonomy to the Zaydis within the provinces of the Empire. The moment of the signing was a turning point for Yemen as it eliminated the discord and the frictions among the Turkish and the Imamate.

<sup>7</sup> This wording includes Aden and the protectorate States and the farther north, including the province of Asir and some areas around the Najran Oasis and Jizan.

included South Yemen, over which the Imam wished to advance his patrimonial pretenses<sup>8</sup>. (Zaid, 2019)

This behavior caused frictions among the Imamate and the British, the latter trying to retain control over southern Yemen. The dispute was solved after World War II when citizens in the South chose the British as more suited than the Imamate to satisfy their interests. Indeed, dissatisfaction with Yahya had intensively spread within the Yemeni society to the extent he had been killed<sup>9</sup> and replaced by his son Ahmad. Despite his claims of supporters of both social and economic popular demands<sup>10</sup>, his reign resembled his fathers' one in nearly all respects. (Wenner, Burrowes, 2021)

His aggressive policies alarmed the southern statelets' families as they feared the curtail of their status in case of takeover by the Imamate. Thus, they chose to cooperate more closely with the British, this latter working to establish the Federation of South Arabia<sup>11</sup>. This politically advanced project increased frictions and mistrust among the Yemeni people of Aden and the Empire, which eventually declared the imminent retirement from the territory, leaving the destiny of South Yemen at the mercy of sundry organizations. (Lackner, 2019)

### **1.2.2 Nasserian hegemonic project**

In 1962 a new revolution spread in Yemen. It was another attempt to overthrow the Imamate, started with the assassination of Imam Yahya. In that same year, Yemen became the protagonist of a bloody civil war; in this circumstance, many powers intervened, notably the Egyptian troops of Nasser. They entered the war after a call for action by the Republicans to oust the country's monarchy. (Orkaby, 2014)

According to many literature sources, this intervention did not give any substantial contributions to the fate of the war, remaining marginal with regards to the outcome. Conversely, other written works

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<sup>8</sup> Link available at: <https://www.saba.ye/en/news537416.htm>

<sup>9</sup> The Imam Yahya was assassinated by a varied coalition of dissidents.

<sup>10</sup> Popular stances concerned the creation of a real responsible cabinet, the abandonment of the principle of establishment of free public education.

<sup>11</sup> This project was aimed at creating a large political entity eventually seeking independence.

do underline the decisive impact of Nasserian intervention into the conflict. Despite the effective contribution to the Yemeni cause, the cost for Egypt proved to be high to the extent the intervention in Yemen is considered by many as the harbinger of the decline of the hegemonic project of Nasser in the Middle East (Fawaz, 2018, Hamid, 2017).<sup>12</sup>

The reason behind the Egyptian involvement must be attributed to the will of Nasser to spread Arab nationalism throughout the Middle East. Concretely, the troops intervened in 1962; their stance was initially offensive despite the multiple appeals for diplomacy by the Egyptian side, always rejected by the royalist opposition. The efforts for peace advanced by Nasser and its contingent were never welcomed by the counterpart, which in turn inflicted counteroffensives any time there was a call for a ceasefire. It resulted in a huge economic decline for Egypt, many casualties, and the beginning of a military failure. (Orkaby, 2014)

In light of this situation, Nasser turned to a defensive stance, thus insisting on meetings intended to forge peace through reconciliation. This project lasted until 1965, when the policy of Egypt underwent a new reverse course called “long-breath strategy” (Orkaby, 2014) that saw Egypt operating offensively once again, also due to the pledge from the Soviet Union. This strategy wished to make the Egyptian presence in Yemen temporarily indefinite. The *rationale* behind this consisted in enabling the Yemeni army to defend itself without Egyptian assistance. Also, it provided an operational plan aimed at de-escalating from the enclaves, focusing instead on minor skirmishes.

In the end, the balance of the war proved highly heavy for Egypt to the point of this being dumped as “Egypt’s Vietnam”. (Ferris, 2015) Indeed, the Yemeni civil war cost much to Nasser both in terms of human lives and economic motives. Moreover, it paved the way for the withering defeat in the Six-Day War with Israel in 1967<sup>13</sup>. (Thorn, 2007)

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<sup>12</sup> <https://www.brookings.edu/blog/markaz/2017/06/05/the-end-of-nasserism-how-the-1967-war-opened-new-space-for-islamism-in-the-arab-world/>

<sup>13</sup> The complete withdrawal of the Egyptian troops from Yemen was triggered by the Arab-Israeli conflict of 1967. Precisely, that war led Nasser to agree to a peace agreement signed in Khartoum asserting the Egyptian forces' complete withdrawal from the Yemeni territory. Furthermore, it provided for an end of Saudi assistance to the royalists and called for Yemenis to decide for the political future of their country by themselves. To deepen the topic at issue, consult the following link:

<https://www.jstor.org/stable/pdf/10.7249/j.ctt5hhsjk.32.pdf?refreqid=excelsior%3A76eb0ad432bf01a42d2eab3201ccd9c7>

The lapses of the Egyptian imperialistic behavior were huge; firstly, the government front suffered many internal cleavages due to Nasser's hegemonic project. Indeed, having clear the Egyptian will of expansion and control, a part of the Republican side detached from the governmental structure, preferring to sign a deal with the loyalist forces. Furthermore, the persistence showed by the aviation in attacking armless villages and Saudi-border places attracted enmities of the international forum. Also, the brutal policy of dealing with tribes suspected of supporting al-Badr overshadowed the incentives for cooperation offered by the Egyptians to the Yemeni tribes to create tribal auxiliaries that would fight on the government's behalf. (Paul, Clarke, Grill, Dunigan, 2013) In this sense, the Egyptian attempt of buying the loyalty of the tribes did not cause any exodus as those groups proved to be "republican by day and royalist at night". (Paul, Clarke, Grill, Dunigan, 2013)

The downfall of the Nasserian project also stemmed from the total rejection shown by the local population with regards to the civic initiatives of the Egyptians; indeed, Yemeni citizens declined the Egyptians modern revolutionary ideology<sup>14</sup>.

In the words of Fred Halliday, Yemen was "one of the most isolated and static countries in the world and had not changed in fundamental systemic ways from the Yemen of two or even seven centuries earlier." (Halliday, 1975) Finally, the *débat* of Nasser and Nasserism also arose from the fact that the Yemeni environment and culture were foreign to Egyptians.

This research wants to demonstrate that the excessive Egyptian involvement in the Yemeni civil war to spread Nasserism in the Arabian Peninsula coupled with the sense of further alienation of the locals and the intervention of Saudi Arabia backing the royalists led the parts to be willing to compromise.

### **1.3 The advent of Saleh and the unification of 1990**

The Republic of Yemen was established in 1990; for many, it was a first sign towards the Arab unification dreamt by Nasser and Gaddafi, but it was a different phenomenon taking place in diverse circumstances and laying down on a peculiar *rationale*. Both the northern and the southern regimes were facing difficulties at that time. Therefore, unity was intended as a response to the profound crisis

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<sup>14</sup> The Egyptian hegemonic project pointed to impose the Egyptian identity by adopting a socialist doctrine. To deepen this concept consult: "The National Character in the Egyptian Revolution", Abu-Laban.

that was hitting both parts of Yemen. Moreover, the slogan of unity was highly spread throughout the country, and it was also part of the official propaganda of each state.

The figure of Colonel Saleh, who is the advocate of unification, derived from the instability resulting from the civil war that ended in 1967. Indeed, after Abdullah Sallal<sup>15</sup> was forced into exile, he was replaced firstly by President al-Iryani, in turn, overthrown in a bloodless coup by Ibrahim al-Hamdi. This latter remains the “ideal” president in popular lore to this day. (Lackner, 2017)

Most Yemenis consider him as a great nationalist leader, his scope being to shape a modern Yemen based on the principles of equality and good governance. Aside from popular sentiment, his presidency was too short to demonstrate any skills as his assassination occurred soon after he seized power, in October 1977. (Lackner, 2017)

The short tenure of Hamdi was followed by the even shorter one of Ahmed al-Gashmi, which stayed in power less than one year. His killing happened in June 1978. After this brief interlude made up of instability and acts of revenge terrain shown fertile for the advent of Colonel Ali Abdullah Saleh. He emerged from the military inner circle, being able to maneuver within the top ranks. Initially, it had assumed him to follow the destiny of his predecessors. Nevertheless, contrary to expectations, he proved to be brilliantly skilled at political horse-trading in his dealings with political groups, traders, tribes, and military forces. (Lackner, 2017)

Saleh stayed in power throughout the remaining years of the Yemen Arab Republic (YAR) and in 1990 achieved unification with the People’s Democratic Republic of Yemen (PDRY). His system was a patronal one<sup>16</sup>. Since the beginning of his presidency, he was able to modify the balance of power between population and rulers. It was possible thanks to the income stemming from the oil export that characterized the first source of the Yemeni revenues from the mid-1980 onwards. (Lackner, 2017)

This statal enrichment allowed Saleh to operate direct control over the Yemenis. Indeed, most of them depended on the statal funds. This dependence gave the Colonel the chance to ensure the loyalty of the multitude of social groups and regions.

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<sup>15</sup> He was the leader of the Revolution of 1962. After the occurrence of the events of 1962, he served as the first President of the Yemen Arab Republic for five years: from 1962 to 1967.

<sup>16</sup> The system created by Saleh is somehow comparable to the patronal politics of the Eurasian regimes that emerged after the collapse of the Soviet Union.

The patronage system also was traceable when looking at the investments in development and by the military/security institutions. Concerning the first, they were just partly decided according to technical criteria as most of them stemmed from regime-favorable considerations. As for the army and the security forces, Saleh has been first and foremost attentive to promote inter-institution rivalry, and then to nominee personnel very close to him to ensure the loyalty of these apparatus to his regime. Finally, he also gave shape to a civil society institution known as the **General People's Congress** (GPC). It was not a proper political party as it lacked an ideology; it was a groupage of influential people assembled under the banner of supporting Saleh. (Lackner, 2017)

The initial popular consent to the Colonel was the result of a flourishing economic period that started in the late '70s. It was a peculiar age, as it was characterized by a rare contrast, namely a poor state with wealthy people. Yemenis substantially improved their living standards at that time, even though the statal machinery was highly dependent on foreign aids and investments. This phenomenon stemmed from the massive migrations of Yemenis, precisely to Saudi Arabia and the other Gulf States. After the oil price rise of 1973, the Gulf countries embarked on major investments that required much labor force; the citizens of Yemen answered well to this call and used those workplaces to generate remittances that allowed the starting of businesses and the opening of shops in their homeland. (Lackner, 2017)

This “decade of wealth” was rapidly dismantled by the patronal politics of the regime of Saleh. He proved soon unable to provide efficient services, and dissatisfaction of Yemenis rapidly grew. (Lackner, 2017)

Parallely to what has been explained above, it is paramount to introduce the reality of the southern territories grouped under the People's Democratic Republic of Yemen to understand the future features of the unitarian state. In 1970 Southern Yemen was freed by British dominance<sup>17</sup>.

However, the economic situation the new republic inherited at independence was very critical. In the first place, nature has never been particularly generous in those lands as the number of resources at the disposal of local people was never high. Secondly, given this scarcity in the hinterland, most people have always relied on the port of Aden and its associated industrial activities to survive, but

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<sup>17</sup> The British departure sharply sped up after the closing of the Suez Canal as that episode *de facto* vanished last motive for the British to maintain its colonies in Yemen.



the closure of the Suez Canal<sup>18</sup> sharpened the lack of resources. Finally, after the departure of the British the regime shifted leftwards, and it did not allow to get any money from Britain<sup>19</sup>.

The regime implemented economic policies mainly focused on changes regarding the management of the lands. In this respect, it was introduced a law designed to decrease the maximum individual landholding. Moreover, since 1970 landowners were forced off the land through violence. (Lackner, 2017)

On the one hand, this leftward shift which resembled the Eastern Bloc-policies had the positive aspect of reducing differences between large landowners and peasantry by empowering low-status farmers. On the other hand, these revolutionary policies resulted in massive migration flows as nationalizations forced previous owners to leave. Contemporarily, the external financing was very restricted, except for the Communist regimes as the Russian one that proved a forefront provider of economic aid and financial support. Other than economically speaking, the PDRY benefitted the atmosphere of the Cold War also from a social point of view. Indeed, thanks to the Russian and Chinese aid, the social conditions of Yemenis much improved, and differentials between rural areas and the cities reduced. Furthermore, all the inhabitants of the state were able to access medical services and good educational standards. Despite these bright spots, the regime also encountered obstacles due to certain behaviors; above all, the fear of enmities at the borders did not allow the citizens to move freely. Moreover, the anti-tribal policies promoted by the leadership had the effect of increasing phenomena such as nepotism, both tribal and regional<sup>20</sup>. (Lackner, 2017)

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<sup>18</sup> The closure had some negative economic consequences like the impact on shipping rates.

<sup>19</sup> The shifting towards the Communist sphere directly had consequences on the relationship of new state with the British, not anymore disposed to aid them in any ways for its ideological proximity to Communist regimes.

<sup>20</sup> A negative connotation was given to tribalism by the governments of the PDRY; instead of intending it as just a human aggregation system, it was intended as a social problem. For this reason, many initiatives against it were promoted. One of these consisted of the distribution of responsibilities among the governmental structures. Despite the rationale behind this policy, it had some counter effects such as nepotism. Indeed, not rarely the distribution of jobs happened following logic other than equal representation.

When it comes to the sphere of politics, the PDRY has been a violent experience made up of upheavals and intracrine struggles for power; these inner contrasts led to mass demonstrations, deep ideological cleavages, and violence. It is in this context that the figure of Salmeen emerged. He was a convinced leftist whom ideas resembled the Communist ones. He was beloved by people coming from the rural areas who appreciated his directness and his firm refusal of the institutional *strata*. His figure was paramount as he was able to stop the ascent bureaucracy. Nevertheless, he was executed in 1978 and the following decade was governed firstly by one of his main rivals, namely Abdul Fattah Ismail, a politician that reapproached to the Eastern model more than what Salmeen would have done, and then by Ali Nasser Mohammed. This latter was far less ideological than his predecessors; he liberalized the economy and opened to foreign aid. These abrupt changes triggered further struggles, which peak arrived on the “13 January Events” where he tried to kill all his rivals. (Kifner, 1986) After this murderous attempt, a “mini civil war” began, and Mohammed’s faction was defeated. Since that moment, the leadership of the PDRY fell to secondary characters. Furthermore, joint to the internal problems, Moscow was contemporarily disengaging from foreign theaters calling for a reduction of the dependency on the central system. All this led the PDRY to initiate negotiations for unification, seen as the only chance of survival for a disrupted country. (Lackner, 2017)

Given these premises, it appears clear that unity was desirable for both the north and the south as both the regimes were gradually collapsing. In addition to practical motives, sentiments also played a role. It is not negligible to cast some light on the links between northerners and southerners’ people. In the first place, the tribal reality often flowed into conflicts which were solved by the phenomenon of tribal refuge and that of the relocation of people. Moreover, drought and flood-induced hunger also contributed to blend people. Likewise, during the Imamate, most Yemenis fled to Aden due to the restrictions on economic activities imposed by the Imam. This mass migration created longstanding links between people from different parts of Yemen, heightening the slogan of unity. Such a social context paved the way for unification despite the internal struggles progressing in both the north and the south before 1990. The transition to unity witnessed two inter-Yemeni wars respectively in 1972 and 1979, both solved by the foreign intervention of Libya first and Kuwait then. These conflicts were resolved employing agreements, which despite the critics of being just aesthetic exercises laid the foundations for unity.

In the middle ’80s, the process sharply moved towards the final steps as incentives to unity were stronger than those for continued division. (Lackner, 2017)

As illustrated above, the southern regime had lost its credibility, and the policy of gradual disengagement operated by the Eastern bloc also played a role in undermining the PDRY. In respect of northern Yemen, discontent from the masses due to the unheard popular demands was mounting.

Further, both the regimes dreaded that the discovery of oil on their share border could have caused strifes and vulnerabilities which could have easily been exploited by Saudi Arabia. The sum of these crises led the regime to choose the path of negotiations to unity.

On November 13th of 1989, an agreement between Saleh and al-Beed was signed, with impressive swiftness. The arrangement provided for a unitarian state. It should have happened within 12 months from the signing. However, the Republic of Yemen was proclaimed before, precisely on May, 22 of 1990 to smooth the process<sup>21</sup>.

#### **1.4 The price of unity: the civil war**

The euphoria for unity did not last long as soon an imbalance of power in favor of Saleh emerged; it acted as a trailblazer for mounting rivalries that led to the civil war of 1994. The victory of Saleh's forces *de facto* enshrined his dominance over the country in the following decades. From 1994 to 2010, Saleh governed Yemen; he operated by following the same principles he had previously employed in the YAR, namely patronage, distribution of cash, and access to economic assets, and particular privileges to small groups of cronies. (Lackner, 2017) The regime soon came to resemble the autocratic times of the past despite the promises of democratization. Restrictions and assassinations often occurred; freedoms were rarely restricted so that the unitarian experience was just apparently a democratic transition. Formally, Yemen was a multi-party state where elections regularly took place. Nevertheless, Saleh behaved often as an autocratic leader rather than as a democrat. (Lackner, 2017)

The outcome of his years in power will be analyzed in the following parts of the research, as this paragraph aims at giving insights on the three months conflict of 1994, known as the War of Secession. Even though the clash lasted for a few months, it is paramount as the Southern secessionist instances grew from that moment.

The motive that triggered the civil conflict was a mounting sense of marginalization within the southern environments and the perception that Saleh wanted to seek the ultimate power. As a result, tensions mounted until Vice President al-Beidh, the former president of the PRY left Sanaa and moved to Aden, with the idea not to come back. After that, assassinations occurred, and in early 1994 the home of the YSP Secretary-General was attacked. Consequently, the sentiment of secession

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<sup>21</sup> To read about the unification, consult the following link: <https://www.nytimes.com/1990/05/23/world/2-yemens-become-one-and-celebrate.html>

increased in the southern side of the country, ultimately leading to the proclamation of the Democratic Republic of Yemen by al-Beidh<sup>22</sup>. However, the forces of the North prevailed, and Aden surrendered. The post-war balance distinguished for an evident dominance of the GPC, despite it moderately diminished after 1994. The demands of the Southerners were reluctantly welcomed. It is plain when observing that neither federalist solutions nor sub-statal entities appeared on the table. The only exception to this general carelessness was represented by the 18 demands (Ortlieb, 1997: 125) by al-Beidh that were theoretically accepted by Saleh, the focal point of this request regarding the diffusion of power. Despite the theoretical acceptance of such a proposal, no such structures were implemented. In addition, al-Beidh insisted on implementing administrative and financial reforms to achieve balanced economic development. (Whitaker, 2019) Whether implemented, the reforms never fully modified the economic system. (Al Assad, 2010) It was also confirmed by some notes of the World Bank, noting that the quality of bureaucracy in Yemen did not improve between 1998 and 2004. And that clientelism followed undisturbed. (Phillips, 2011: 54-58)

Finally, the most significant unheard request issued by the southerners concerned the restructuring of the security forces intending to reduce any signs of regional or tribal influence<sup>23</sup>. It did not occur, and the Southern military dissolved. Consequently, the army followed to exist as a provider of internal security for Saleh and a *de facto* extension of the governmental power. It is the same dynamics that resumed with President Hadi when he tried to reshape the security *apparatus*. Without any success<sup>24</sup> as it followed to be loyal to Saleh. (Fennes, 2015)

In sum, the outcome of the civil war did not lead to substantial improvements for the Southerners. On the contrary, it only represented a violent interlude not to forge any shift in the power dynamics. Saleh followed to govern as he pleased and without any severe opposition<sup>25</sup>.

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<sup>22</sup> It happened even though it did not fit with the original purposes of al-Beidh. His starting views did not include a revocation of the unification.

<sup>23</sup> The following link exposes the main differences between the Constitution of 1990 and the Document of Pledge and Accord issued in 1994. In bold, the diversities between the two texts. [https://al-bab.com/albab-orig/albab/yemen/pol/pledge\\_comparison.htm](https://al-bab.com/albab-orig/albab/yemen/pol/pledge_comparison.htm).

<sup>24</sup> This failure represents one of the leading factors that led to the multi-layered conflict in Yemen.

<sup>25</sup> The only relevant movement opposing the government after the civil war was Hiraq-al-Janoubi. It regrouped Southern rights groups aiming at ending the marginalization of the South. It gained support

Nevertheless, 1994 in Yemen is paramount to understand the sparks advanced by the southern secessionist in the last years.

## **1.5 The emergence of the Houthis and the Six Sa'ada Wars**

The advent of Saleh coincided with the birth of the Houthi movement; this political current developed around the northern area of the Yemeni territory, traditionally the homeland of Zaydism<sup>26</sup>. It is a declination of the Zaydi revivalist movement, but this does not imply a coincidence among the two. Houthis represent a response to the need for the revival of Islam of Zaydi belonging. Nevertheless, there are many Zaydis who don't support the Houthis and some non-Zaydis who support them. (Lackner, 2017)

The movement was initially set up in 1992 as the "Believing Youth" Zaydi revivalist movement, and the initial scope of the faction consisted in re-activating the tenets of Zaydism among the youth populating the Governorate of Sa'ada. (Lackner, 2017) In so doing, Houthis operated within the framework set up by Saleh at first; their political leader Husayn al-Houthi was elected to parliament in 1993 so that the movement had been at that time yet rationalized. Despite the initial smoothing institutionalization of the group, in some years things completely changed; in 1997 al-Houthi lost his seat, and the relationship between the Houthis and the governmental *apparatus* sharply deteriorated

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in the South from 2009 onwards. Theoretically, the movement was against any form of violence. However, some armed clashes occurred. Nevertheless, this group was never mentioned in any literature source as a warring armed group fighting against the government, just remaining out of the warring theatre. The only exception to this mainstream interpretation is by a paper by Salisbury of 2013. He described Hiraq as "a militia formed after the civil war which has fought with the Yemeni military on several occasions in the past."

<sup>26</sup> It is one of the Shia sects. They believe that the elder of the Muslim community, or Ummah, must be Fatimid, that is to say a descendant of Muhammad via Fatimah, his only surviving daughter., whose sons were Hasan ibn 'Ali' and Husayn ibn 'Ali. They call themselves Zaydis to differentiate from the Twelver and Isma'ili Shia. The main difference with these currents being the possibility of the fallacy of the Imam and the Imamate succession to any descendant of Fatimah's sons.

to the killing of al-Houthi in September 2004, after the first bout of fighting off the Sa'ada wars. (Lackner, 2017)

Before coming to terms with the Sa'ada era, this research aims at investigating and analyzing the Houthis, their beliefs, and ideology to easily guide the reader in a full-fledged comprehension of the movement from its emergence to the present day.

### *1.5.1 Radiography of the Houthi movement*

The Houthi movement was born as a political one, initiated by a family of *sada*<sup>27</sup> living in a largely tribesmen-populated area. The relationship elapsing between the group and the tribes is paramount to understand the movement and its development. Indeed, both its victories and failures largely depended on the consent coming from the different Yemeni tribal realities. It is no coincidence that when the Houthis were just supported by the Sada tribe, their success was modest. Conversely, when Yemeni tribes of diverse extraction and beliefs reunited around the Houthi political group, it reached its maximum height. In other terms, the ideology played a crucial role just initially, while in the long run the popularity of the movement primarily resulted from social and economic dynamics that the work will extensively address later. Nevertheless, Houthis were born with an ideology, which main distinguishing characteristic is the firm belief in the innate right of *sada* to rule. (Lackner, 2017)

The initial attachment to the ideological precepts gradually vanished in favor of a vast politicization of the movement. This shift resulted primarily from a mounting sense of dissatisfaction with the regime of Saleh that pushed many Yemenis to find ways out from that; most of them approached the Houthis, and consequently, the movement became a hotbed of a wide range of political views, gradually losing ideology in a strict sense. This transformation well explains the multitude of leaders, moves, and strategies adopted by the Houthis over time and *de facto* confutes those claiming an absolute uniformity of the movement and its scopes.

This work aims at casting some light on the complexity of the phenomenon, standing against the oversimplifications often operated when dealing with the Houthi movement and Yemen in general.

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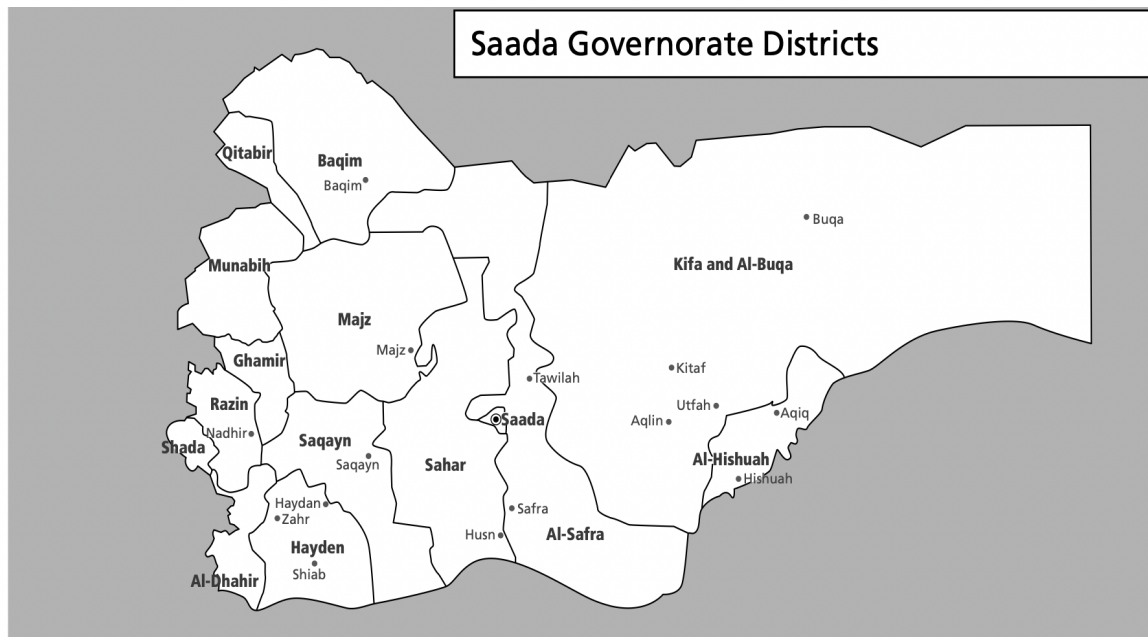
<sup>27</sup> This wording indicates the descendants of the Prophet. Synonyms to denote this social stratum are “Hashemites” and “Ashraf”.

## 1.5.2 The Houthi Wars

The following maps serve to map the geography of the wars at issue. The first map sketches the Yemeni boundaries, and the geographical position of the Governorate of Sadaa is marked in grey. The second explains the districts of the Governorate<sup>28</sup>.



<sup>28</sup> Source of the images: War in Sadaa: From Local Insurrection to National Challenge. A Carnegie Papers Series: Yemen: on the Brink. 2010.



As stated above, the movement of the Houthis was born to favor the revival of Zaydism. While this new reality was initially well tolerated by the government of Saleh as it was seen as an optimal way to counter the growth of Salafism in Yemen, the initial convergence of interest soon left the scene to clashes. Specifically, it was in 2004 that the first skirmishes occurred in the town of Sa'ada.

Geography is very relevant in this story as the Governorate in question is historically one of the poorest of Yemen; it much suffered from underdevelopment and was among the last Yemeni regions incorporated into the Republic. (Boucek, 2010)

In the area surrounding the city of Sa'ada, the central government never had total control, and civil services have never been in good shape. Then, the suboptimal living conditions and the sense of sectarian marginalization contributed to making hostilities explode. Moreover, the outbreak of the conflicts also found its roots in the grassroots displeasure at governmental policies on cooperation with the United States and Saudi Arabia<sup>29</sup>. Given this framework, it is evident that the Sa'ada wars primarily burst for social frustration, the initial aim being to improve the poor living conditions. Notwithstanding this, the *leitmotiv* for the Houthis to fight much changed along the war years. Whether in 2004 the clashes wanted to serve as a driver for a governmental turnaround, they soon escalated into a textured opposition to Saleh's regime. This objective is provable by analyzing the *modus operandi* of the Houthis forces; during the warfare, they never formulated specific and punctual demands; they identified their very *raison d'être* with the resistance to the military

<sup>29</sup> After 2001, Saleh decided to cooperate with the United States in their "war on terror" program.



offensives. (Boucek, 2010) This behavior is also attributable to the abovementioned variety of views coexisting within the movement, which certainly did not allow convergence towards just one line of conduct. Nevertheless, it would be misleading to state that the vagueness showed by the Houthis in their demands only stemmed from the leadership's lack of a coherent vision. It was partly a tactical move.

Proceeding with an order, the first round of war occurred in 2004 for the reasons explained above; the governmental rhetoric against the Zaydi movement gradually intensified, and the Houthis were alleged to favor sectarianism, spreading extremism, and deviance<sup>30</sup>. (Peterson, 2008)

The discredit of the Houthis' image also consisted of allegations of collaboration with Iran and Hizbollah, which they firmly denied. The fighting proceeded for months, and it lasted until the killing of the Husayn al-Houthi in September, followed by the unilateral declaration of victory issued by the government that sanctioned the end of the first round of clashes. Despite a short and apparent quiet interval, hostilities resumed in 2005. The leadership of the movement was assumed by the son of Husayn, al-Badr.

Under his leadership, the situation got worse. Saleh started a campaign against most Houthis exponents. Also, he posed allegations against some political forces accused of endorsing the rebellion. Many went to prison<sup>31</sup>, and the conflict rapidly escalated to the top of violence. A temporary and doubtful block occurred thanks to a new unilateral declaration of victory issued by the government in May 2005.

In this second bout, diversely from the previous, the skirmishes never totally ended despite the official announcement, and minor clashes followed even after May. Such a similar tense situation soon paved the way to another intensive round of fighting, which began in November and lasted until early 2006. This third round differentiated from the others; it started from a rivalry among tribes supporting the Houthis and those favoring the government. It is a peculiar fact to cast some light on for two reasons: firstly, as stated before, the degree of the Houthis' success always laid largely on the tribal affiliation to the movement. Secondly, the involvement of the tribes unleashed an entirely new dynamic on an already complex and multi-layered conflict. The war had transformed into a tribal struggle where people tried to impose their personal, social, and economic interests. It means that loyalty to Houthis

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<sup>30</sup> See J.E Peterson: "The al-Houthi conflict in Yemen"

<sup>31</sup> According to some reports, Saleh appeared on television to offer pardon to al-Bard, who refused it. Also, the government's chief would have declared an amnesty for the Hothi prisoners, although it seems many remained in prison.

was not a principal driver to enter the conflict; people joined one side or the other pushed by consideration laying on private interests, and they switched sides accordingly. (Boucek, 2010)

The third bout had a great resonance; it was due to the geographical enlargement of hostilities far beyond Sa'ada and to the entrance into the war of the Hashed tribe, considered as an invader presence ready to loot the territories of the Governorate.

After some months of official quiet, a new bout occurred. It was in February 2007. This fourth round witnessed a major disaffection of the supporters of the regime as they were disappointed and concerned about the management of the conflict by Saleh and its government. This time the motive to start the fighting regarded presumable threats against the Jewish community in Sa'ada advanced by the Houthis. Once again, the government also played the weapons of an eventual Houthis' collaboration with the Iranians and Hizbollah. In such a climate, violence became ordinary. As the government may be thought of as having lost power, in this last bout it started to actively recruit tribal levies to deploy in Sa'ada. (Boucek, 2010) This development meant injecting tribal politics into the war, giving it a new connotation. Sectarianism left room for tribalism, and it would prove to be a lasting element in further bouts, which made the wars in Sa'ada metastasize.

The end of hostilities happened through Qatari mediation; Qatar provided a peace plan known as the **Doha Agreement**<sup>32</sup>, which eventually failed. Aside from it, it set the basis for any future settlement. The Agreement implied the reconstruction of Sa'ada, a government amnesty, the commitment of the Houthis to give up their weapons. It also provided exile measures for the Houthi leaders. However, it was judged as steeped by vagueness, specifically about the reconstruction of the city and the arrangement of the exile of the Houthis.

The fifth war expanded far beyond Sa'ada<sup>33</sup>, moving towards the Bani Hushaysh area near Sa'ana. This geographical expansion grew concerns from the élites and the government. It is no coincidence that a cease-fire was announced unilaterally by Saleh in July 2008. The fact that the clashes moved until the outskirts of Sa'ana secured a major involvement in favor of the government forces as the proximity of the rebel advance towards the capital was an issue for many. Nevertheless, the cease-fire did not end hostilities, and in March 2009 tensions again began to rise. Episodes of abduction in the Sa'ana Governorate took place, but differently than previous kidnappings, no terms for the release

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<sup>32</sup> The text of the agreement is consultable at the following link: <https://www.peaceagreements.org/view/1433>

<sup>33</sup> It was the first time that the clashes spread beyond Sa'ada, into two neighboring Governorates.

of the captives had been fixed. It resembled an Al-Qaeda-style abduction, and possibly AQAP staged everything to divert the attention from its operation by forcing the government to engage in war against the Houthis more vehemently. This episode is worthy to emphasize because it makes visible the intracrine struggles for power in Yemen. Although AQAP never joined the wars, it participated as an external actor by pushing Saleh's regime to further considering the Houthis as the enemy to destroy.

The kidnappings set the stage for this most recent round of the Saada war, which followed rebel closures of several key roads, including the road linking Saada and Sanaa. The Yemeni government started this round by launching Operation Scorched Earth<sup>34</sup> in August 2009. (Boucek, 2010:9)

A report from *Jane's Intelligence Review* speaks of more than 40.000 soldiers deployed by the Yemeni government in support of this operation, a far higher number than the previous episodes. (Boucek, 2010: 10)

The sixth bout of war further metastasized due to governmental new tactics. They used aerial bombardments and artillery, which had the spillover effect of increasing the collateral damages inflicted to noncombatants, thus thriving local animosity to the government. Moreover, this bout witnessed the entry into the conflict of Saudi Arabia as the Houthis crossed the border. This event catalyzed the attention over the internationalization of the Yemeni domestic issues, which further will enlarge.

The violence and destruction caused by the sixth round of war resulted in a cease-fire explained by the exhaustion on both sides and reached in mid-February 2010. Nevertheless, few predicted that the cease-fire would last as both the government and the Houthis had no interest in addressing the underlying causes of the war. Contrary to expectations, the respite endured as the war rhetoric was partially dismissed due to the emergence of primary political developments, namely the 2011 popular uprising. (Lackner, 2017) Moreover, the rivalry over succession inflamed the debate.

## **1.6 From the Arab Springs to the current situation**

The descent into civil war was predictable from the mid-2000s; the enduring confrontation with the Houthis in the north surely contributed to it, but many other variables influenced the uprisings of 2011. Despite the Sa'ada wars, Yemen also had to face other destabilizing factors including the worsening poverty, the instances of secession of the southerners' separatists, the reduction of the oil

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<sup>34</sup> <https://www.spiegel.de/international/world/operation-scorched-earth-a-us-hand-in-yemen-s-civil-war-a-732734.html>

prices, mounting rates of unemployment, uncountable localized military conflicts, and the water crisis. All these factors sharply fostered the population's anger and frustration and led to the paralysis of the formal political system. (Lackner, 2017)

Although the crisis was expected to come, many variables were misunderstood rather than undervalued, starting with the Saudi involvement and the triggers for change. The Yemeni Arab Spring was often oversimplified in its nature while the composition of interests at stake was extremely great. Nevertheless, specifics will be given in the next chapter. What is pressing here concerns the understanding of the years going from 2011 to the present moment; thus, this work aims at furnishing to the reader a framework of the leading factors, the major actors involved, and the geopolitical motives for action.

The revolts of 2011 strove to bring about democratic governance, a fair distribution of wealth by ending the élite appropriation of it, and an improvement of the economic conditions of the population. (Lackner, 2017)

Notwithstanding, 2011 paved the way for the collapse of the country.

The reason to study to understand the dynamics which led Yemen to misery start from the demands for Saleh's departure called by the citizens. After an attempt of changing the constitution that would have assured Saleh to stand for another constitutional term<sup>35</sup>, protests rapidly spread in Sa'ana. Following the impetus given by Tunisians and Egyptians, the demonstrations in Yemen grew in their size and transformed into a "live-in" at the entrance of Sa'ana University, renamed the "Change" square. (Kasinof, 2021)

What is peculiar is that the Yemeni change squares were different from the ongoing movements in other Arab countries. In the first place, the Yemeni movement lasted longer and was more widespread than in other countries; secondly, people adhered carelessly to their belongings and ideals, joining as single individuals calling for a change. It shaped a social transformation that will impact the politics of the following years substantially<sup>36</sup>. Finally, the movement stood out for its dynamism, which forced the parties of formal opposition to Saleh to actively participate in the protest.

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<sup>35</sup> The reason for this move was to remain as president until Ahmed, Saleh's eldest son, reached the constitutional age to succeed him.

<sup>36</sup> The societal characteristics of the movement paved the way for radical changes in the architectural structure of the Yemeni society, determining a long-term influence on the country's politics; new visions and ideas were shaped.

The turning point for the nature of the movement occurred on March 18, when the tragic events of the “Friday of Dignity” took place. The population was outraged at large by the government forces that “over three hours, killed at least 45 protestors (...) and wounded 200.”<sup>37</sup> (Human Rights Watch, 2013) Those repressions opened the path towards violence, that soon escalated. Moreover, that episode had consequences on politics as the JMP openly declared its allegiance to the revolution. In such a tense climate, foreign powers present in Yemen understood the need for intervention due to the fragility of the regime. It resulted in an agreement called the Gulf Cooperation Initiative (Ibrahim, 2016: 233-234)<sup>38</sup>, conceived to bring Saleh to hand over power to his vice-president without any prosecutions to follow. The transitional government would have served as a watershed between the old and the new *apparatus*; this latter should have emerged by the intermediate phase led by Hadi, that would have guaranteed the drafting of a new constitution then approved by sort of referendum, and a period fixed to sixty days to call new elections. This deal included all the Yemeni political parties, but Saleh repeatedly refused to sign it until November 23, when he was forced to accept the arrangement as the situation had become unsustainable. He had been wounded, evacuated to Saudi Arabia for treatment, and returned to Yemen in a country torn apart by violence. Beyond that, the Resolution 2014 of the United Nations calling for the implementation of the GCC Initiative further pressured the President to sign the deal. The initial premises bode well as the original agreement was supplemented by a more comprehensive one called Implementation Mechanism of the GCC Initiative<sup>39</sup>, that outlined the parameters inspiring the transition “towards good democratic governance.” (Lackner, 2014)

The problem arose from the fact that the transition government proved unable to drive a real and tangible change. The confines of neoliberalism were never overcome in order not to undermine the economic interests of the *élites*. It practically resulted in a situation of paralysis as the exponents of the government followed a *formula* according to which one party was to determine the distribution

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<sup>37</sup> Human Rights Watch, Unpunished Massacre: Yemen’s Failed Response to the “Friday of Dignity Killings, New York: HRW, February 2013.

<sup>39</sup> Text of the agreement available at: [https://www.peaceagreements.org/wview/758/Agreement%20on%20the%20Implementation%20Mechanism%20for%20the%20Transition%20Process%20in%20Yemen%20in%20Accordance%20with%20the%20Initiative%20of%20the%20Gulf%20Cooperation%20Council%20\(GCC%20Implementation%20Mechanism\)](https://www.peaceagreements.org/wview/758/Agreement%20on%20the%20Implementation%20Mechanism%20for%20the%20Transition%20Process%20in%20Yemen%20in%20Accordance%20with%20the%20Initiative%20of%20the%20Gulf%20Cooperation%20Council%20(GCC%20Implementation%20Mechanism))

of ministries and the other to choose which set they would appoint. (Lackner, 2010) This system favored patronal politics and a massive exclusion of the members of the civil society.

Given this framework, the international community and all those involved should have promoted further initiatives to smooth the transition, in a way to lead the country towards good governance. Nevertheless, it did not occur.

Although most scholars attributed this failure entirely to the National Dialogue Conference, this work wants to cast some light on **the security sector** as one of the lost challenges for fostering change. This work claims that the transition was typified by the insubordination of the security and military forces, which lacked any commitment to the constitution. Hadi never accomplished to dismantle the *apparatus* created by Saleh despite his multiple attempts. In so doing, he did not avert the risk of the well-trained units remaining faithful to Saleh. It happened because of the care they had received previously in terms of salaries and benefits. Also, the patronage system concocted by the previous President was strategically valuable; the recruitment of the military officers happened from Saleh's strongholds, namely the Governorates of Dhamar and Sana'a. Thus, this long-lasting loyalty discouraged any success in Hadi's reforms. Moreover, it must remember that these communities will also play a crucial role in the descent into civil war and the success of the Houthis that the work will later assess. (Ardemagni, 2018)

Despite it may not sounds like a fully explanatory theory to understand the transition's failure, it is undeniable that the security forces' loyalty to Saleh highly aggravated the transition process.

The other determinant factor for the failure of the transition to good governance was the National Dialogue Conference. It was an organ created to bring together all the Yemeni political forces, both the historical ones and those that emerged from the uprisings. Even though some of them were overrepresented and others underrepresented, the crux of the matter primarily concerned the details of the future federal state. Specifically, this issue signed the final breakdown between the transitional government and the Houthis as the latter did not agree with the six-regions-division proposed by the governmental forces. In the words of Mohammad al-Bukhaiti<sup>40</sup>, it would have divided Yemeni healthy from poor regions<sup>41</sup>. Apart from this, other questions implied into the partial abortion of the NDC's plan regarded the short time given to it for the accomplishment of the transition, the

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<sup>40</sup> He will be the Houthis' spokesman.

<sup>41</sup> Gulf News, 2014.

overvaluation accorded to the initiative at the detriment of other ignored fundamental aspects, and the absolute detachment from the practical problems of Yemenis<sup>42</sup>. (Schmitz, 2014)

Following the NDC, it was established the Constitutional Drafting Committee in the aim of drafting a constitution to deliver to Hadi. Nevertheless, it left many issues unsolved as the Southern question, the role of women, and the justice system. As a result, it triggered the next phase of the crisis. Despite having a new constitution, vital issues pressing Yemenis were still almost ignored. While people expected substantial improvements in their living conditions, the situation on the ground seemed unaltered; infrastructures did not improve, and an equitable economy was not realistic. This paved the way for further frustration, and for growing support for the Houthis, that in the meanwhile were quietly consolidating their control over the south of the country, setting the scene for an alliance with Saleh on the sidelines.

This strategic move together with the decision of the Hadi's government to raise diesel prices in compliance with the demands of the International Monetary Fund created fertile terrain for the counter governmental forces, namely the Houthis, to heighten the movement to the *status* of sole defenders of the interests of the people, *de facto* changing the balance of power in the Yemeni political panorama.

### 1.6.1 Houthis takeover of Sanaa

Initially, Houthis acted by leveraging on the massive popular consent they were receiving from the Yemenis. Once consolidated, they went further by advancing in the capital.

Before doing this, there was the last attempt of finding a compromise between the movement and the transitional government, namely the **Peace and National Partnership Agreement**<sup>43</sup> aimed at forming an inclusive government, increasing the power-sharing, and formulating the steps to draft a new constitution.<sup>44</sup> (Al-Dawsari, 2021)

When signed, it led to the departure of the prime minister. Therefore, a new one should have been appointed. Disagreements over the right candidate to elect were soon visible; on the one hand, a businessman without any political baggage, Ahmed Awadh bin Mubarak, and on the other hand

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<sup>42</sup> The NDC spent most of the time in dealing with the instances of separatism of the South, while issues like unemployment were almost ignored.

<sup>43</sup> <https://peacemaker.un.org/yemen-national-partnership-2014>

<sup>44</sup> To deepen the content of the agreement, also consult the following analysis: <https://carnegieendowment.org/sada/57087>

Khaled Baha. The Houthis drastically refused Mubarak as the international community and other foreign powers backed him. Therefore, the decision fell on the appointment of Baha as a prime minister. In the beginning, Houthis operated behind the scenes, but gradually they intensified their actions employing coercion. At this point, Hadi's government had two options; resign or being a puppet of the Houthis, and he chose the first.

After the resignation of Hadi, internecine struggles for power within the Saleh-Houthis alliance emerged. Unable to find a leader for the post-Hadi era, the Houthis proclaimed a Supreme Revolutionary Committee to lead the country for the following two years, contemporarily suspending the functioning of the Parliament. Meanwhile, Hadi withdrew his resignation, installing in Aden and trying to reshape a governmental authority. Fighting in the city became heavy, and on March 24, 2015, Hadi requested military support to Gulf Cooperation Council to restore his power. At this point, Yemen was in a state of civil war. A Saudi-led coalition intervened military following a request from Hadi to reverse the coup and restore his government.

The main point to raise before introducing the next section concerns the international community's efforts to hail the civil war massacre. In this respect, The United Nations adopted a resolution, namely Resolution 2216, and placed Yemen under Chapter VII to restrict arms flows and sanctioning some spoilers. (Al-Dawhari, 2021) Nevertheless, this mechanism proved ineffective, as the decree was never enforced. Consequently, the coalition led by Riyadh was not accountable for the claimed violations of human rights. (Al-Dawsari, 2021) Therefore, at that point, the international community de facto failed to stop the catastrophic situation, opening the path for an escalation of violence and hard power actions. However, the issue will be further deepened in the next chapter. In this regard, it will introduce the war, its players, and the reasons for its lifetime.



## **Chapter 2: The civil war: narratives of the conflict**

### **2.1 Roots of the conflict**

When it comes to Yemen, understanding what is happening is hard. Indeed, the country is the homeland of many different conflicts intertwining between them. There is more than one civil war, and regional interests are also at stake. Moreover, the country serves as a base for terrorist organizations and is home to al Qaeda in the Arabian Peninsula.

Understanding the roots of the ongoing war requires a substantial analytical effort, as the underlying causes are multiple and diverse. This work aims to understand the present dynamics, the actors involved, and the interest at stake to give a complete framework of the catastrophe of Yemen.

The previous chapter introduced the reader to the country; this second part will deal with the conflict that caused the worst humanitarian crisis of the last century.

The protagonists of the war are multiple. Notwithstanding this, the major ones are the Houthis, the Southern secessionists, and the internationally recognized government of Hadi. Other than internal players, regional and global powers also play a role. Specifically, Saudi Arabia, the United Arab Emirates, the United States, and Iran are the most engaged actors.

As illustrated in the first part of this work, the state of civil war hit Yemen in March 2015. Since the takeover of the Yemeni capital, the Houthis advanced southward to Aden in the spring, forcing Hadi to flee to Riyadh. Their success was eased by the aid provided by Iran, which since 2011 equipped

and trained the group<sup>45</sup>. The Iranian involvement in Yemen caused concern for the Saudis as they viewed the Houthis as an Iranian proxy and feared an Iranian presence at its southern border intervened militarily in March 2015 against the group. They did it in the form of a coalition whose main participants were the United Arab Emirates and the United States, the latter participating by furnishing intelligence, refueling, and munition. The stated purpose of Washington by engaging in Yemen regarded the halt of terrorism, with a specific emphasis for the AQAP threat, seen as a destabilizing factor. Meanwhile, in the southern part of the country, some groups started to seek independence, thus furtherly exacerbating the situation.

In such a context, it should be added the humanitarian crisis hitting Yemen. Almost the poorest country of the Middle East, Yemenis conditions sharply deteriorated after the beginning of the war, and especially following the Saudi blockade<sup>46</sup>. Moreover, the death toll is high to such an extent that the protracted armed conflict is amidst the most destructive wars since the end of the Cold War. The last five years have witnessed around a quarter of million deaths<sup>47</sup> (United Nations, 2020), including over 12 600 civilians killed in targeted attacks<sup>48</sup> (ACLED, 2019). The victims under the age of five<sup>49</sup> represent 60% of the dead. (Bohl, Moyer, 2019)

The United Nations claims the mortality rate could exceed 480 000 deaths with an estimated 330 000 deaths of children under five years old<sup>50</sup> if hostilities follow in 2022. (United Nations, 2020)

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<sup>45</sup> Iran backed Houthi also before 2011, but the weight of the aid of the Islamic Republic much increased since then.

<sup>46</sup> The Saudi-led blockade was both economic and logistic. It included the closure of ports and airports, *de facto* isolating the country forcing it to catastrophe.

<sup>47</sup> <https://news.un.org/en/story/2020/12/1078972> 30

<sup>31</sup> ACLED. Over 100,000 reported killed in Yemen war. Available: <https://acleddata.com/2019/10/31/press-release-over-100000-reported-killed-in-Yemen-war/> [Accessed 4 Dec 2020].

<sup>49</sup> Moyer JD, Bohl D, Hanna T. *Assessing the impact of war on development in Yemen*, 2019

<sup>50</sup> <https://www.un.org/development/desa/pd/news/levels-and-trends-child-mortality-2020-report>

According to this work, the seeds for war existed before the civil war of 2011, but it was a turning point for furthering rampant violence. The grassroots unrest aimed to oust Saleh's regime because of corruption and exclusion from political and economic affairs. In other terms, Yemen encountered a major crisis of political legitimacy. The protests further weakened an already faint regime ruled by competing elite factions within the country. (Hill, 2013) In further detail, that power struggle saw Saleh's forces on the one hand and Islah<sup>51</sup> on the other one. The initial skirmishes exploded into an armed conflict spreading around all Yemen and in the northwest in the first place. This situation increased insecurity all over the country, leaving room for the advancement of non-state actors that took advantage to fill the vacuum. Respectively, al Qaeda and the Houthis seized control over southern Yemen and Saada.

In addition to this, Southern secessionists operated through other forms of unrest, which substantiated in attacks on critical oil pipelines as the country is heavily dependent on export revenues. The final objective of those operations was to pressure the government to allow the independence of the South. (Salisbury, 2016)

Seeing the collapse of Yemen near, Saleh resigned. As illustrated above, after his ousting, the GGC advanced an initiative to foster peace in Yemen. Nevertheless, it encountered obstruction by the Houthis; and their interference triggered the intervention of a Saudi-led coalition wishing to restore the political power to the internationally recognized government of Hadi. The following paragraphs will analyze the many facets involved in the civil war in Yemen.

## **2.1 Levels of the dispute**

As anticipated before, the Yemeni conflict is not even one; it is composed of a series of nested conflicts intertwining between them. The genealogy of the war is primarily domestic, and specifically originated from inter-élite rivalries, present in the country since this immemorial, claiming autonomy and demanding social balance. The war of 2015 started as a political dispute for power and resources (Ardemagni, 2020) involving domestic actors. Despite the disputes are long-standing in Yemen, this work pinpoints the failure of the uprising of 2011 against Saleh as the driver for the escalation of the conflict.

Protests against his regime provoked a change within the regime, but not a change of the regime. Territorial grievances remained largely unaddressed, thus leaving space for the aspirations of

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<sup>51</sup> This competition primarily substantiated in the area around Adan, Hadramawt, Mahra, and Socotra, and Hodeida.

independence and autonomy advanced by the Houthis, and the Southern secessionists above the others. Additionally, the spread of hostilities further enlarged the conflict to the involvement of regional powers, thus regionalizing some originally domestic rifts. Almost fragile internal balances have been altered by foreign intrusion into domestic affairs, substantially increasing the fragmentation of the Yemeni territory. In further detail, external players maximized divisions in feuds relying on militias for a large part associated to the most influent, and competing, centres of powers: the Hadi government, the Houthis, and the Southern Transitional Council (STC) established in 2017.

In such a context, reciprocal influence between internal and external actors occurred, provoking changes both in Yemen and at a regional level, theoretically engaging into an agent-structure relation. Indeed, other than the increasing internal fragmentation into feuds, the interplay of domestic and foreign elements has also determined a heightening of the regional tensions, and above all the rivalry between Iran and Saudi Arabia followed by the more subtle contention for leverage between Saudi Arabia and the United Arab Emirates<sup>52</sup>.

Given these specifics, the Yemen war distinguishes between four layers of the conflict, that are the following: centre versus peripheries, old against new élites, hegemonic competition between Saudi Arabia and Iran, and the Sunni-Shia rivalry, with the first two being the original drivers of the war and the others intervening after the start of the clashes, thus altering previous balances.

To follow, this work will proceed with the analysis of each of the layers.

### **2.2.1 Centre versus periphery**

The storyline of Yemen has historically been marked by this sort of dispute, thus forging a profoundly divided society. As Yemen experimented with a merger in the early '90s, divisions cross from North to South. From this, it follows that the occurrence of the civil war in 1994 is no coincidence. On the contrary, it resulted from a spread perception within the southern Yemeni governorates concerning the unification. In their eyes, it was an “internal colonization” according to which the Sa’ana-based northern regions imposed their power over the rest of the country, thus marginalizing the south. Either in terms of allocation of revenues or institution-building. Likewise, the Sa’ada wars fought by the Houthis against the forces of Saleh to obtain territorial and religious autonomy represent another example of this domestic division. Despite this, it is not just a fragmentation based on a “north versus south” rhetoric; the local scenario of Yemen is much more sophisticated than this. Other than these

dichotomist narratives, other variables intervene in the Yemeni context. Among these, some governorates with diverse identities, different religious compositions, and several economic peculiarities are seeking autonomy from the central government. Nevertheless, they are just equated by the wish to detach from the central state, but despite the common battle for independence, a Southern State will hardly be shaped as differences exist, and consistently manifest. (Salmoni, Loidolt, Wells, 2010)

Also, decentralization occurred over time, thus shaping some *de facto* autonomies from the bulk of power, namely Sa'ana. It is the case of Mareb, that acts as an independent Governorate. It is not a chance that Ansar Allah has recently advanced toward it. Indeed, the recent Houthi taking of this city has *de facto* marked the Saudi defeat due to its strategic significance, both for its position and the consistent oil revenues.

As stated above, other than the Houthis and the Southern secessionists, several factors concur in shaping the conflict.

Nevertheless, as Ansar Allah and the southerners are the most structured and relevant movements that oppose the interim government, the study of the civil war will primarily proceed with the analysis of these two experiences.

### **2.2.2 The Houthi experience**

Most of the first chapter has been dedicated to introducing the Houthis, or Ansar Allah. Now, the work proceeds towards the analysis of the role of the group within the conflict, insisting on the reasons that allowed to this force to advance until the taking of the Yemeni capital and to be *de facto* the dominant power in the northern Yemen, namely the former Yemen Arab Republic.

In the first place, it is useful to highlight that Houthis' opponents are largely still convinced that the movement will naturally disappear once the conflict is settled as it is conventional thinking to imagine the group just flourishing in conflictual situations where chaos reigns. Conversely, this work stands on the opposite side for two reasons: firstly, this proposition is still untested, and secondly Ansar Allah repeatedly proved its ability to keep internal contradictions in check as the different power centers finally end to accept decisions issued by the central authority. Moreover, the Houthis are a well-structure movement that was able to forge networks of control, to control both local and central institutions, and that is still trying to behave as a government.

More in detail, the Houthis have totally acquired control over the institutions of the territories they conquered, establishing a form of governance over them substantiating into the recruiting of new

members, the appointee of new senior officials in both the districts and the governorates, and the choice of ministries directly designated from its supporters. Furthermore, Ansarullah has constituted parallel networks of “supervisors”. (Ardemagni, 2019) These figures are paramount for the optimal functioning of the Houthis governance system as they ensure a strict control and surveillance over the whole apparatus, and especially over the security forces. This supervisory system allows a certain degree of cohesion of the security forces instead lacking in the Yemeni areas not governed by the Houthis. Additionally, they have been good at implementing the *divide at impera* strategy to the tribal system by means of rewards and funds. Specifically, Houthis have cut off support to the longstanding tribal leaders in favor of the ascendance of new contenders in the aim of fostering competition among them, this way avoiding the chance of formation of a united front against them.

The movement has also embedded itself in business. (Simmons, 2021) It has operated following three major lines: in the first place, it has created monopolies for new businesses in affiliation with the Movement, then it has taken control of large companies formerly headed by political rivals, and finally silent partnerships with entrepreneurship disposed to accommodate Houthis’ demands and claims have also been established. Alongside these tactical moves, some centralization also occurred. According to a recent UN panel of expert, Ansar Allah has redirected \$ 1.8 billion of revenues for its war effort. It is an absolute unpopular choice, especially in times of war but suggests the fine administrative and strategic capacity of the movement. (Nichols, 2021)

Finally, as partially stated above, the fact that the group is not inscribable under any ideological camp, makes it less vulnerable to changes in politics as it easily adapts to the changing agendas of both competitors and switching partners. This volatility has frequently been criticized by the Houthis’ opponents claiming the lack of a political program and charging the movement of being a weathervane. In the aim of allaying these allegations, technocrats, and politicians near to the movement have tried to lay out a political agenda in the form of the “National Vision” that proved testament of the political face of the movement. Nevertheless, it has harshly been contested. (Simmons, 2021)

### **2.2.3 The Southern experience**

The clash of the civil war of 2014 has heavily bouleversé the internal Yemeni political panorama as it meant a change within the domestic power structures that substantiated the formation of new networks. An example of this new faction is the Southern Transitional Council (STC), a pro-

independence movement formed in April 2017, and it wished to guarantee independence to the previous South Yemen.

This entity came to light a self-stile, following ideological and historical motives, namely the division between north and south, and proposing itself as a government-in-waiting. (Salisbury, 2021)

At the moment of this writing, the STC is a heavy presence in the southern part of the country, having a say both politically and territorially. Regarding the former, the STC has a voice in the Hadi's administration as it holds one-fifth of the cabinet seats while concerning geographic considerations, this political faction maintains under its control most of the governorates of the south, including its auto-proclaimed capital Aden.

Furthermore, it is paramount to highlight that being part of the governmental *apparatus*<sup>53</sup>, STC will account for the final resolution of the conflict if and when the United Nations will try to come to a political settlement of the war<sup>54</sup>. (Salisbury, 2021)

Despite the foundation of the Southern Transitional Council in 2017, it would be erroneous to affirm that the southerners are all represented within the movement. Divisions existed since before the war, even though they have been surpassed during the wartime period.

The roots of the STC are findable in the southern independence movement that emerged after the civil war of 1994 to undo the unification pact of 1990. Specifically, the core of the fight to restore the independence of the south moved around al-Hirak al Janoubi, namely a loose coalition of groups struggling for statehood. The Hiraquis never attained competitive levels, neither to nor militarily. Thus, a compromise was imperative to strengthen their position. (Salisbury, 2021)

Soon after the war began, the Houthis had allied with Saleh's forces to overrun southern cities. Given this objective, the southerners reacted by organizing a stiff defense that backed the United Arab Emirates. Nevertheless, the situation hurry transformed into a chance for local leaders to emerge and wield power. Thus, a network of political/security leaders tied to the UAE surfaced. It comprehended Hiraquis, the Salafist leader Breik, Aydrous al-Zubaidi, and some pro-independence fighters from the Yafa tribe. Initially, the internationally recognized government of President Hadi proved

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<sup>53</sup> During Yemen's UN-overseen 2012-2014 political transition, diplomats regularly complained of Hirak's inability to form a coherent negotiating platform.

<sup>54</sup> It was a clause included in the Riyadh Agreement. To deepen the content of the document, consult it at the following link:  
<https://www.saudiembassy.net/sites/default/files/Riyadh%20Agreement%20Fact%20sheet.pdf>

accommodating these figures. Nevertheless, as they rapidly gained leverage, the relationship got complicated. (Salisbury, 2021)

#### **2.2.4 STC and Hadi: a hard path to compromise**

Despite initial goodness towards the Southern Transitional Council, the government turned suspicious and indisposed towards the southerners. The reasons driving this antagonism are primarily two: ideology and a historical intra-south rivalry. It follows an analysis of both.

Concerning the first issue, the unyielding difference between the two regards the UAE's consideration of Islah, namely a constituent group of the government forces. Islah is the most prominent Sunni Islamist party, and it has some relations with the Muslim Brothers, considered on a par with an existential threat by the UAE officials. It is intended as a gateway to jihadism, and thus a menace to national security. As such, contacts with Islah have always been to the bare minimum and even averted when feasible. Another motive for revile towards the Sunni party concerns its behavior in the civil war of 1994. It was blamed by the STC, and incidentally the Hiraquis, for having exceeded in many ways. (Al-Hamdani, Lackner, 2020)

The second cleavage concerns a historical intra-south division having its roots in the conflict of 1986. According to the southerners that war had tribal connotations. Into detail, that was a conflict between Abyan and Shebwa forces from one side, and the al-Dhale and Lahj faction on the other hand. The bottom line is that President Hadi is from Abyan, and locals in the South have prophesied a split between the "Bedouin" from Abyan and Shebwa, such as Hadi, and the "tribesmen" from al-Dhale as Zubaidi.

This prevision proved to be correct as the rupture gradually occurred, ending in open fighting. Proceeding with an order, the first step towards clashes was the firing by Hadi of some UAE-aligned officials. This move followed the overt endorsement of these officials for southern independence. To this breach followed a further divisive gambit, namely the creation of the STC by Zubaidi. Afterward, clashes in Aden erupted until the takeover of the city in August 2018.

Hostilities and violence only ceased when Saudi Arabia intervened by brokering through the Riyadh Agreement in November 2019.

##### **2.2.4.1 From Riyadh onwards: A waiting game**



As for every deal advanced in Yemen, the Riyadh agreement was another accord used by the subscribing parties to gain an advantage over their rivals. On the one hand, the government of Hadi saw the deal as a sign of victory over the UAE-sponsored forces, and a *de facto* débacle of the independence instances of the STC. On the other hand, from its perspective, the STC thought the exact contrary, which means they intended their inclusion in UN-led talks as a step forward towards the independence cause. ( Salisbury, 2021)

Given these views, it appears evident that compromise did not flatten a tense situation, but rather it further inflamed the reciprocal demands of the players, thus converting the picture into a wait-and-see game where both the actors gamble that they can outlast the other (Simmons, 2021)

The government of Hadi and its allies believe that the STC's military *apparatus* is close to imploding without the UAE's backing. Furthermore, they also perceive the inclusion of the STC within the governmental sphere as a motive for accountability, meaning that STC officials can be charged with the failures of the southern governorates. On its side, the STC relies on the Houthis presence in Marib to uphold its position of ascendance. Indeed, the southerners consider the outcome of the fighting among the Houthis and the governmental bodies as a sign of credibility or weakness of the internationally recognized government. The more the rebels seize territories, the more the government loses trustworthiness.

Finally, doing the math, it can be stated that the relationship intervening between the two players in the analysis is a delicate balancing act standing over intersects among numerous variables, actors, and interests at stake. The situation is now describable as a stalemate in which both the players are waiting to strike a blow. At the moment of this writing, the will of secession of the southerners is undimmed, and the desire of the central government to eradicate the movement is equally vivid.

The last chapter will illustrate the views of this work in this proposal.

### **2.2.5 Old élite versus new élite**

Tribal alliances in Yemen have always been fluid, and in present politics are still significant in their impact. In the post-unrest context, new a-ideological and tactic alliances emerged. On the one hand, Saleh decided to side with the Houthis to defy both the Hadi's government and the rise of the Islah party. (Schmitz, 2018) Contemporarily, the attempt launched by the GCC Initiative to smooth the political transition of Yemen by forming an inclusive government including all the political parties did not lead to tensions and hostilities between élites disappearing. Instead, the inclusion of Islah in the governmental coalition highly reduced the influence of the General People's Congress (GPC). At the same time, the *interim* President Hadi, coming from the GPC and deprived of his strength, started

to appoint loyalists in the public sector. And he also tried to implement reforms into the Security Sector to sideline Saleh and its military commanders. As partially introduced above, Hadi opted for a reshuffling of political positions to create a system faithful to his regime rather than forging functional machinery to the safety and security needs of the Yemenis. (Ardemagni, Al-Hamdani, 2021)

As a result, instability rapidly grew, and the country further fractured into three main competing political-military entities claiming legitimacy. Beneath this rival domestic actor seeking power, the security provision of the citizens has practically shifted towards tribal chiefs that often replace the central government. Although these local actors are often framed as apolitical, they are not. Conversely, they result from politicized environments.

Moreover, dissimilarities between urban and rural areas exist. Furthermore, areas under Houthi control and other territories highly differ.

Finally, this multitude of players makes Yemen a mosaic of instability. In addition to the fight among élites, the battle over single territories also enter the game. In conclusion, Yemen is a context always more torn by bottom-up decentralization and self-governance.

#### **2.2.6 Sunni vs Shia: politicization of religious identities**

Yemen is a country where power struggles have always occurred other than sectarianism. Nevertheless, with the clash of protests and after the Saudi intervention, a new phenomenon started to shape the country, namely the politicization of religious identities. It frequently happened in the Middle East, becoming an instrument for gaining power or fighting an enemy. It was respectively the case of the Iranian Revolution and the intervention of the United States in Iraq. In the Yemeni case, the belonging to the Shia side of Islam of the Houthis made them automatically equated with Iran despite the fact it is a wrong association in many respects: in the first place, as stated above, the movement was born with political intentions, and it raised political instances; secondly, despite the majority of the Houthis' members are Zaydis, there is the Sunni factor too and vice versa, as in the ranks of the opponents the Zaydis component exists, and it was the case of President Saleh. In addition, Zaydism is other than the Iranian Shiism on which the Islamic Republic was created, namely the Twelver Shiism. Zaydism is often considered to be closer to Sunni Islam rather than to Shiism of Iranians. From a theological perspective, the major difference concerns the identity of the fifth Imam – Zayd ibn Ali for the Zaydis, and Muhammad al-Baqir according to Twelvers. Also, Zaydism implies a greater tolerance for Imams, that are not considered as infallible. Also, the attitude towards the early

Sunni caliph differs as Twelvers are much more ardent than Zaydis, the latter being more liberal. Furthermore, the Iranian support for the Houthis does not stand either on religious similarities or common belongings. In opposition, it is more pragmatic, and attentive to geopolitical considerations. (Johnston, 2020) (Perteghella, 2018)

As put by Sarah E. Parkinson and Anna Gordon, the Houthis “became Shia” because of the rhetoric of President Saleh, and the Saudi propaganda after. Both insisted on portraying the Houthis as a Shia group of rebels incited and backed by Iran and Hezbollah. (Gordon, Parkinson, 2018)

Consequently, it was the strategy played by the former President and by Saudi Arabia to generate the threat of a Shia takeover of power. In other terms, sectarianism was activated for geopolitical reasons rather than naturally resulting from historical dynamics. It is provable by highlighting that Sunni and Shia have prayed in the same mosques for a long time in Yemen.

Furthermore, the emergence of terrorist groups as AQAP and ISIS stirred sectarian hatred as these groups insisted on the religious element to retain power, thus enlarging the sectarian rift.

In conclusion, the Yemeni conflict cannot be characterized as a religious-driven war as the points raised above confute this thesis. Nevertheless, it is undeniable that ideology- religious in this case- played and still plays a role. Therefore, it is urgent to decrease sectarianism to avoid further violence.

### **2.2.7 Terrorist groups: Al-Qaeda and ISY**

As partly introduced in the previous paragraphs, the security and governance vacuum installed in Yemen by the civil war paved the way for the resurgence of terrorist groups as AQAP and ISY. It is not impressive as international relations teach us those vacuums always replenish. Thus, it was the case of Yemen, with the peculiarity that the power struggle in the country is variegated and includes many players, still fighting at the moment of this writing.

#### **2.2.7.1. The success of al-Qaeda**

In the case of Al Qaeda in the Arabian Peninsula, it emerged as a response to the weakening of the organization in other countries. The attempt of this being conferring new credibility to the group. It enlarged in the Gulf, thus giving life to AQAP. In Yemen, the major success of AQAP occurred soon after the intervention of the Saudi-led coalition, or better after the starting of the coalition campaign. When it happened, AQAP increased its war chest and its numbers, *de facto* establishing a state in the Eastern part of the country by April 2015. This accomplishment resulted from the ability shown by

the organization in securing its buy-in from tribal leaders and contemporarily the tacit acceptance by the local populations. It is noteworthy to underline that the Eastern Yemen local inhabitants are difficult to terrorize into submission. And they are also very well-armed. As a result, being able to win their passive tolerance is a resounding hit. Other than AQAP's organizational remarkable skills, its success also stemmed from the fact the territory it governed was one of the few stable areas of the country in times of bombing and naval blockades. In addition, the organization proved copy into adapting to the territory it approached; in a land of small and varied local communities, AQAP succeeded in providing the services people needed in times of war. Thus, it organized community projects paying attention to the needs of the citizens and forging a large platform of consent. Along with this, the group rebranded itself with a local name, namely *The Sons of Hadramawt*. The purpose of this action was to ingenerate its proximity to the Yemeni people. (Kendall, 2018)

AQAP also operated employing politicization of religious identities as anticipated in the previous paragraph. It proposed itself as the advocate of the Sunnis against the Houthis, recasting the historical fears of a takeover of the southerners, thus adopting the narrative of apocalyptic jihad. (Kendall, 2018) In addition to merits, circumstances also helped AQAP cause. The high death toll caused by the interventions of the United States and Saudi Arabia made the terrain fertile for credible alternatives to arise. In other terms, AQAP had the chance to stand as the good guy. It is beneficial to exemplify it by reporting two episodes. Firstly, the promise made by the group following the inclusion of Saudi Arabia in the hit-list of the United Nations. In that case, AQAP swore not to target neither children nor women in the double objective of stimulating consent for the organization while also demonizing the enemy. In the same direction moved the competition hold in March 2016. It was a tactical move used to ingenerate hatred towards the United States, particularly in the young generations. The match pertained to design anti-U.S. and anti-drone posters. (Clausen, 2017)

In conclusion, AQAP was able to gain traction in Yemen thanks to its culturally specific narrative, its projects of community development, and its propaganda system. Moreover, disillusion and fear among Yemenis played a role in forging approval and closeness to the organization. Finally, the arrival of the Islamic State also contributed to the advantage of AQAP for two motives; in the first place, it redirected international attention away from it. Secondly, the brutality of ISIS *modus operandi* made AQAP look reasonable.(Clausen, 2017)

### **2.2.7.2 The reasons for the failure of the Islamic State**

Different from AQAP, the Islamic State in Yemen proved unable to gain significant support. The reasons lying behind this failure are enclosable into two missing drivers. The first mistake was the

inattention accorded to the local dimension, limiting to savaging the Houthis. ISY missed engaging in development projects for the community, thus, not answering the necessity of the Yemenis stuck into war. The second fallacy regarded the use of force, which turned out to be counterproductive for the organization; the Islamic State conducted several indiscriminate attacks against civilians that caused hundreds of deaths, such as the double bombing of Friday Prayers organized in Saana. Yemeni people disregarded this sort of action massively, as then and now they searched for the end of the hostilities.

According to this framing, the Islamic State never steadily earmarked in Yemen, just staying in the shadow.

Another contributory motive to make ISY marginal in Yemen was the sectarian narrative shown by the organization. It proved unpopular in an area, namely the eastern side of Yemen, in which citizens came to be more attentive to tribal issues than to religious matters. A survey conducted in the governorate of al-Mahrah has clearly shown it: most of the respondents on a total of 2.000 participants declared to consider the tribal sheik as more relevant than the Imam, adding that the latter only had a voice in religious and personal matters. As a result of this spread perception among Yemenis, it distinctly emerges that the concept of global jihad based on a religious ideology did not fit with Yemeni local dynamics and issues at stake. Conversely, the local audience has an attraction for practical questions, careless of ideological precepts.

By late 2016, the group was confined to the Bayda governorate. Some attempts were made to revive ISY's waning fortunes, but U.S airstrikes decimated its two main camps in October 2017, squashing any chance of resurgence. Finally, the assets of the ISY leaders were frozen, and sanctions were slapped by the United States along with six Gulf Cooperation Council states. It was the final depletion of the organization.

### **2.2.7.3 The new Yemeni ISIS**

A reincarnation of the group gradually emerged out of the ashes of ISIS's obliterated camps in the governorate of Bayda'. The new version of the organization stemmed from a new set of leaders. While leaving unaltered ISIS's flag, brand, and rhetoric, the group made some adjustments. The post-2018 ISIS insisted on local rivalries and tried to inject culturally attuned camaraderie (Kendall, 2021) into its videos. Despite these minor shifts, the most obvious change was in the targeting set. Whether in its early version the assaults addressed al-Houthi combatants in central Yemen, the new release related to al-Qaeda, accused of collaboration with the Yemeni armed forces. In response, al-Qaeda

started to complain of ISIS vexations until disagreement amounted to war in the summer of 2018. Since then, two years of killings and violence occurred. (Carlino, 2019)

The obsession for disrupting al-Qaeda is also evident by analyzing the testimonies of defectors. They narrated the strategy used by the vertices of the organization about the fresh recruits. Once within ISIS, they started the training to prioritize the members of al-Qaeda as the top deviants and the duty to exterminate them.

For a correct understanding of this tactical shift that shaped into an open war between jihadists, three eventual explanations come to concur. The first motive for shaping such a tightening hatred may be the enlargement of the global rivalry among the two actors. Secondly, it may result from an attempt to sow discord among the Yemeni jihadist landscape deliberately advanced by security and intelligence agencies. In this perspective, the videos series “Demolishing Espionage” by al-Qaeda amply supports this hypothesis. Finally, there is the possibility that terrorist groups in Yemen are an arm for the proxy wars among regional powers. (Kendall, 2020)

In this complex framework, the issue of the al-Houthis fighters is also relevant to insert into the discourse. Indeed, it is not clear the extent to which it is adherent to reality. Nevertheless, official sources have theorized a collaboration between the two, despite ISIS's apparent target of the rebels. According to internal sources it amounted to 94% out of the total attacks against enemies. (Kendall, 2021)

Notwithstanding this, locals have contradicted data provided by ISIS officials, and even though some offensive actions occurred, they were small-scale ones. Thus, the conflict between the two seems to be more fictitious than they want to make-believe. It is beneficial to the interests of both. For the Houthis, the claiming of indiscriminate attacks against them advance their position before the international community; for ISIS, it follows the dictates of the sectarian narrative.

### **2.2.7.3 ISIS vs Al-Qaeda: who is the winner**

As it often happens when treating rivalries, the strongest and the weakest are usually used as mere theoretical constructs to frame a situation. Nevertheless, there are moments of glory and strength as declining ones, and they imply that the balance of power shifts accordingly. In the case of ISIS and al-Qaeda, the collective imaginary puts the latter in a stance of greater power for the reasons explained above. Although that is the evidence, other variables are intervening in the Yemeni context. The complexity of the domestic environment led to a slow decline of al-Qaeda, coming from the need to

focus on battlefields other than the Bayda' one when also ISIS intervenes. This necessity derived from the fact that new clashes exploded between pro-government troops and separatists, and it also resulted from the imminence of saving other areas such as Mareb. In addition, the decline in 2020 was also partly dependent on the leadership modifications that occurred. The new chief Khalid Batarfi changed the political agenda of the group. As a result, the approval in his regards never touched great peaks. Thanks to this fragility, ISIS had the upper hand despite its previous weakness. It tripled its attacks for 2019. Also, it had benefited from a paralyzing phenomenon taking place within al-Qaeda; it consisted of large quantities of desertions, deceptions, and desertions that directly empowered ISIS, with some splinter groups switching allegiance to the Caliphate. The reason behind this U-turn is still under investigation; it is may the result of a payoff or the outcome of the work of agents operating on behalf of regional intelligence services. The success of ISIS also stemmed from the ability to describe al-Qaeda as a political pawn. In detail, a multimedia content by ISIS and titled "To Be Absolved Before Your Lord" appeared. (Beyer, 2020) It featured some militants of the organization saying out loud about a collaboration between al-Qaeda and the military to fight not exclusively the Houthis, but also the separatists in the South backed by the United Arab Emirates. Additionally, the timing of the delivery of the video was also meaningful. It appeared soon after the declaration of "self-administration" for southern Yemen issued by the separatists. (Jalal, 2020)

The video made the play of the separatists. Indeed, they claimed a collaboration among the government and the terrorists' organizations since time immemorial. And a video depicting this situation directly by the admission of the components of al-Qaida was the proof needed to justify their attempts of seizing control of the territory. Furthermore, the revelations also advantaged other players and caused internal tensions within the Saudi-led coalition, particularly between Saudi Arabia and UAE. Contemporarily, the disclosures also diverted attention from the war against the Houthi, thus benefitting them and their sponsors, namely Iran.

Given all this, it could seem that ISIS is currently more powerful than al-Qaeda. It is true in a binary comparison, but the overall number of activities carried forward in the last times are low for both the terrorist organizations. This decrease in the number of operations is explicable by introducing several discourses. In the first place, the counter-terrorism operations assured this drop.

Moreover, the pandemic of Covid-19 also influenced the operation capacity of these groups. But above all this, there is one leading cause for the decline of the terrorist groups in Yemen that concerns the cooptation of terrorists by regional actors for political motives and geopolitical interests. The extent to which this phenomenon effectively realizes is hard to state unquestionably as the domestic panorama of Yemen is characterized by deep factionalism that rends loyalties easily modifiable. Even though sides and alignments exist, internal divisions are persistent. In such a fluid and composed

context, the jihadist groups, weakened by drones and spies, are wittingly or unwittingly serving the geopolitical agendas of great powers intervening in Yemen. Putting it another way, they are weaponized by foreign powers rather than listed in the docket of the enemies to fight.

On the subject of foreign interventions and interest, the following chapter will analyze this issue.

### **2.2.8 Parties in Yemen: the GPC and Islah party**

The dysfunctional power system in Yemen pertains to the control of two parties since time immemorial, namely the General People's Congress and Islah. They respectively occupied the position of governing and opposition party.

Regarding structures, these are resembling: they equally created a large *umbrella* to sensitize the tribesmen, religious, and local leaders to connect interests and resources to the central institutions. (Ardemagni, 2021)

GPC was the party of President Saleh. Thus, after his killing, it gradually lost control, especially among tribes. And it split into branches. Conversely, the reality of al-Islah found fertile terrain, with its influence sharply growing in the aftermath of 2011. This party is close to the ideology of the Muslim Brothers. Moreover, it comprehends some Salafis<sup>55</sup> and the conservative-business-tribal *milieu*. (Ardemagni, Al-Hamdani, 2021) For these reasons, it encountered compact opposition in Yemen since its creation, primarily by the Ansar Allah, and the Southern Transitional Council. (Ardemagni, Al-Hamdani, 2021)

Apart from periods of the glory of one or the other party, political parties in Yemen have been considered defective since time immemorial.

They represent mismanagement and partisanship in the collective imaginary. It is no coincidence that since foundation, GPC and Islah called themselves respectively “congress” and “congregation” instead of “party”, thus strengthening their alienness from the population and its needs. (Ardemagni, Al-Hamdani, 2021)

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<sup>55</sup> Salafism is a branch of Sunni Islam aiming to return to the traditions of the ancestors (salaf), namely the first three generations of Muslims as it is thought they know the true and pure Islam.



From the information above, it emerges that their national ambitions easily crumble and that the multiparty system in Yemen is highly fragmented. The parties have geographical areas over which they exercise control: GPC mostly around Sanaa, and Islah in the Sunni provinces while also rallying Shia Zaydis. (Ardemagni, Al-Hamdani, 2021)

However, affiliation lost its significance after 2011 as power shifted towards local leaders. They started to be the relevant political pawns within the Yemeni context, both as decision-makers and leaders. It resulted from the enlargement of foreign powers of the once internal issues. Indeed, given the world-systemic opening, the domestic leaders of communities started to be tied to external patrons, thus bypassing the national parties. Additionally, others local leaders just began to bring forward their agendas without any further preoccupation. (Ardemagni, Al-Hamdani, 2021)

This picture highlights the growing fragility of conventional political parties. In the first place, they are not representative of the multitude of competing interests existing in the country. Secondly, new movements from the peripheries emerged since 2011, *de facto* forging high-mobilization realities reuniting high consensus around them.

#### **2.2.8.1 Islah and GPC: a comparison**

GPC came to light before Islah, being the first ruling party in Yemen. Nevertheless, it never achieved enlarging its power base outside Sanaa. Precisely, it gained consensus beyond the capital, but it never forged strongholds in other Yemeni territories. It acted as an advocator of the interests of former President Saleh, thus striving to impose them over the country by shaping a network of power standing on robust membership. However, this support never turned into adherence to the principle of GPC, thus remaining a space where coincident interests found breeding ground to be grown. Diversely, Islah maintained an inner hierarchy and requisites to membership. In addition, it also expanded beyond the national borders of Yemen, stretching its roots to a transnational level. It also depended on closeness to the Muslim Brothers, which embraced a cross border dimension since a time before.

This original discrepancy disorged differently in the post-2011 environment. Indeed, the GPC was internally amalgamated into the Houthis' power structure<sup>56</sup> and externally broke apart into three components: in Cairo, in Riyadh, and Abu Dhabi<sup>57</sup>. (Ardemagni, Al-Hamdani, 2021)

Geopolitically speaking, GPC currently divides into two currents: the Saudi-supported wing that insists on national unity and insists on unity principles, and a group backed by UAE pointing to operate in the Red Sea Coast.

Regarding Islah, the uprisings of 2011 and the following implications reinforced the party. It gained power within the internally recognized government of Hadi despite the Presidents' affiliation to GPC, thus starting to play a consistent role in the Yemeni power structures. However, the conservative party lacks territorial organization, and foreign political leverage on it is still unclear, primarily by Turkey. Another crucial diversity between the two parties regards the relations with tribes. In Yemen, they act as patrons of the parties. Thus, the relationship with them necessarily needs to be cultivated to have a say in the country. In the case of GPC, this connection is now inexistent as the party-members use the money addressed to tribal confederations for their personal needs, thus disabling any eventual long-term tribal relationship.

This pattern differs from Islah, which, in turn, preserves its bounds with tribal Yemen directly engaging in community projects<sup>58</sup>. As a result, the balance of affiliation shifts in favor of Islah, thus exacerbating the GPC deep legitimacy crisis.

Furthermore, in recent times weakened political parties have left the scene to burgeoning armed groups, further intrincating the struggle for power in Yemen. Both GPC and Islah have unofficial

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<sup>56</sup> It was the result of the convenience alliance made between Ansar Allah and Saleh before his killing.

<sup>57</sup> The Cairo-based wing is mixed and dialogue-oriented. The Saudi represents the loyalists to Hadi, and the Abu Dhabi one is bound to the nephew of President Saleh, Tareq.

<sup>58</sup> In detail, Islah sustains Sunni tribes. Among the others, tribes in Marib, Al-Baydha, and partly Al-Jawf have received significant support.

military wings, that after 2015 hybridized on the ground through auxiliary armed groups.<sup>59</sup> (Ardemagni, 2021)

As a result, for the time in being political parties show their incapacity and unwillingness to guarantee an eventual political settlement. The current state of affairs witnesses more divided leadership than ever before, and auxiliary groups on the ground seem to have the upper hand.

### **2.2.8.2 Evolution and pragmatism: how to survive in the politics of Yemen**

The previous paragraphs underline looser political structures composed of fragmentation and uncertainty. Before all, internal division regards GPC, whose leadership is on the spot and still dependent on the balance of power forged by President Saleh without any new relationship undertaken.

Given this scenario, the only viable path to overcome the current fragility of the party is to re-build the GPC brand to confront the Houthis compactly and credibly<sup>60</sup>. (Ardemagni, Al-Hamdani, 2021)

Prospects for Islah are shinier. Indeed, President Hadi's current power is shrinking. His leadership faces growing contestation, and multilayer oppositions jeopardize it. Thus, the eventuality of succession to power is not utopistic. In this eventuality, Vice President General Ali Mohsin Al-Ahmar would likely assume the charge. And it is notable as he has prominent links with Islah, standing yet as the pivot party and further steading in the case this contingency took place. In this regard, it is worthy to note that considering Islah as a continuation of the Muslim Brothers is reductive. If it were true, the party would have vanished promptly in a country where political equilibrium continuously shakes and changes. The proof that Islah is other than the Muslim Brothers is that the conservative party has repeatedly worked by the side of its enemies. For instance, with GPC previous and during the conflict. The final aim of this move is to expand in the whole country on top of ideological and diehard discrepancies. In other terms, geopolitics assumed a prominent position in Islah's views. And it must be the path to follow if Islah ultimately becomes the dominant party in Yemen.

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<sup>59</sup>On security hybridization in Yemen, see Maged Sultan, Mareike Transfeld and Kamal Muqbil, "Formalizing the Informal. State and Non-State Security Providers in Government-Controlled Taiz City", *Yemen Polling Center*, Policy Report, 22 July 2019

<sup>60</sup> The first step in this direction could substantiate into the empowerment of Saleh's nephew Tareq to fight Ansar Allah in Tihama

## **Chapter 3: From civil war to inter-regional conflict**

### **3.1 World-systemic opening: the exogen actors**

The Yemeni conflict exploded for intracrine struggle, and primarily in the wake of the Arab uprisings. Nevertheless, it gradually changed in its nature, becoming a hotbed for political agendas of external powers which intervened for different reasons.

In early 2015 Saudi Arabia entered the war claiming the need to fight the Houthis inasmuch the rebels, according to Saudis, were Iranian clients. This latter wanting to destabilize Yemen, Saudi Arabia, and the Middle East<sup>61</sup> to gaining control over the region. The rhetoric assumed religious tones, posing the

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<sup>61</sup> In the case of Egypt, which contributed with just air and naval assets, the Yemeni civil war of the sixties has weighted heavily when coming to decide how to intervene.

skirmishing as dependent on theological divergences intervening between Sunni Muslims and Shia Islam<sup>62</sup>. Despite intervening as a coalition, no troops were committed to the conflict aside from Saudis and the United Arab Emirates. Other participants may fear getting bogged down in the quagmire. As a result, after a brief interlude to receive largesse, the coalition had reduced to just two active players: UAE and Saudi Arabia. But the commonality of intentions did not last long as soon the agendas of these actors started to diverge: the most relevant issue of discord being the link of the government of Hadi with the Islah Party, namely the Yemeni equivalent of the Muslim Brothers. The UAE disagreed, opting to compromise with the Southern Transitional Council, and with some southern tribes<sup>63</sup>.

This closeness occurred to gain control over the sea lanes of the Arabian Sea<sup>64</sup>. Thus, without descending into details that will be later introduced, what is pressing here is to underline that the countries have undertaken very different paths. The Saudi insisting on gaining control over the region by confrontation with its historical enemy, Iran, and the UAE trying to assure a long-term presence in the Horn of Africa by focusing on the southern coast of Yemen<sup>65</sup>. Finally, Saudi Arabian role is losing centrality in Yemen over the last period, especially after the Houthi's progress. Riyadh is now pushing to regain political relevance, and in so doing, it looks at Oman as the relationship with the Sultanate is significantly improved, and Muscat could play a decisive role in the eventual settlement of the Yemeni conflict.

Another relevant presence in Yemen is that of the Islamic Republic of Iran. Even though its effective contribution to the Houthis remains controversial, it is undeniable that a relationship of favor and help with the Yemeni rebels does exist. The motive to intervene in Yemen is in line with the Iranian

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<sup>62</sup> As it is easily imaginable, this is just a coverture for ceiling the geopolitical motives laying behind the interventionism of Saudi Arabia.

<sup>63</sup> It has been reported of monetary payment to certain southern tribes. For info, look at the following link: <https://www.reuters.com/article/us-yemen-security/saudi-arabia-and-uae-suffer-yemen-setback-as-allies-fall-out-idUSKBN1FM1S3> .

<sup>64</sup> The island of Socotra is believed to be house of a UAE military base.

<sup>65</sup> At this proposal, the United Arab Emirates signed agreements with Somalia and Eritrea intending to enhance airports and seaports. It allowed the country to have access.

regional strategy, which aims at keeping a foothold in many countries of the area to demonstrate Iran is alive and flourishing<sup>66</sup>.

When it comes to the United States, coming to terms with Washington is hard as its interests are complex. Under the Presidency of Obama, the US-backed Saudi-led efforts by helping it with intelligence, air refueling, and logistics. However, as the number of casualties was consistent, and possibly associated with the intervention of the American country, the cabinet of Obama partially disengaged<sup>67</sup>. Moreover, this partial step down depended on the risk of an AQAP advancement in South Yemen. As the American effort against the Houthis was high, terrorists could have gained terrain. This prudent behavior completely vanished when the Trump administration came in chief, resuming full-fledged aid for the Saudis. Nevertheless, the American public opinion talked against the complicity of the United States in the killing of millions of civilians in Yemen, *de facto* being skeptical to giving *carte blanche* to the Saudis in the war.

Then, also Moscow has a say in Yemen. The Kremlin poses as an impartial mediator, trying to exploit a chance of conflict-resolution in which many others have already failed in the purpose of strengthening its international standing and its position in the regional Middle Eastern environment. It is hard to weigh the effective crisis solver skills of the “power broker”; it is a matter of debate of the paragraph dedicated to the Russian Federation. However, with the United States disengaging and the European Union’s power keeping low, Moscow grows in its weight.

In conclusion, what emerges from this brief introduction is that no foreign power has the upper hand. All need to compromise and striving for peace in Yemen implies including an inescapable variable, namely Ansar Allah, into the discourse. Houthis are a *de facto* state within a state, and to fix the Yemeni war, they must necessarily enter the picture. Otherwise, no productive and satisfying bargaining will ever occur.

### **3.1.1 The interventionism of Saudi Arabia**

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<sup>66</sup> This conception is the result of an Imperialistic posture. In fact, for a country that was an Empire, it is hard to reason differently from power logic, even though it is not always coincident with rational choices.

<sup>67</sup> <https://edition.cnn.com/2016/08/20/middleeast/us-military-yemen-saudi-led-coalition/index.html>

Saudi Arabia launched its military efforts in Yemen on March 26, 2015, following the Houthis' takeover of Sanaa. However, the Saudi interference within Yemeni politics dates to the latter half of the twentieth century. Saudis tried to coopt local tribes and sustained the spread of Salafist schools in the country since the seventies. Thus, the rivalry with Zaydis, and subsequently the Houthis, is not an early 2000' phenomenon. Conversely, it has more ancient roots. Nevertheless, the Saudi interventionism in the strict sense of the term firstly occurred in the last bout of the Sadaa's wars, then re-appearing after the failure of the Transitional Plan and the consequent advancement of Ansar Allah.

Operation Decisive Storm represented *de facto* the beginning of a new foreign policy course for the Kingdom. It had never acted as aggressively as it did in the Yemeni conflict. The Saudi engagement was large and offensive. It will follow the analysis investigating the motives for such an abrupt aggressiveness.

Available literature concerning the Saudi intervention in Yemen mainly stresses two factors. Many scholars characterized it as a conflict for regional power with Iran, the so-called proxy-war. And this narrative, along with a Sunni-Shiite divide, became central in Saudi state-owned media. Others pointed to personalities as the leading factor for the intervention. In further detail, they individuate the ascendancy of Prince Mohamad bin Salman as the driver for Yemen War.

This work argues that the rise of the crown prince was not decisive for the deployment of the troops. It holds that the Saudi intervention was pushed by geopolitical interests and the need to pursue *status*. (Darwich, 2018)

However, may the ascent of the prince concurred to forge the feisty posture of the Kingdom. The following section will explore the status-seeking posture adopted by Saudi Arabia by contextualizing this interpretation considering the inherent literature of International Relations literature.

### **3.1.1.1 The Saudi struggle for Status**

According to this work, Saudi Arabia intervened in Yemen following immaterial and symbolic motives. This hypothesis is well-supported by scholars that subdued strategic calculation to prestige and glory in their constructs.

Max Weber provided a strong argument in this vein, arguing that the states aim to acquire prestige (Machprestige), defined as "the glory of power over other communities." (Weber, 1964)

Lebow exhaustively argued that symbolism was the driver for 62% of wars since 1648, adding that it also overcomes security precepts. (Lebow, 2010)

In the same direction moved Morgenthau; in his “Politics among Nations: the power struggle” he claimed that countries go to war to “impress other nations with the power one’s nation possesses, or with the power it believes, or wants the other nations to believe, it possesses.” (Morgenthau, 1948: 89)

This thesis moves along these theoretical lines, according to the Saudi offensive in Yemen status-seeking connotation. Specifically, Saudi Arabia wanted to exploit the post-2011 order to affirm its role as the Custodian of the Two Holy Mosques. And consequently, as the leader to protect the Sunni and Muslim world<sup>68</sup>. (Al-Labbad, 2014)

The Yemeni context was not the only theatre in which the Saudi intervened by force; they also military helped the demonstrations suppress in Bahrain in 2011 and participated to bring back to power a military regime in Egypt. Nevertheless, Saudis felt the inappropriate resonance of its status. Thus, the aggressive posture shown in Yemen was the consequence of a mismatch between self-consciousness and recognition of others. (Darwich, 2018) In other terms, Saudi Arabian foreign policy turned to be assertive and aggressive to illustrate its powerfulness; in so doing, the Yemeni war proved to be the righteous context in the right moment.

Additionally, the Kingdom also intervened to launch a message to the United States. After the nuclear deal with Iran, the relationship between Riyadh and Washington reached its negative peak. It was yet before compromised as the White House had been reluctant to intervene in Syria, but the negotiations with Tehran witnessed the breaking point. Riyadh not only felt abandoned but also betrayed by its Western ally. The Obama presidency was considered disrespectful of the Saudis interests. (Kenner, 2015)

Thus, the urgent need for showing prestige found fertile terrain in the accession of King Salman. The new branch of the royal family in charge opted for a foreign policy based on interventionism. It possibly happened in consequence of the previous immobilism showed by King Abdullah, and well-described in the words of the sociologist Khalid al-Dakhil who affirmed that during the reign of Abdullah, Saudis had watched events unfolding in front of their eyes. (Al-Omran, Fitch, 2015)

In conclusion, status-driven considerations were the reasons for the involvement of Riyadh in the Yemeni war. The following section will now provide further details on operations on the ground and will fully assess the Saudi performance up to the present moment.

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<sup>68</sup> For more details of this status-identity as a regional power, see Mustafa Al-Labbad, “The Saudi Narrative at the End of 2014 [in Arabic],” *As-Safir Newspaper* (December 22, 2014), retrieved November 20, 2016, from <http://assafir.com/article/391546>.



### 3.1.1.2 Assessing the Saudi intervention

If it comes to evaluating the performance of Riyadh in Yemen, it stands far from the initially declared objectives of the intervention. Operation Decisive Storm had to push the Houthis rebels outside the capital and restore the government of the *interim* president Hadi, as also put by the Saudi Ambassador to Yemen Adel al-Jubeir in far 2015<sup>69</sup>. Moreover, Saudis sources had told the Obama administration that the lasting of the operation would have amounted to about six weeks<sup>70</sup>. However, things turned diverse, and any achievements did occur. In the first place, the Hadi government is possibly weaker than in 2015 and pours into disarray. Then the Houthis are far mightiest than they were at the beginning of the war, *de facto* being now the most powerful actor in the Yemeni panorama.

Furthermore, other than geopolitics also stands the Yemeni humanitarian crisis, with one of the highest malnutrition rates in the world along with the spreading of the COVID-19 pandemic, which further gave a deadlier thrust<sup>71</sup>.

Additionally, the extent of fragmentation the country currently pours renders utopistic any idea of reconstituting a single state. Not even the pre-1990 situation of the two States is thinkable; the picture now distinguishes by tiny statelets (Johnsen, 2021) held by different armed groups with diverse trajectories.

Thus, from six years since the entrance into the conflict, the only growing statistics concern the death toll. The Saudis have conducted air campaigns causing many victims and casualties. However, it

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<sup>69</sup><https://english.alarabiya.net/News/middle-east/2015/03/26/Ambassador-al-Jubeir-Having-Yemen-fail-cannot-be-an-option->.

<sup>70</sup> On this topic, it is useful to listen to the Brookings-sponsored event “US policy and the war in Yemen”, available at: <https://www.brookings.edu/events/u-s-policy-and-the-war-in-yemen/>.

<sup>71</sup> To consult statistics and data, consult the World Food Program report at the following link: <https://www.wfp.org/yemen-crisis>.

contributed neither to any advancement nor to victories. On the contrary, at the time of this writing, the Saudi adventure is failing. And the attempts of the Kingdom to foster peace are explanatory of the *déba*cle.

As for every weaponry-advanced country, Saudi Arabia entered the war with the certainty of winning it rapidly. Indeed, in Riyadh's view, Yemen was an ill-equipped country, unable to counterattack in any ways, and dependent on the Kingdom in many respects. Nevertheless, the internal cleavages within the coalition<sup>72</sup>, alongside the backing of Iran to Ansar Allah and the armed groups seeking influence, inflicted a heavy setback for Saudi Arabia.

### **3.2 Iranian fingerprints in Yemen: rhetoric vs real involvement**

Before the uprisings of 2011, Iran had a marginal role in Yemen; it had a solid diplomatic presence in Sanaa, but The Islamic Republic did not vehemently engage in the domestic affairs of the Gulf country.

Arab uprisings modified things. Great political turmoil stemmed from those events, opening the path to many players. Since then, Iran started to approach the Houthis, despite it is not clear the extent to which it happened in the first moment. What is certain is that allegations of Ansar Allah's backing by Tehran attained by the hand of Saleh also years before the clashes of 2011, but this accuses never found any trustable feedback of any sorts. On the contrary, analysts repeatedly dismissed it. It was a fabrication of Saleh to discredit the Houthis and maintaining his power. Ironically, after some time, the former Yemeni President turned to be sympathetic with Iran and the Houthis because of regaining power-driven calculations. Probably, this shift was also encouraged by the self-Iran.

Beyond suppositions, evidence of the involvement of Iran in the Yemeni context grew in 2012. Specifically, a coupled operation by the U.S Navy and the Yemeni navy sequestered the Jihad I. It

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<sup>72</sup> The discrepancy with the UAE primarily determined the coalition's weakness. Moreover, throughout the conflict, Qatar, initially part of the Saudi-led group, was removed from it in 2017 because of different political and diplomatic views with other members like Saudi Arabia, the UAE, Bahrain, and Egypt.

was an Iranian cargo-carrying onboard explosive, ammunitions, and surface-air missiles. (Stewart, 2013) Moreover, the Iranian Revolutionary Guard was eavesdropped on to train and assist the rebels in the governorate of Sadaa.

Following this first phase of hidden aids, an institutionalization of cooperation occurred after the takeover of Sanaa. After that, the Houthis went to Tehran to regularize air service coupled with further operative closeness. Thus, both personnel and supplies by Iran flew to Yemen. However, during the assault to the capital, reports concerning the Iranian advice not to do it circulated<sup>73</sup>. (Watkin, Grim, Ahmed, 2015) No further details regarding the reasons behind the position of Tehran propagated. Thus, the opposition may be a timing issue rather than a matter of principle. (Kendall, 2017)

However, the episode was a detector that an absolute coincidence did not adhere to the state of affairs. Also, the Houthis themselves declared not to be an Iranian proxy, claiming a mere overlapping of interests, first of whom the hatred for America<sup>74</sup>. Besides, the Ansar Allah's activist Hussein al-Bukhaiti denied any plan to instaurate Shia domination in Yemen. He dismissed any Iranian plot to make Yemen resembling the Islamic Republic. The argument withholding this possibility concerned numerical considerations, as in the words of Bukhaiti, the Iranian system was not applicable to Yemen because of the greater Sunnis presence in the country<sup>75</sup>. In short, Tehran and Ansar Allah opted for a marriage of convenience. And not an inextricable bond, as argued by many. And it should not be surprising with Houthis since they stipulated an alliance with a former archenemy like Saleh.

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<sup>73</sup> Also consult: April Longley Alley and Joost Hiltermann, "The Houthis Are Not Hezbollah," *Foreign Policy*, February 27, 2017, <http://foreignpolicy.com/2017/02/27/the-houthis-are-not-hezbollah/>.

<sup>74</sup> Yara Bayoumy and Mohammed Ghobari, "Iranian Support Seen as Crucial for Yemen's Houthis," Reuters, December 15, 2015: <http://www.reuters.com/article/us-yemen-houthis-iran-insight-idUSKB-N0JT17A20141215>.

<sup>75</sup> "Al-Bukhaiti to the Yemen Times: The Houthis' Takeover Can Not Be Called an invasion," The Yemen Times, October 21, 2014, <http://www.yementimes.com/en/1826/intreview/4467/Al-Bukhaiti-to-the-Yemen-Times-%E2%80%9CThe-Houthis%E2%80%99-invasion%E2%80%9D.htm>

Other than previous argumentations, however, some aid effectively occurred. It is no secret that Iran considered the Houthis as legitimated to govern in Yemen. Also, the Islamic Republic strongly promoted its Twelve Zaydism brand, further sharpening the tense climate with Saudi Arabia. It is no coincidence that since the Iranians permanently operated in Yemen, the Houthis begun launching missiles against Riyadh. Nevertheless, it must distinguish between rhetoric and actions.

Rhetoric serves geopolitical interests. Thus, it is overemphasized to ingenerate fear in enemies and forging confidence in partners.

In the case of Tehran, several statements were released for this purpose. For instance, Ali Reza Zakani, Ali Said, Ali Akbar Velayati<sup>76</sup> talked on this. They respectively spoke of an Iranian conquest of the Bab al-Mandab strait, Tehran mounting influence from Lebanon to Yemen, and of the exportation of the Revolutionary values to Sanaa. Also, a parallel between Hezbollah and Ansar Allah was advanced<sup>77</sup>.

Acting in this manner is clearly in the interest of Tehran following regional power politics considerations. The Iranian goals in Yemen primarily regard achieving regional prominence by weakening Saudi Arabia both financially and psychologically and gaining influence over the shipping routes of the Red Sea to improve the Iranian standing in the eyes of the international audience.

The following section will deepen the roots of a primary strategic Iranian interest in Yemen: the weakening of Saudi Arabia.

### **3.2.1 The Iranian antagonism with Saudi Arabia**

At the moment of this writing, the Iranian interest in Yemen slightly modified as time passed, and things changed. However, the purpose of this paragraph concerns shedding some light on the motives that led Tehran to engage in Yemen. And specifically, what outcomes Iran wanted to pursue in terms of confrontation with Riyadh.

Firstly, it must highlight that the rivalry between the countries did not start with the Yemeni war. It dates to older times and stands on religious grounds; Saudi Arabia is the birthplace of Islam, and it is widely considered to be the leader of the Muslim world.

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<sup>76</sup> They were respectively, at the moment of their statements, an Iranian parliamentary, the supreme leader of the IRGC, and the foreign affairs advisor to Khamenei.

<sup>77</sup> To deepen this topic, and understanding the existent discrepancies between the two actors at issue, consult the following link: <https://foreignpolicy.com/2017/02/27/the-houthis-are-not-hezbollah/>

This affirmation encountered an earnest challenge in 1979, when Iran experimented with the Islamic Revolution, thus creating a new type of state, namely a revolutionary theocracy which pointed to be emulated outside the national borders, de facto challenging the Saudi dominance over all Muslims. (Marcus, 2019)

Furthermore, this rivalry escalated following a series of events like the overthrow of Saddam Hussein, which turned Iraq into a Shia-led country. Then, the mounting instability distinguishing the Middle Eastern environments from 2011-onwards put the two players in favorable conditions to exploit the upheavals to expand their influence over the region, thus sharpening reciprocal diffidence. Given the growing inflammatory feud between the two and the ascending number of theatres of confrontation, the two States have been coined “a regional equivalent of the Cold War.” (Marcus, 2019)

Returning to Yemen, and to the Iranian drivers for action against Riyadh, Tehran saw its engagement in an unwinnable war as rewarding for the Iranian regional expansion. At the same time, The Islamic Republic considered it a deteriorating situation for Saudi Arabia. In the first place, the draining of the finances of the Kingdom was considerable and fruitful to Iran. Secondly, Syria was at stake at the moment of intervention. Thus, greater involvement in Yemen for security reasons should have precluded a massive Saudi engagement in Damascus. (Perteghella, 2018) It is paramount as it must be remembered that Tehran’s financial capacity was never that high. Therefore, hitting enemies by rhetoric was primary and still is. In addition, fiery rhetoric also was a tool to undermine Riyadh’s credibility. Indeed, the Islamic Republic vehemently condemned the Saudi airstrikes along with the Saudi naval blockade on Yemen. And this discredit operation also eased the urgency the Yemeni conflict continuously acquired. In further detail, Iran exploited the Saudi blockade extensively: it gave Tehran the chance to cast as the sole humanitarian actor intervening in Yemen while indicting Saudi Arabia to be responsible for war crimes and accountable for the Yemeni citizens’ starvation. Additionally, Yemen acted as a pawn to compromise with Saudis as Iran saw it as the “easiest compromise” in the event of decreasing tensions with Saudis<sup>78</sup>.

However, it is worthy to note that the above-mentioned rampant rhetoric just regarded the period precedent to March 2015, namely before the launch of the Saudi military intervention. After the military entrance, Tehran cushioned its aggressive tones and replaced them with self-referential statements. They had the purpose of highlight the Iranian advocator’s role of oppressed populations.

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<sup>78</sup> The alternative was Syria, unanimously considered by the Iranian decision-makers as less prone to sacrifice, specifically for geographical proximity reasons.

Unpredictability and incalculability of the Islamic Republic make it hard to firmly affirm whether this shift ensued from a *bona fide* concern for growing Houthi strain or it formed part of previous-thought strategic calculations aiming at fully embroiling Riyadh in the Yemeni conflict.

Nevertheless, it would not be exceptionally to think of the Iranian stance as merely intended to make its national interest rather than the Houthis' one. In this orientation, it is enlightening to report on the comment issues by a member of the Houthi Revolutionary Committee in March 2016. He asked for Iran to stop its "exploitation of the Yemen file"<sup>79</sup>. Additionally, the faint Iranian support for the Houthis<sup>80</sup> also emerged from the conclusion popped up from a Track2 dialogue between Saudi Arabia and Iran. Final statements made clear that Yemen was more important for Riyadh than for Tehran. Also, it came out that both the symbolic and financial support for the Houthis was not as resolute as that accorded to Hezbollah or the popular mobilization units in Iraq. (Kendall, 2017)<sup>81</sup>

In conclusion, it may seem that the Iranian involvement in Yemen has been overstated. (Hokayem, Roberts, 2016) Several analysts tried to write about the hybrid war<sup>82</sup> conducted by Iran by listing all the possible ways implied. However, no production of any incontrovertible evidence occurred. What is sure is that the bellicosity of the Iranian rhetoric decreased following the military launch by Saudi Arabia; imperialist tones left the place to the stress of the peaceful ambitions for Sanaa, as proved by the statements of the then Foreign Minister Javad Zarif and the then Ministry of Defense Dehqan. The former pointed that the Iranian purpose in Yemen regarded the achievement of a ceasefire, the smoothing of humanitarian assistance, and an overture to dialogue to forge a broad-based government. (Roman, 2015) The latter defied the American claims concerning the supply of missiles

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<sup>79</sup> Yusuf al-Fishi posting on Facebook, reported in "Houthi Official Tells Iran to Stay Out of Yemen Crisis – Posting," Reuters, March 9, 2016, <http://news.trust.org/item/20160309152401-f1fp2>.

<sup>80</sup> The adjective "faint" is not used here in absolute terms. It is implied with respect to the general statements pertaining by scholars, and medias about the Iranian involvement in the Yemeni conflict.

<sup>81</sup> To deepen it, consult: Safa Al Ahmad, "Rise of the Houthis," BBC Documentary, March 21, 2015, <http://www.bbc.co.uk/news/world-middleeast-31994769>

<sup>82</sup> A useful potential list has been compiled by Maher Farrukh, Tyler Nocita, and Emily Estelle, "Warning Update: Iran's Hybrid Warfare in Yemen," Critical Threats Project, March 26, 2017, [https://www.criticalthreats.org/print/ana\\_58d7dd6967adb](https://www.criticalthreats.org/print/ana_58d7dd6967adb).

to the rebels, affirming how Iran had never been prone to cowboy methods of war, adding then that the time for hurling accusations needed to end as well as the war<sup>83</sup>.

The *rationale* behind this tactical shift played on the fact that Iran was conscient that the Yemeni conflict was, and still is, a multilayered one where achieving clean victory is unattainable. Therefore, it made sense to avoid overtly get involved. And it also perfectly reflects the broader regional strategy of Tehran. (Posch, 2017)

The following section will treat the Iranian diplomatic strategy in Yemen. In detail, it will aim to analyze tactical moves. It will occur by framing the Iranian behavior in the international context to give the reader an exhaustive framework of the situation. The diplomacy of Tehran, and the Saudi moves, all pertain to the sphere of geopolitics; all the relationships intervening between international players pertain to geopolitical considerations, that in turn, answer to the will of the omnipotence of human beings<sup>84</sup>. It is particularly relevant when it comes to Empires<sup>85</sup>, and in this coverage, to Iran. The following section will furnish details on this proposal.

### 3.2.2 The Iranian diplomatic stakeholder

As abovementioned, after the military intervention of Riyadh, the Iranian posture turned pliable. However, it did not immediately translate into Tehran's open-declared efforts to fostering peace. Nevertheless, it happened later. Specifically, the Iranian change in behavior occurred when the dialogue for peace between Saudi Arabia and the Houthis intensified with the Riyadh Agreement<sup>86</sup>.

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<sup>83</sup> “Wazir al-difa’ al-irani: ‘ala wazir al-difa’ al-amriki an ya’lima anna ‘ahd al-cowboy qad walla,” al-Masirah online, April 19, 2017, [http://www.almasirah.net/details.php?es\\_id=6755&cat\\_id=4](http://www.almasirah.net/details.php?es_id=6755&cat_id=4).

<sup>84</sup> To deepen the concept of geopolitics, consult the following link: <https://www.limesonline.com/rubrica/cose-la-geopolitica-e-perche-va-di-moda>

<sup>85</sup> This concept is well explained by the following article: <https://www.limesonline.com/cartaceo/gli-imperi-non-vivono-due-volte?prv=true>

<sup>86</sup> It is a peace deal signed between the Yemeni government and the Southern Transitional Council. However, it was not efficient to solve the disputes in Yemen. For an overview of the agreement, consult the following link: <https://www.aljazeera.com/news/2020/7/29/yemens-riyadh-agreement-an-overview>

The reason for this attitude shift was the preoccupation for a peace process led by Riyadh, up to the point that contemporarily to the smoothing dialogue of the Kingdom and the rebels, Tehran officially accorded the Houthis a diplomatic recognition. It practically consisted of the nominee of a Houthi official, namely Ibrahim Mohamed al-Dailami, as the Yemeni ambassador to Tehran<sup>87</sup>. This move concealed a symbolic meaning.

Following this move, Hadi's officially recognized government and Saudi Arabia accused the Islamic Republic of a breach of the international law as Resolution 2216 issued by the Security Council of the United Nations stated the illegitimacy of the coup d'état led by the Houthis in 2014. And the international community took their part. Consequently, Iran was isolated by the international community, with allegations of putting obstacles to conflict resolution.

The accuses to Iran were adherent to reality, as Tehran wanted to avoid a Saudi-driven war ending to stop the expansionism of Riyadh in the Yemeni frontier. Also, Tehran wanted to oust Hadi, while Saudi Arabia made efforts to shore up its legitimacy. As a result, Iran strengthened its bond with the Houthis.

Furthermore, the diplomatic *via* undertaken by the Islamic Republic also stems from its financial impossibility to invest in the reconstruction of Yemen to protect its interests. Therefore, diplomacy serves to overcome shortcomings and to try looking like a constructive player. It somehow happened; while encountering firm condemnation by the United States, European countries and Russia showed overture to Tehran. And it will be the theme of the following sections.

In conclusion, Iran tries to stand as a diplomatic stakeholder to countervail against Saudi Arabia in the first place and the government of Hadi then. The way to do this is through a multilateral formal including western powers such as some European countries, and prominently Russia. It will be the topic of discussion in the section regarding the Federation.

Additionally, the diplomatic efforts of Tehran also moved towards the United Nations. In detail, by asking the international organization to recognize the Houthis' government<sup>88</sup> and calling for a stop in

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<sup>87</sup> On this, consult the declarations issued by President Rouhani , and reported by Mehr News Agency at the following link: <https://en.mehrnews.com/news/152442/Iran-to-back-Yemeni-people-both-in-talks-and-in-confronting-aggression>

<sup>88</sup> <https://www.middleeastmonitor.com/20210210-iran-asks-un-to-recognise-houthi-govt-to-end-yemen-crisis/>



arms sales to Saudi Arabia<sup>89</sup>. All this commitment has the grand objective to decrease the tensions with Riyadh<sup>90</sup>, even though the Shia country knows the difficulties standing to pursue it. More pragmatically, engagement with the United Nations aims to assure Iran a seat at the bargaining table on the future of Yemen.

Finally, it is worth highlighting that the Islamic Republic did not substantially modify its attitude towards the United States following the election of Biden. Although the new President removed the Houthis from the list of terroristic recognized groups previously made by Trump, the dialogue did not materialize. Reversely, Tehran increased the backing of the Houthis by sustaining the offensive of Ansar Allah in Marib. And the delivery of arms to the rebels never ceased. However, neither number nor certainties over any other issues are measurable, as it always happens in proxy wars. (Michelin, 2020)

Thus, Tehran points to bargaining while backing Ansar Allah. And the efficiency of this strategy is high, as also the plausible deniability.

### **3.3 United Arab Emirates: from surge to recalibration**

The United Arab Emirates has been a leading actor in the Yemeni conflict since its clash. Abu Dhabi played a consistent role within the Saudi-led coalition, de facto being the right arm of Riyadh. Officially speaking, the UAE has at the moment, concluded its military withdrawal that occurred on February 9, 2020. Nevertheless, the impact of the country follows to be considerable, and its presence has not disappeared in full of the Yemeni environment.

Proceeding with an order, the UAE deeply engaged in the Yemeni war for five years, directly involving two enemies: the Houthis and the terrorist organizations present in the Gulf country, namely AQAP and ISIS. Concerning the first front, UAE was active and determinant on several frontlines.

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<sup>89</sup> Official Iranian agency Tasnim declared it. To read it, consult the article at the following link: <https://www.tasnimnews.com/en/news/2021/03/02/2462665/iran-urges-halt-to-sale-of-arms-used-in-yemen-war>

<sup>90</sup> <https://www.tehrantimes.com/news/458023/A-thaw-in-relations-between-Iran-and-Saudi-Arabia-dependent-on>

And through its operational command was decisive in the liberation of Aden in 2015<sup>91</sup> and Mocha in 2017<sup>92</sup>. Respectively, these actions were: Operation Golden Arrow and Operation Golden Spear. Their outcomes were particularly relevant regarding reducing the territorial control of the Houthis alongside decreasing influence in the Gulf of Aden and the Red Sea. Furthermore, maritime security was strengthened. (Jalal, 2020)

About extremist groups, the UAE contribution substantiated into training to the security Belt Forces (SBF) to counter terrorism in the governorate of Abyan. Also, the UAE directly intervened in counterterrorism actions as in the case of Mukallla's expulsion of AQAP in 2016. (Jalal, 2020)

However, the terrorist menace was undefeatable in full. It depended on the extreme security volatile environment, especially in the southern governorates of Yemen. Nevertheless, Abu Dhabi proved an asset in weakening extremists.

Furthermore, must be introduced a third front of a battlefield in which the UAE engaged, namely the Muslim Brotherhood. As analyzed in the previous sections, this organization is highly responsible for the discrepancies between Riyadh and Abu Dhabi. But the point to raise here concerns the understanding of the temporal moment in which the opposition to the Muslim Brotherhood became central in the foreign policy of the Emirate. According to this work, it happened after the appointing of Khaled Mahfoudh Bahah as a Vice President in 2016. His figure was considered as highly pro-Muslim Brothers (Jalal, 2020), and it possibly led the UAE to shift its policy orientation. (DeLozier, 2018) Otherwise, it is hard to think that UAE sacrificed its resources to fight such an enemy that is marginal within the Yemeni context.

To sum up, the first phase of engagement saw the UAE in the first line, while from 2020 onwards, it gradually reduced its presence in Yemen. What is notable to highlighting here concerns the ability shown by the Emirate in so doing. The retirement was very well-prepared, and it did not speed up. The groundwork for disengagement was laid strategically, and in a way to weaken the Yemeni government in the liberated territories. Also, the coalition's attention turned around the Houthis, and Islah, namely the fifth column of the Muslim Brotherhood, rather than concentrate only on Ansar Allah.

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<sup>91</sup> To have more detail on the episode, consult the following link: <https://www.bbc.com/news/world-middle-east-33563190>

<sup>92</sup> <https://www.albayan.ae/one-world/arabs/2017-01-24-1.2836014>

Recalibration is now in being. The UAE left Yemen except for strategic islands in the south. However, Abu Dhabi has control over the majority of the Yemeni non-statal armed groups, which supports by providing logistic assistance, salaries, direct training, and capacity building. (Jalal, 2020)

Also, the UAE established an inextricable bond with the Southern Transitional Council, definable as its southern proxy, and paramount to advance the Emirati's interests in Yemen, especially after the signing of the Riyadh Agreement that allowed the STC to enter the government.

### **3.3.1 Consequences of the Emirati retirement**

The withdrawal of the UAE is having several consequences on the Yemeni conflict. It contributes to isolating Saudi Arabia and to weakening the coalition, not only in terms of arms and troops training but also regarding operational capacity to wage a military campaign.

Moreover, it also determined a further fragility of the Yemeni institutions because of the heritage the UAE left in the country; as stated above, Abu Dhabi trained non-state armed groups and empowered them. Consequently, they are now in good shape and ready to advance their ambitions. Thus, the effective governance exercised by the Hadi and its governmental machine over the Yemeni territory is very faint. (Jalal, 2020) And it translates into a decreasing bargaining position in the eventuality of peace talks taking place.

Additionally, the setback of Abu Dhabi opened the path for mounting intracrine divergencies within the Saudi-led coalition. It split into different wings also fighting among them. Moreover, the objectives and trajectories of the various factions highly differ and move in diametrical opposition. In this proposal, it is emblematic to highlight the behaviors of the STC-affiliated militants and the west coast forces' behaviors. The former focuses on countering Islah. The latter concentrates on fighting the Houthis. The outcome is a zero-sum game as cohesion lacks, and consequently, territorial gains are not obtainable.

Therefore, the UAE will follow being a relevant player in conflict resolution for Yemen because of its influence over the STC and the local groups standing behind it. This bond allows the Emirati to pressure the STC to engage in peace negotiations, alternatively as an independent actor or as a delegation of the government. (Jalal, 2020)

Finally, what emerges from the analysis of the UAE's heritage in Yemen is that the withdrawal does not imply a decreasing influence in Yemen. The patron-client relationship system created by Abu Dhabi with local players suggests that the role of the Emirati and its soft power over the Yemeni conflict will continue to exist. (Jalal, 2020)

Also, it must note that despite the claims for withdrawal, the Emirati presence in Yemen follows in many ways. From strategic islands to air and seaports, the accusation moved to UAE concerns its continuous active role in the civil-turned proxy war. (Khalel, 2021)

According to Justin Russel, head of the American think tank “New York Centre for Foreign Policy Affairs (NYCFPA), Emirati is still supporting Yemeni groups regularly. The only difference from the past regarding the attention of the international community that drawn away. Especially, sources identify the control over the Bab-el-Mandeb Strait as a priority line because of its essentiality to oil and refined petroleum passage. (Khalel, 2021) Explanatory in this direction also moves the affirmation issued by Shireen al-Adeimi, according to which the UAE’s withdrawal only concerned physical presence. (Khalel, 2021) He also underlined how Abu Dhabi accomplished its mission thanks to Saudi Arabia being the front-facing group, thus being under the lights and pulling away attention from the actions of the other member of the coalition. According to him, it was the reason why they had the chance to retire. Additionally, the Saudi involvement in the first line also allowed Emirati to hinder its reputation of war crimes’ perpetrators by launching a strategy for this purpose, namely the UAE Soft Power Strategy<sup>93</sup>.

In conclusion, analysts and data largely agree on the fact that despite the claims of withdrawal, the UAE is still persistently present in Yemen. The retirement was well planned and exploited the vulnerability of Saudi Arabia and its weakness in the eyes of international observers. Meanwhile, Abu Dhabi proceeded to withdraw its troops. However, this spread spoken disengagement only took the form of a physical retirement while proxy war is still ongoing and feasible because of the influence of the Emirati over the local powers.

Additionally, it was also possible by implementing a strategy designed to increase the country’s soft power while temporarily decreasing critical attitudes towards Emirati’s operations. All this in the aim of pursuing its regional interest substantiating into the control of the international naval trade lanes.

### **3.4 The role of the United States**

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<sup>93</sup> To read about it, consult the official website of the United Arab Emirates at the following link: <https://u.ae/en/about-the-uae/strategies-initiatives-and-awards/federal-governments-strategies-and-plans/the-uae-soft-power-strategy>

Washington steadily contributed to heightening both tensions and the death toll in Yemen since the beginning of the war. Under the presidencies of Obama and Trump, the White House heavily engaged in the conflict by providing arms to Saudi Arabia, targeting information, offering logistical support, and providing intelligence-sharing. Moreover, the counterterrorism efforts also resulted in direct interventionism in Yemen.

According to official American documents, the US spent billions of dollars in weapons to back Riyadh in its armed interventions. However, with the election of President Biden, the premise to end the American involvement in Yemen grew as he announced his willingness to engage in diplomatic talks to foster peace in the Gulf country. (Gilani, 2021)

The relevant element to underline concerns the rhetoric used by Biden. In fact, despite its claim to withdraw and take the path of diplomacy, he advanced the same argumentations put forward by Obama when he had to motivate the reasons for intervention. Specifically, both underlined the urgency to provide aids to Saudi Arabia to defend its borders and territories by the Houthis. Thus, it follows that the American posture has always pertained to the logic of a defensive strategy. It happened in the matter of entering the war as exiting the war. It is also defensive in the fight against terrorism as Washington focuses on defending its territories by foreign actions.

In the next sections, the work will analyze the American counterterrorism operations in Yemen and the eventual transport of weaponry to the Saudi-led coalition.

### **3.4.1 Operations of counterterrorism**

The American commitment to degrade the terrorist threat represented by the U.S.-designated Foreign Terrorist Organizations is present and huge.

Since 2002, the number of air, drone, or ground operations against terrorist targets conducted in Yemen is equal to 374.<sup>94</sup> (Bergen, Salyk Virk, Sterman, 2021)

The most recent to date was on May 17, 2020, in Al-Arquoub against the AQAP leader Saeed al-Awlaki. Before this, news outlets had reported about the killing of Qasim al Rimi, a powerful AQAP commander. However, as noted by several scholars, eliminating relevant pawns does not end the terrorist threat. Safe heavens continue to exist and to nurture terrorists' ambitions. In fact, over time, organizations like Al-Qaeda built their physical sanctuaries from which they operate with impunity.

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<sup>94</sup> To consult other statistics on this topic, also visit the following link: <https://www.thebureauinvestigates.com/projects/drone-war/yemen>

Thus, it follows that the U.S strategy against terrorism should include support by local partners guaranteeing both commitment and resources to end the “forever wars”. (Mostajabi, 2020)

Moreover, even if a terrorist group in a given area disappears, the Yemeni quagmire easily replaces its stronghold by installing a new group governing over the “liberated” territory, thus triggering the beginning of a new threat. Finally, the U.S should also insist on stabilizing the targeted areas as the Yemeni uncertainty is high, making the terrain fertile for the emergence of menaces of every type.

Concerning the evolution of the U.S strategy of counterterrorism in Yemen, it is notable that under the mandates of Trump, it witnessed an increased effort in the counterterrorism war. He loosened the restrictions for striking and overcame the Obama drone-wars era by intervening by raids on the ground. Consequently, it resulted in a mounting number of civilian casualties. In detail, Obama had introduced a rule stating the government imperative to annually disclose an estimate stating the number of suspected terrorists and civilian bystanders killed in airstrikes outside war zones. (Savage, Shane, 2016) Trump removed it in 2019 (Savage, 2017) staying vague in overtly exposing its drone policy framework. With the election of President Biden, a revision of the rules is occurring. However, precise parameters are still in the making. In the meantime, the new Administration imposed the need to justify eventual counterterrorism actions occurring in poorly governed places like Yemen.

This requirement was inexistent under Trump. Under his presidency, the circumstances to intervene was a competence of the ground troops. And any duty to ask for permission existed. Thus, the move of Biden serves to remedy the grey zones of a transitory period of revision.

Concerning this revision, governmental sources report an ongoing review analyzing the previous counterterrorism approaches. In further detail, it should be attentive to redefine the limit for preventing civilian casualties in operations. Moreover, another issue for discussion concerns the flexibility accorded to the Trump period. According to several sources, the system overcame written rules with ease. And the respect for the existing standards was far less than it should have in theory. Thus, it is under discussion whether and how to write stricter general rules.

Furthermore, in broader terms, it is under discussion whether to return to a system similar to the centralized one or to maintain proximity to Trump’s decentralization.

In conclusion, revision is a complex process. And it takes time to be prudent, coherent, and adequate to the current exigencies. Balancing the national interests and the public opinion concerns is an everyday issue for the American Administration. However, standing above the parts, this work sustains a position claiming the need for Washington to tighten the limits imposed by Trump. Likewise, it does not imply to come back to the Obama era as the world evolved, and the same did the counterterrorism fight. (Savage, Schmitt, 2021)

### 3.4.2 The US aids to the Saudi-led coalition

Since Saudis entered the war in 2015, the United States provided them aids with weaponry, intelligence, and operational help. Until 2018, Washington refueled Saudi warplanes (Savage, Schmitt, 2021) by dropping bombs, but the practice sealed following appeals from activists and lawmakers that pointed to the brutality operated by Riyadh. Therefore, since November 2018, the American involvement in the Yemeni conflict started to regard only logistical and intelligence support and concerned the selling of weaponry like precision-guided missiles.

However, the American attitude towards its partner changed after the election of Joe Biden, at least officially. The new President insisted on disengagement from the Yemeni conflict to end the war. At this proposal, he promoted the diplomatic via. Concretely, to move towards reconciliation, he removed the Houthis from the list of the terrorist groups recognized by Washington that they had entered before Trump left office.

The reasons behind the cooling of the bilateral relation between Washington and Riyadh lays on several facts: in the first place, the growing humanitarian crisis occurring in Yemen, and denounced by the media, and the humanitarian organizations, pushed the U.S to step back from overtly sustaining the Saudis, primarily accused of being responsible for the mounting death toll. The repressions carried out by the Kingdom domestically also led Washington to distantiate from the Gulf country. Thirdly, Riyadh started to be under scrutiny, consequently to the murder of the journalist Jamal Khashoggi in 2018.

Concretely, this distancing substantiated into the statement of the American Senator Chris Murphy, who spoke about “reset” about the relation of the United States and the Gulf countries, implicitly indicating a new attitude towards Riyadh. And declaration oriented towards a shifting focus towards Yemeni citizens and the forging of peace also took place. However, skeptical doubt the breakup with Saudi Arabia is concrete. Effectively, despite the claim for a defensive posture and the interruption of military support, some aids for the Saudi airplane still exist. Further explaining it, and as stated by the Navy Commander Jessica McNulty, the American Defense Department supports aircraft maintenance through the Foreign Military Sales<sup>95</sup> to Saudi Arabia “for which the Kingdom bears the costs and implementation is conducted by DoD contractors.” (Ward, 2021)

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<sup>95</sup> The text is available at the following link: <https://www.dsca.mil/foreign-military-sales-faq>

Practically, it means that Riyadh uses an American governmental program to maintain its aircraft, and this action does not have any costs for the taxpayers of the United States<sup>96</sup>. Thus, even not directly, a connection still exists. And this sort of operation is still greenlit by Washington. In simpler terms, contractors are the intermediary for the relation between The United States and the Kingdom. The reason why this mechanism is still on its feet is geopolitical. Saudi Arabia is a major regional partner to Washington. Therefore, ending any aids in its regard would cause Riyadh not to think of the United States as reliable anymore. (Riedel, 2018) Consequently, the American stance with Iran would substantially weaken, and the U.S would also lose the opportunity of having troops stationed within the Saudi territory. Therefore, it is evident the choice not to end the support for Riyadh in full is political and geopolitical.

Besides, the line between an offensive and a defensive action also raises some questions. It is undefinable, and it depends on subjective considerations. Thus, it is hard to determine whether the eventuality in which Saudi Arabia strikes some Houthis' launch points in response to missile launches inside its national borders pertains to defensive logic or not. However, what is clear is that such a retaliatory response could not occur without the US-agreed maintenance of Saudi fighters.

In conclusion, despite the initial claims of clarity and transparency advanced by President Biden, the involvement of the United States at the side of Saudi Arabia is still under debate and complexity. As analyzed above, Washington has not cut all the bridges with its Middle Eastern partner because of its huge strategic interests in the region. Therefore, being theoretically defensive, the American engagement in Yemen still supports offensive actions.

### **3.5 The Russian factor**

Different from the United States, the Russian Federation never entered the Yemeni war with assertiveness. Moscow preferred to build its image as a non-aligned actor aiming at keeping all actors content. (Olazabal, Hamad 2019) Therefore, it acts as an impartial mediator respecting the sovereignty of the players while trying to find a middle ground for fostering dialogue.

The Kremlin aspires to appear reliable and tantamount. Following this orientation, Yemen represents an occasion for Russia to resolve a conflict that other players have failed to fix.

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<sup>96</sup> As stated by the official document explaining the Foreign Military Sales, this program allows international partners of the United States to receive defense services, articles, and training at their expense, without any costs for the American taxpayers.



Understanding the Russian posture in Yemen requires to recall the attention over the historical relationship with the Gulf country; in fact, the current Moscovite willingness to have a say in Sanaa is not new. On the contrary, it derives from a desire for “resurgence” in Yemen and the Middle East. In the past, the USSR and the People’s Democratic Yemen Republic signed agreements equipping the Soviet Union to exercise control over the Red Sea (Rajeh, 2009) and impose its presence in the region. Then, they vanished following the events of the 1990s that witnessed a hand-over to the United States, with Russia leaving the bases in the Middle East and *de facto* losing its power position. Thus, what emerges from this historical background is that the reasons for a reiterated Russian commitment in the region not only pertain to the need to contain the Western influence. They also follow the will to retrieve both geopolitical and military power in the Red Sea.

Yemen is notably important for Moscow in reason of the Persian Gulf because it occupies a primary place in the collective Security Plan for the Gulf<sup>97</sup>, a Russian-styled Middle East vision opposed to the project of the “Arab NATO” additionally including Iran<sup>98</sup>. (Bianco, Cafiero, 2018)

Concerning the Yemeni strategy, Moscow plays contemporarily at three levels: local, regional, and international. Concerning the first domain, Russia entertains relationships with all the players, exception made for the jihadists. While recognizing the government of Hadi, the Kremlin does not rely on Saudi Arabia. Simultaneously, it has a liaison with the Houthis; they consider the country adept at defending their interests differently from other actors. Furthermore, the Russian stance towards the Southern groups is in good shape, thus emphasizing the ideological precepts that stand over territorial integrity respect.

Regionally, Moscow moves between its bilateral relationship with Iran while entertaining links with the UAE and Saudi Arabia. Regarding the Islamic Republic, this bond strengthened throughout the 2000s, then consolidating after the Syrian intervention. About Yemen, Moscow does not stand by the Iran side overtly, even because the role of Tehran remains unclear to the present day. However, the clear stance aiming not too partisan with the monarchies of the Gulf makes the Moscow-Tehran axis solidify. (Olazabal, Hamad, 2019)

When it comes to the UAE, cooperation among the Russian Federation and Abu Dhabi primarily touches the Horn of Africa (Korybyo, 20218), then moving also to Libya and Syria. Finally, coming

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<sup>97</sup> [https://russiaun.ru/en/news/press\\_conference080819](https://russiaun.ru/en/news/press_conference080819)

<sup>98</sup> The project proposed by the Trump Administration aimed to counterbalance the Iranian influence in the region.

to terms with the bridges between the Saudi Kingdom and the Kremlin implies Russian neutrality towards Riyadh, attentive not to neither too harsh nor too soft with the Gulf country's stance in Yemen.

The international posture of Moscow is interesting to analyze in the first place within the context of the United Nations, where the Russian Federation plays a significant role given its veto power. This proposal was used several times by the Russian delegation for opposing some resolutions. It was the case of Resolution 2216<sup>99</sup>: Moscow abstained from voting, motivating this decision as not in line with the requisites for being political. In further detail, the initiative urged Ansar Allah to leave all the areas it seized to reinstall the legitimate government of Hadi. Russia called for a ceasefire but opposed this appeal. Similarly, it also vetoed UN resolutions in other regards as the US proposal to create a Quad for Yemen<sup>100</sup>.

This attitude within the maximum expression of the international community reflects the Russian intention not to endorse any official stance outright. The final aim of it is the maintenance of cordial relations with all the stakeholders.

In conclusion, Moscow has made clear its intention to propose as a mediator for the Yemeni conflict, showing its chameleonic attitude able to compromise with actors different in their nature. Fashioned this way, Russia could be relevant in terms of both regional resolutions of the conflict and domestic struggles for power. Therefore, Yemen is an occasion to prove might and artistry in bargaining beyond being a theatre for advancing political and economic interests.

Finally, Moscow has legitimacy on its side, a missing element to other eventual intermediaries. Along with leverage, the country could thus play the card of the "problem-solver" and highly contribute to stabilizing the region.

### **3.6 The Omani diplomacy**

The warring sides in Yemen have not been able to bridge the gap between them up to now. It also emerged by the statements released the last May by the U.N. envoy for Yemen<sup>101</sup> Martin Griffiths,

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<sup>99</sup> <https://www.un.org/securitycouncil/s/res/2216-%282015%29-0>

<sup>100</sup> <https://ye.usembassy.gov/yemen-quad-meeting-in-london-joint-declaration/>

<sup>101</sup> Since 2011, Yemen has received three U.N envoys. They respectively proposed various ideas and suggestions. However, disparities never narrowed because the adversaries stick to their demands.

who expressed his frustration and concern about the Yemeni stalemate. Therefore, the hope for a peaceful settlement passes now via Oman. The Sultanate looks like the right candidate to change the sorts of the Gulf State by forging peace in the war-torn country.

Gulf contemporary politics are hugely fluid, and Oman could exploit it by showing its “omanibalancing”, namely the Omani diplomacy as renamed by the scholar O’Really, who re-adapted the concept of “omni balancing”, the ability to balance domestic and external threats. (O’Really, 1998)

In so doing, Muscat has recently increased its relationship with Riyadh that could ease the peace process for Yemen. The recent meetings among Sultan Haitham and King Salman were symptomatic of it. The leaders agreed to strengthen the cooperation of the two countries by creating the Saudi-Omani Coordination Council. (Arab News, 2021) Also, Yemen played a central role in their talks.

Furthermore, Muscat has a pivotal role in Yemen as it also nurtures good relations with both the Houthis and the almost compromised government of Hadi, and it is beneficial to Saudi Arabia given its fast lane. Additionally, despite the mounting bond with Riyadh and the alliance with the United States, the links of Oman with Tehran are fine, as shown by the recent April meeting between the then Iranian Foreign Minister Zarif and Abdul Salam.

The last June saw a Yemeni delegation going to Muscat for entertaining diplomatic talks for a strategy standing on “open diplomacy,” the Sultanate’s leaders also met the leaders of Ansar Allah in Sanaa for the first time since the breakout of the conflict. The purpose of the visit regarded the persuasion of Ansar Allah to accept a cease-fire and engage in negotiations for peace. For this purpose, the demands of the Houthis are the following: they ask for the reopening of the airport of Sanaa, and the possibility for the ships to dock in the port of Hodeida without any forms of Saudi obstruction. Despite the bigotry of the rebels, and the defiant attitude they assumed since the outbreak of the conflict, hopes over the Omani influence over the group are high, and the belief of yielding different results is concrete, as also demonstrated by the declarations issued by Elena DeLozier of the Washington Institute for Near East Policy who talked of the Omani involvement as a “big deal.” ( Baron, DeLozier, 2021) She insisted on the novelty of this direct interventionism shown by Muscat given its long history of an enabler for mediation rather than shuttle diplomacy advocator. According to her, this shift underpins a mounting preoccupation with the direction of the Yemeni war. However, out of optimism, DeLozier also insists on the necessary commitment of the local parties to end the conflict as the internal political will alone is not sufficient. (DeLozier, 2020)

The reasons for the Omani foreign policy of détente in Yemen are both defensive and offensive. Muscat fears tangible threats like the spillover effect of the war within its boundaries. And it also explains the previous opposition to the Saudi military intervention at the beginning of the war. In-depth, Oman fears the power vacuums eventually deriving from the continued instability in the country. (Cafiero, 2021)

Additionally, competing ideologies' spread also worries the Sultanate coupled with the risk of mounting domestic tensions. However, the diplomatic efforts do not only depend on concern-based motivations. They also rely on geopolitical considerations; unlike the Omani internationally accorded uniqueness, the Sultanate is far from behaving like a "regional exception". (Tveit, 2020) Conversely, Muscat pursues and advances its interests in the same manner as the other players. Thus, the foreign policy's drivers encompass an attempt of asserting independence from neighboring countries, most importantly the UAE and Saudi Arabia. Also, the thrust concerns the consideration of Yemen as an area where projecting influence.

Moreover, some hypotheses are advancing a deterrence strategy played by Oman. It should have the aim to disquiet the UAE and Saudi Arabian bellicose conduct. Thus, following this line of reasoning, the diplomatic engagement is not frameable as a historical continuity choice and as dependent on security concerns. Instead, it serves to deter the abovementioned countries.

In conclusion, the Sultanate's interest in diplomatically committing in Yemen pertains to several motives, the extent about each of them remaining unclear and currently under discussion. Regardless of this, the positive impact of Muscat's efforts is visible to every external eye, and its exploitation should be highest.

However, it is not sufficient to solve the Yemeni conflict. For doing this, domestic players' contribution is also needed. Otherwise, compromise is not attainable.

## **Chapter 4: Understanding perspectives for Yemen:**

### **4.1 Why Yemen matters: understanding geopolitical motives**

The previous chapters outlined the major players shaping the Yemeni conflict both domestically and globally speaking. However, the analysis carried out a line of reasoning standing on singular perspectives of several actors. Differently, this final section serves to understand the importance of Yemen in the global context. More specifically, it aims to clarify the strategic relevance of the Gulf country with reference to global issues like migration flows, regional stability, and the maritime routes. At this proposal, the Gulf country is strategic as it stretches along the strait of al-Bab-Mandab, a key shipping lane for crude oil lying at the southern end of the Red Sea. It became strategically relevant in 2018 when Saudi Arabia halted oil shipments transiently, motivating the choice like consequent to the Houthis' attack on two tankers.

Since then, the waterway importance grew substantially, thus becoming a global economy-relevant issue.

Geopolitics of this sea strait is vital for many reasons: Bab-al-Mandeb is a channel between the trade routes of the Mediterranean and Asia. Also, the oil transiting from the Middle East and directed in North America and Europe crosses it if it navigates the Suez Canal. Therefore, its importance is notable for oil-exporters like Saudi Arabia, and for the United Arab Emirates is also tantamount. (Calabrese, 2020)

An eventual closure of the Bab-al-Mandeb seems now unthinkable. The Saudi one in 2018 was temporary, and before that, it had just happened one decade before, but not definitively. However,

whether it happened for a short interval of time, the consequences would be severe. As disclosed by Bloomberg tanker tracking, avoiding the passage in Bab-el-Mandeb by making the ships passing in the Persian Gulf, and thus around the tip of Africa, would steadily increase the time of the voyage. For instance, the itinerary from Saudi Arabia to the Port of Rotterdam would take 39 days in the case of a passage around Africa compared to the 22 days via Suez and Bal-el-Mandeb. (Basagni, 2019) Furthermore, the Strait is between the Arabian Peninsula and the Horn of Africa. It follows that the commercial and geopolitical interests of the states of the Middle East are advancing toward the latter area. It happens within the broader context of the rivalry between China and the United States. Thus, a confrontation occurs both regionally and between great powers, the two layers of the dispute reciprocally alimenting tensions.

Considering the intra-Gulf rivalries in the Horn of Africa, Yemen enters the scene as one of the leading motives for confrontation. Despite the economic motive for the Gulf States to capitalize on the African countries following the expected boom in the sectors of real estate and infrastructures, also geopolitical considerations shape the framework significantly in the mounting interest in the Horn.

The challenges occurring in the Middle East and on the unstable African region over the last decade led the countries of the Gulf to understand the Horn as “an integral part of their core security perimeter” (Verhoeven, 2018) especially in consequence of the Yemeni conflict. The risk of a spillover drove the Gulf states to modify their foreign policy strategies about the Horn of Africa. It resulted in projecting more assertive conduct and a proactive stance that aims at shaping rather than reacting to the events (England, Wilson, 2019).

About the dueling countries in the Horn, two layers of confrontation occur. First, the proxy between Saudi Arabia and Iran, and then the combination of Qatar and Turkey withstanding the “quad” formed by Saudi Arabia, United Arab Emirates, Egypt, and Bahrain. The Yemeni conflict primarily affected the proxy between Riyadh and Tehran, transforming it into a zero-sum game also in the Horn of Africa. Practically speaking, an example of this concerns Somalia, where the Kingdom pledged aid only after the former cut its bonds with Iran (Maclean, McDowall, 2019). Therefore, intra-Gulf rivalries led to the installation of naval bases and military bases in the Horn of Africa and the Red Sea.

Furthermore, Bab-el-Mandeb has geostrategic relevance also for the Houthis, which repeatedly made the naval voyages insecure and precarious. The rebels compromised the security of this waterway by implanting anti-ship missiles rather than explosive boats. The most recent event happened when Ansar Allah attacked a Singapore oil tanker, BW Rhine, unloading the cargo on the Jeddah Port in

Saudi Arabia. It is no coincidence that actions like it were compared with the “Tankers Wars<sup>102</sup>” that occurred between Iran and Iraq during the conflict between the two.

Concerning Saudi Arabia, its interest in the sea strait other than for its proxy with the Islamic Republic substantiating in a military presence in Socotra also concerns an infrastructural development to produce and distribute the products of petroleum, being Riyadh giant in oil manufacturing. Concretely, the Saudi plan firstly implied the build-up of a port. Additionally, it included an oil pipeline extending up to the province of Al-Mahra. The latter situating at the border with Oman, on the northern side of the country. Equally, Riyadh has already activated its resources to exercise maritime and air control over Mahra.

Almost more hard-hitting is the presence of Abu Dhabi in and around Yemen. As previously outlined, the UAE opted for increasing its influence on the Yemeni coasts in the south to gain terrain over the shipping routes. Peculiarly, Emirati assured its military presence in the Strait and the Yemeni Socotra archipelago to expand its commercial activities. Equally, this move also intended to deepen the connection with its naval bases in the Horn, namely Barbera, Somaliland, and Eritrea.

Furthermore, the United States has much to gain from the stabilization of the waterways around Yemen. Its interest does not only imply the end of the Yemeni conflict. It also involves the counteraction of the growing Russian and Chinese presence in the Red Sea. The Biden Administration diplomatically engaged in ending the Yemeni war in view of a political settlement. Thus, Bab-el-Mandeb could be a crucial point to treat to forge peace in Sanaa, that is in the interest of the White House.

Concerning the Red Sea script, also China has significance. Beijing installed a military base - the first of its history to be overseas- in Djibouti. (Vertin, 2020) It works as a bridge between the Red Sea and the Gulf of Aden, thus creating a bottleneck changing the balance of power among great powers in that area. The Chinese attitude moves around different lines compared to the Washington behavior in the Red Sea. Indeed, Beijing is investing in infrastructures, financing construction contracts, and providing loans in the area circumnavigating the Horn of Africa largely exceeding the Washington investment capital. It is an index of the large difference intercurrent between the stances of the powers in the territory in question: the United States intend the area as a security prism while China stated aim is to use a “developmental approach” in the Horn of Africa. Therefore, Washington fears eventual

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<sup>102</sup> This appellative was accorded to the anti-shipping campaigns carried out during the Iran-Iraq war going from 1980 to 1988. To deepen the topic, consult:” Strait of Hormuz, assessing the threat to oil flows through the Strait”, available at the following link: <https://www.strausscenter.org/strait-of-hormuz-tanker-war/>

concessions to Beijing; the Chinese largesse could lead Djibouti to heavily depend on the Asian country's resources, thus threatening the U.S interests in the region. (Vertin, 2020)

In conclusion, Yemen is primarily relevant for its ports. The country counts 1.200-mile coast, and the proximity of the Strait of Bab-el-Mandeb is also significant. Between the Chinese silk road, the Russian presence, and the American furthering interest in the Red Sea, it imposes itself as a new frontier for the game of the great powers. At the same time, regional implications are also huge. The Gulf-rich countries are recently heightening their naval and military presence, economically investing in the Horn of Africa. In addition, they identify the security of the area in question as a priority line in their respective foreign policies. Thus, the prominence of Sanaa is not valuable, as well as is not the volatile Yemeni environment. Maritime routes, economic thrusts, and securitarian dynamics are intervening both in and around the borders of Yemen. Consequently, a political settlement is not avoidable anymore.

## 4.2 Future perspectives

Given an overview of the conflict and analyzed the reasons to forge peace, this section aims to understand why previous Western-sponsored initiatives failed to attain this objective and explain how to overcome the limitations encountered.

This paper takes the view that the lack of adaption to the volatile Yemeni environment is the primary reason for failure and individuates into a recalibration of the whole peace process an imperative to achieve satisfying results.

Firstly, it is essential to come to terms with the peace initiatives promoted by the West, and primarily the United States under the umbrella of the United Nations, to highlight the missing elements and the detected mistakes. In the first place, the origins of the current dramatic situation date to the political failure represented by the misconceived and conceptual-ill plan designed to lead the power transition of former President Saleh. It took place following the rubric of the Gulf Cooperation Initiative in 2011, which granted immunity to Saleh, and ended to keep the old élites in charge, thus contrasting with the values of the revolution. Therefore, it resulted in a deadlock for Yemenis, who, after months of protests, found themselves shackled in a transitional agreement conceived by a coterie of aristocrats to protect the interests of a plutocratic élite<sup>103</sup>. (Salmutter, 2017)

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<sup>103</sup> Also see Al-Muslimi, F., (2015). Why Yemen's political transition failed. Carnegie Middle East Center: Lebanon.



The transition did not modify the balance of power of Yemeni politics. Instead, it moved in the opposite direction concerning the out loud declared preconditions, *de facto* being a security-driven project (Carapico, 2014) focusing on high politics and conceived to avoid an escalation in rivalries between the factions of the old regime and the determination of a state of chaos<sup>104</sup>. Following this orientation, the GCC did not change the rules of the game. It was limited to reshuffle the structure of the competition without introducing or removing players. Therefore, the power framework remained intact while pressing problems like the marginalized groups as Ansar Allah and the separatists of the South worsened as the economic and securitarian situation did. In addition, Saleh received immunity, and he never left the stage, continuing to influence Yemeni politics. Therefore, it was the first sign of failure by the international community. Being preoccupied with gearing the intracrine power struggle, attention to the grievances of the citizens proved absent. Thus, it was a first step towards the failure of forging stability in Yemen. It set the scene for the further detrimental developments and growing destabilization that converged in the breakout of the conflict.

Successively, during the conflict, the international community again intervened in Yemen in the vest of conflict manager by employing Resolution 2216 as a legal foundation to intervene. However, it just partially proved adequate to the Yemeni situation as compliance with it was not attained in the Stockholm Agreement, namely the most impacting and relevant deal concluded over the years of war and after a long time of stalemate.

Thoroughly, the agreement saw the Houthis and the government compromising on three major issues, namely the exchange of prisoners, Taiz, and Hodeida. However, implementation was frail and proved difficult, far more than the signing of the deal itself.

In-depth, Resolution 2216 stated that the rebels should have withdrawn by the ports, while the United Nations did not push for it, instead insisting on normalizing the *status quo* by facilitating the re-deployment of the Houthi forces and the government in two phases within 21 days. Thus, the legal basis left the scene to the willingness of the U.N negotiators. As a result, it disgorged into the non-compliance with the 21 days-term. Consequently, the United Nations further acted to de-escalate tensions and reduce security incidents. As evidenced, they substantially decreased it. However, Houthis' action did not stop in full as they accomplished an attack on a governmental delegation and claimed responsibility for a missile attack in Mocha. Therefore, the U.N. statements differ from these figures, showing that success was inferior to what was officially stated.

Furthermore, the incoherence of official statements of U.N officials further weakened the credibility of the U.N as an effective third party able to smooth the peace process and promote pragmatic

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<sup>104</sup> To deepen it, consult Salisbury, P. (2016). Yemen: Stemming the rise of a chaos state. Chatham House Report.

solutions. Specifically, contradictions occurred when the Houthis transferred control of the ports to the loyalists, with a first statement moving critics to it, defining this move as a “withdrawal comedy<sup>105</sup>” for being then greeted. (Jalal, 2019) Therefore, skepticism around the U. N’s capacity as an interlocutor grew among the Yemeni public.

Moreover, questions arose also around Taiz, on which the U.N mission was judged as too vague to function. Precisely, it consisted of the redaction of an understanding<sup>106</sup> given the following consultations. The doubt about it concerned the extent to which this action could have improved the harsh living conditions of the inhabitants of the places in question and helping the humanitarian catastrophe.

In conclusion, the Stockholm Agreement accomplished the stated goals just partially. It attained poor signs of progress and *vice versa* strengthened the *status quo* in Yemen. In addition, it paved the way for furthering fragmentation instead of stabilizing the country; the Houthis exploited the spaces left open by the scarce provisions to advance, relevant players as the Southern groups were left out of the deal, and élites of power were not defied. Therefore, the interests of Yemenis were not secured.

In 2019, the Riyadh Agreement appeared to correct the inclination shown by the previous agreements and its legal basis represented by Resolution 2216. In further detail, its design occurred to include the Southern Transitional Council in the cluster of the involved actors. In theory, this deal should have rectified the Stockholm Agreement. Practically, it did it only partially as disagreements between the parties emerged, especially about three issues: security arrangements, nominees of governmental officials, and the handover of critical military installations. Thus, implementation encountered substantial difficulties, and the violence between the signatories reached high levels. Therefore, not only the rollout sounded hard. It also had the effect of smoothing the Houthis takeover of northern governorates and discouraged them from starting negotiations. (Keating, Petouris, 2021)

However, this initiative had the merit to include the Southerners within the discourse, despite not in its complexity and fringes. Therefore, beyond being a step forward for inclusive peace negotiations, Riyadh lacked into the domain of pluralism of southern voice, and it also proved insufficient to equate the struggle between the Houthis and the government to the mounting instances of the Southerners.

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<sup>105</sup> To deepen it, consult the following link:  
<https://www.theguardian.com/world/2019/may/15/yemen-hope-for-turning-point-after-houthi-hodeidah-port-withdrawal>

<sup>106</sup> The text of the Statement is available at the following link:  
[https://osesgy.unmissions.org/sites/default/files/taiz\\_agreement\\_0.pdf](https://osesgy.unmissions.org/sites/default/files/taiz_agreement_0.pdf)

Indeed, this work takes the position that this is an issue that needs not to be contingent upon to the conflict between Ansar Allah and the ROYG. Conversely, it is as notable as it is. And an effective peace can only occur understanding this proposition. To attain this objective, a well-defined agenda must be set, and regional facilitation is needed. Deepening the concept, this thesis sustains the view according to which the United Nations must work close to regional mediators as Oman as operating by the side of a country equipped with great local dynamics understanding, an outstanding sensitivity of regional geopolitics, and a distinct expertise could highly increase the chances for success. This easiness attainable by employing regional diplomacy is traceable by comparing the above-described agreements of Stockholm and Riyadh. The former, Western-sponsored, proved hard to sign, and highly unable to deliver the initial promises. Instead, the latter turned out to be more effectual. Therefore, the orientation to follow is correct, and it highlights the relevance of having a regional backer. (Jalal, 2020)

Concerning the United States, it has engaged in the peace processes around the world since time immemorial. Moreover, the Biden administration changed the course of the American policy undertaken by President Trump, deciding to opt for a reset in Yemen. Concretely, it resulted in a rhetorical opening to peace, the removal of the Houthis from the list of the terrorist organizations recognized by the United States, and the nominee of a new special envoy for Yemen. However, this shifting is largely theoretical. (Al-Dawsari, 2021)

The Yemeni conflict requires a profound knowledge of the country, its internal struggles, and its needs. Thus, measures must be adaptable to the context. Therefore, despite American diplomacy's momentum, Washington should abandon the idea of designing an American peace. To do this, the White House should understand that it is not its responsibility and avoid exploiting its political capital as it could be not self-defeating. And it was made clear by the previous examples. Instead, the United States should focus on answering the needs of Yemenis, thus promoting practical actions rather than a political settlement. In this framework, the inclusion of civil actors within its operation is tantamount and beneficial.

Until now, the American diplomatic strategy stood on the negotiation of a cease-fire to put the basis for a political settlement between the two main warring forces, namely Ansar Allah and the Hadi's government. However, this move does not suffice to ingenerate peace. Furthermore, such a process is detrimental for the exponents of the civil society, that are hugely fighting to de-escalate tensions, to make their country accountable and fair in the purpose of driving and orientate the peace process. What results from this framework is that there is no coincidence between the peace asked for by the Yemenis and the peace that foreign mediators wish to impose on Sanaa. And this discrepancy in the

views has the only counterproductive effect of furthering heightening the rivalry among the warring actors and the dramatic consequences their actions have on the civilians.

Another harmful variable for Yemen regards the national currency, which is now loftily depreciated. The mediators should help it regain its value following the trail of Yemenis as they are working hard despite the undeniable economic barriers and regularly to facilitate peace for their homeland. It is exemplifiable by mentioning the Feminist Peace Roadmap<sup>107</sup>, namely an initiative promoted by Yemeni women. This approach is still not widespread; however, scholars are promoting it and writing on the relevance of the inclusion of locals into dialogues for peace. Alternatively explained, this theoretical approach proposes to reform the peacebuilding in the direction of a bottom-up mechanism<sup>108</sup>. Hence, the international community should adopt such an orientation instead of imposing peace from the outside. Contrarily, fragmentation in Yemen would achieve a tipping point. Therefore, the goal of national unity would become unattainable. (Stark, 2021)

Furthermore, another point that arose vigorously overtime concerns the need to avoid piecemeal solutions for the war because it is an incentive for the parties instead of leading them to compromise. Thus, Yemen needs a grand bargain, namely an agreement to tie all the facts of the conflict into a single package. (Johnsen, 2021) In this sense, the United States has great relevance. Washington has a prominent influence over Saudi Arabia and the United Arab Emirates. Therefore, per extension is also can influence the government of Hadi and the Southern Transitional Council. The only problem for the White House regards its impossibility to ensure the good faith negotiation by the Houthis side. To do this, the involvement of Iran and Oman is paramount. Precisely, Tehran should convince the rebels that the protracted conflict is not fruitful to their interests and ambitions. Diversely, it is unthinkable that Ansar Allah could sit at the negotiation table to genuinely broker peace. (Johnsen, 2021)

However, the Islamic Republic can only be imperative in coopting the Houthis, and not also in financial terms. Its economic contribution to sponsor the reconstruction of Yemen is narrow because of economic stagnation. Therefore, this is a domain of competence of the rich Gulf countries. And

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<sup>107</sup> The document is consultable at the following link: <https://s3-eu-west-1.amazonaws.com/publicate/contentupload/OF81CgB1995040/eng-feminist-peace-roadmap-draft2.pdf>

<sup>108</sup> To deepen the topic of the “bottom-up” peacebuilding, read the work by Séverine Autessere: “The Frontlines of Peace: An Insider’s Guide to Change the World.”

additionally, this falls within their interests as the war is proving extremely damageable in terms of economic efforts in financing it.

In addition to regional powers, the Russian Federation is also essential. Specifically, its usefulness is sensitive when the object of analysis is the Red Sea Coast and the Saleh family power exercised by Tariq. The bilateral relation between Moscow and the powerful Yemeni family goes back to the time of former President Ali. Until his killing, the bond was strong. However, after this event, the Kremlin closed its embassy in Sanaa, thus determining a remarkable disengagement from the theatre of confrontation. (Hamad, Olazabal, 2019)

Nevertheless, at the moment of this writing, Russia seems to be willing to robustly resume its relationship with the Saleh family via Tariq. And it is necessary as his National Resistance Forces are advancing on the Red Sea Coasts imposing themselves as a prominent player in the Yemeni scenario. Thus, Moscow's diplomatic skills are primary to convince him of the urge for a unitarian solution. It is crucial since the National Resistance Forces have recently announced the establishment of the Political Bureau, therefore making clear their growing political ambitiousness. Indeed, this platform represents the need for recognition claimed by the NRF. Until now, their military power has inevitably grown, at the point of making the leaders convinced to expand politically. And this shift has ingenerated concerns since it is believed to be a sign of an eventual resurgence of the Saleh's family. Furthermore, an eventual expansion of Tariq's forces would be well-welcomed by regional powers like the UAE and Egypt. They would intend it as a political power able to compete with the Islah party and to reduce its influence over the Red Sea Coast and the Bab-el-Mandeb strait. And such a denial would directly advantage Abu Dhabi and Cairo as their national security would be secured. More clearly, whether the NRF assumed control over the Coast, Islah – backed by Turkey and Qatar – would lose its leverage on the area, and its backers would do the same, thus halting their threat to the national security of the abovementioned countries. (Ramani, 2018)

However, at the moment in being, it is uncertain the extent to which Tariq's political project could evolve. Obstacles are several and considerable. Nevertheless, the Red Sea Coast must necessarily be under the lens of the international community as it is a crucial area for the internal balance of power of Yemen. And for wholesome peacebuilding, it is an agenda priority. (Al-Madhaji, 2021)

In conclusion, given the sensitivity of the territories in question, a Russian action of shuttle diplomacy is vital. Moscow is the sole player capable of unraveling the power logic of that side of Yemen. And it is equally unique to have plenty of leverage to gear the situation orientating the parties towards an inclusive peace process. Finally, the Russian factor is also incidental within the Security Council.

Other than power logic and involved actors, this work takes the view that the concept of peace is perhaps problematic to solve the Yemeni conflict. The position held by this paper concerns the fact that peace must be achieved in many respects, while it is broadly equivalent to the absence of violence. (Manea, 2021)

More specifically, the Yemeni case proved that even though many compromises occurred in the form of agreements and peace deals, they turned to be not sustainable. Therefore, they moved towards peace. However, this peace shrinks in many domains. Thus, achieving peace should involve not only a conflict-resolution mechanism aimed at ending current violence between the warring parties. Instead, it should move forward; in further detail, historical observations should emerge in the discourse along with ethnic identities' considerations and tribal recriminations. It implies that the definition of "sustainable peace" provided by the United Nations is reductive and insufficient. In detail, it underlines the need for the conflict parties to transpose their political or economic struggles into a framework where disputes can be resolved. (McAuliffe, 2017, quoted in Hadjigeorgiu)

A similar view is not fittable with the civil wars. It undervalues ethnicity, this latter being a leading factor to the crisis. Therefore, this proposition lacks the identification of any solutions to reduce hostilities among ethnic groups. Instead, it lays the ground for further enmities or triggers their suppression. Hence, it comes that whether in the case of an ending of brutality and violence, other crises will come following this approach.

Additionally, this thesis also points to the interpretation of ethnic conflicts. These types of wars are often misunderstood, as also are the motives behind them. It follows that the incentives for mobilization to move towards peace do not correspond to real perceptions. In other terms, symbolism is very relevant in ethnic wars. (Kaufmann, 2006: 202)

However, it is often left aside in favor of the interests of the parties and institution-building. Therefore, emotional motives are neglected. And it set the scene for further consideration, namely the line dividing peacebuilding and state-building. Indeed, when it comes to state-building, the process of rebuilding relationships damaged by conflict is ignored or regarded as peripheral. (Salter, Yousuf, 2016) Contrarily, the two concepts should be intertwined, and reconciliation should be the central element to bridge the gap between them.

Furthermore, the Yemeni conflict is very peculiar, as it is state building. Indeed, the country's history highlights that the rhetoric of the "unitarian state" has always been fragile and external to the feelings of Yemenis. The first section of this work explained the motives that led the country to unity and the circumstances where it occurred. Therefore, it emerged that it resulted from practical and pragmatic needs rather than on cultural kindships. Thus, it seems hard to propose the "unitarian state" discourse. Still moving further, this is not a problem *per se*'. Instead, the difficulties in imposing such a model

derived from the fact that conflicting parties never levied a dominant model over the other segments of society. Therefore, grievances never vanished.

On the contrary, in a fragile country locked into the lack of “stateness” - it consists of authority, legitimacy, and capacity - (Carment, Landry, Samy, Shaw, 2015: 13)- in which no dominant side emerged, they further developed and generated a conflictual environment. In addition, the condition of missing “stateness” must also be interpreted in light of the appropriation of power per personal gains. It signifies that large segment of the Yemeni population were excluded by the governing regime, as it just focused on promoting its wealthiness by exploiting ethnic identities instead of employing inclusive methods. It naturally followed that the concept of “stateness” has lacked into the collective imaginary as people did not feel represented and did not trust the regime in charge.

In light of this, the calls for an improving statal capacity launched by the social groups that protested in Yemen over time may seem more understandable and linear.

In conclusion, the purpose of the analysis above was to underline the peculiarities of the Yemeni conflict to understand the mistakes occurred in the peace-making initiatives for the country. It emerged that the underground problem concerns the tainted relationship between the state and society. Therefore, it is not by proposing solutions to overcome the “fragile” state that peace can be forged. Instead, winning solutions should point to foster the “civic trust”. (Carment, Landry, Samy, Shaw, 2015)

### **4.3 The SMALL approach for conflict resolution in Yemen:**

This paragraph proposes some tools identified as worthwhile to solve the Yemeni conflict given the above-explained context and its drawbacks.

This work individuates the SMALL approach proposed by Abdi and Mason in 2019 as a well-fit one for Yemen. Specifically, this methodology offers a mediation strategy for fragile contexts, where the authors identify as fragile states those situations where there are inadequacies in governance structures. (Orkaby, 2021) Given this initial assumption, it follows that mediation cannot easily come. Instead, it requires a mediating effort punctuated both in spatial and temporal terms.

Putting it plainly, interventions must occur in different temporal phases: short-, medium-, and long-term actions. And the bargaining process must employ inner and outer mediators to unite their views and perspectives. This theoretical formulation starts from the premise that peace mediation in fragile situations is hard to achieve. To demonstrate this difficulty, the authors draw attention to four challenges to the mediators. The first critical aspect concerns the changing space of mediation as conflicts can move around low or high intensity depending on the conflict fluctuation resulting from

the socio-political factors intervening. Then, as highly traceable in the Yemeni environment, the issues and the actors in mediation are complex because of the changing trends and the emergence of new players. (Orkaby, 2021)

The third element is the challenge of sustainability of mediation outcome, and it highlights the necessity of including into the mediation different temporal spaces. Indeed, fragile contexts are fluid, and new conflictual elements readily emerge. Consequently, they could lead to a derailment of the mediation exercise. Given this possibility, it is vital to frame the needs and the interests of the affected population both immediately and in the long term. Fourthly is the significance of building relationships to increase the level of proprietorship of the peace agreement. (Orkaby, 2021)

Therefore, given the complexity of peacebuilding, an adequate and articulated mediation phase must occur. Further investigating it, the short-term juncture deals with the acuteness of the conflict, thus operating in a sensitive context. Therefore, its action is oriented to resolve problems on the ground, without including any governance-building process. Instead, this latter element falls within the competence of the medium-term measures. This second phase incorporates mediation, and it is the first step towards the erection of a governance mechanism. Practically, it involves designing local committees charged with embracing both the needs of statal and non-statal actors. These organs serve to address the conflict's fueling factors, both the structural and the acute ones emerging after the breakout of hostilities.

Finally, the last phase involves the making of strategic policies. In detail, laying on the terrain set by the previous steps and in continuity with their outcomes, this juncture aims at minimizing the "predatory sphere" – the space developing between the customary and modern forms of governance responsible for leaving conflict and criminality unaddressed. Further explaining it, the approach individuates a fuzzy governance area. And being ungovernable accounts for the outburst of conflictual behaviors. Therefore, this area needs to be minimized by creating states able to deliver security and services to all citizens effectively and legitimately. (Abdi, Mason, 2019)

In conclusion, this approach brings the novelty of mediating by including internal and external mediators and different levels of bargaining. The peace work must stand on comprehending the existent levels of the conflict and the interaction between them. Therefore, this methodology involves creating a leeway where players are willing to face the conflict cleavages to resolve them. In sum, these wiggle rooms serve to build consensus for peace sustainability by linking inner and outer strategies for peace combined to foster multi-level collaboration across the conflict rifts.

Such a theoretical orientation has the final aim of building the above-mentioned civil trust, that according to this dissertation, is the primary element to forge peace in Yemen. Critical arguments about this approach exist and substantiate in questions around the neutrality of inner mediators.



However, this thesis sustains the proposition that impartiality cannot occur when it comes to insiders. The important thing being the political sensitivities and understanding of the conflict of the mediator. (Opongo, 2021) The work backs the assumption of Moore, who stated that the role of the insider-partial, namely a person interested in the conflict but trusted enough to be part of the solution. (Moore, 2004)

Provided an historical contextualization, furnished an explanation for the multidimensional conflict, and analyzed the prospects for peacebuilding, the present work proceeds now to conclude by illustrating the findings of the thesis.

## CONCLUSION:

This work aimed to frame the Yemeni conflict considering the actors involved, the layers of the war, and the historical roots of the country's population. Finally, the last section tried to expose the opportunities for peace deriving from the above-analyzed context.

What emerged from this composite analysis involving history, geography, ethnicity, and interests at stake consists of an evolutionary road that led the Yemeni conflict to change in its nature from the beginning of the clashes up to the present moment.

As aforementioned, the war exploded in response to the supposed transition period, as contrary to the grassroots expectations, it resulted in a further strengthening of the élites in power. Afterward, the initial domestic conflict re-shaped and enlarged to foreign powers. Hence, it engaged in regional dynamics that intertwined with domestic players' interests. Therefore, the layers of the dispute became multiple at the point that differentiating arrays, goals, alliances, and rivalries turned complex. Subsequently, this mixture of players and strategies paved the way for further actors to engage in the conflict later. Also, as abovementioned, none of the involved powers had the upper hand, neither domestic nor foreign. However, the Houthis gained a lot from the war. They profited more than the other actors from the compound Yemeni environment. As abovesaid, their leverage embodied the chameleonic nature of the group; indeed, their primary skill concerned the ability to adapt their rhetoric to the popular demands for gaining as much approval as possible, and this made them attractive.

Differently from the rebels, the study above demonstrated that Saudi Arabia, namely the most involved foreign power, *de facto* lost the war in a double manner: in the first place, the current situation witnesses a stalemate, and eventually a forced set-aside. Secondly, the so-called Saudi-led coalition dissolved because of intracrine struggles and discrepancies primarily between Riyadh and Abu Dhabi, with the latter taking advantage of its assumed retirement to decrease operational costs without losing its leverage in the southern side of Yemen, while the former being stumbled into the Yemeni shitload.

Hence, the continuous attacks coming from the four corners of the country tightened up the situation. Above all, in terms of a humanitarian catastrophe. Moreover, the currency depreciated rapidly, and it

is particularly severe for a country relying on imports heavily. As a result, an entire generation of Yemenis risks being acutely damaged.

Therefore, the analysis of this work pointed to the commitment that the international community should take to ensure a foreseeable future for the Yemeni population. The country's collapse is near and symptomatic of a further escalation of a yet profound crisis. Thus, donors need to engage to the maximum of their possibilities, in the first place lifting the maritime blockade to ease the food delivery to citizens at risk of starvation.

The work introduced the socio-economic context in which the conflict occurred and broadly analyzed the outcomes it caused. However, its focus was the geopolitics of the country. In further detail, this study aimed to understand the geopolitical significance of Yemen in the Gulf for both regional and global players. The reason for this choice occurred as this work takes the position that peace for Yemen must occur by laying on realism and pragmatism. Hitherto, the actors' strategic interests must be addressed to frame a peace work. Following this orientation, the thesis' attention fell on the Yemeni seaside. Predominantly the strait of Bab-el-Mandeb and the Red Sea, the objective being to deepen the geopolitical reasonings of the powers in that area.

Regarding global players, this analysis highlighted the motives for the growing importance of the Red Sea in the foreign policy *agendas* of China and Russia. For Beijing, it is central for its “Maritime Silk Road”, namely the waterway component of the “Belt and Road Initiative” while Moscow is also massively entrenching its position from the Mediterranean down to the Gulf of Aden to a pathway in Africa.

Consequently, the theatre automatically acquires strategic relevance also for the United States, despite its pattern of disengagement.

In light of what aforementioned and given the mounting relevance of the waterways around Yemen, this study takes the view that working for peace in Sanaa is beneficial not only to Yemenis but also to the powers partaking in the war because of two motives; the crecive economic war costs, and the geopolitics of the Red Sea. Henceforth, peacebuilding is essential but in terms different from the current initiatives. Further elaborated, peace processes must change in their premises. They should be conducive to greater inclusivity, pivoting around the internal Yemeni environment and not externally driven.

It stems that this research identifies some prospects for peace despite the dramatic ongoing situation. Specifically, what emerged from the analysis regards an oversimplification concerning the drivers for the conflict that tends to leave its original causes largely unaddressed. More specifically, this work identified the lack of “stateness” as the driver for the breakout and the persistence of hostilities. Yemen lacks “civil trust” between the state and society. Therefore, the peacebuilding mechanisms

also lack it, consequently focusing on correcting the symptoms of the conflict while leaving aside the issue of proximity between the social fabric and the institutional machinery.

Correct this unfruitful orientation implies proposing a theoretical approach. This work identifies it in the **SMALL methodology** by Abdi and Mason, weighed as suitable to Yemen, intended the country as a fragile context. In this sense, this methodology suggests a mediation process involving inner and outer mediators and a spatial and temporal decomposition. At greater length, it assumes that in shrink states exposed to high political, economic, and social volatility, a sophisticated approach intertwining both short-, medium-, and long-term strategies are needed. Additionally, given this environmental mutability, a refined brokerage must occur. Consequently, it follows that insiders' needs must encounter and interbreed with external views to forge an informed and thoughtful perspective for peacebuilding.

Other than theory, this work deems that regional powers need to engage in diplomatic efforts for Yemen given their proximity to the questioned area and their expertise about the context. Precisely, Oman should take this leading mediation's role given its closeness to Yemen, its neutrality in its foreign policy agenda, and its expanding wedlock with Riyadh. These factors assembled make Muscat the ideal candidate to generate peace. In addition, Iran has the leverage to coopt Ansar Allah, given its alignment with them.

Beyond regional actors, the argumentation held by this work concerns the need of the international community to improve the chances of a durable political settlement. (International Crisis Group, 2016) To pursue this goal, efforts should go towards inclusiveness, intended as incorporating all the players in the diplomatic talk. Furthermore, they should move en route to vast consideration of the Yemeni peculiarities. It means that the historical roots of the country, its internal divisions, and ethnic identities should enter the discourse to forge a lasting peace. Do otherwise would signify ending the symptoms of the crisis and not even the grounds triggering it. Such an orientation would have detrimental effects in the long-term as it would arouse infightings, hinder skirmishes, and bad tempers shaping new layers for the dispute.

In conclusion, this work aimed to introduce the reader to the Yemeni conflict by adopting a perspective focusing on geopolitics as the factor to follow to stimulate peacebuilding. Precisely, the thesis started with the historical contextualization to clarify the drivers of Yemeni politics. Then, it moved towards the framing of the civil war and its protagonists. Finally, Given this backdrop, it proceeded towards the analysis of future perspectives holding a line of reasoning standing on the feasibility of peacebuilding despite the critical situation.

In conclusion, the study terminated that a long-lasting peace for Yemen needs to consider the anguished history of the country, highly including the ethnicity factor into the discourse, and adopt

an approach considering the context specificity widely. More specifically, peacebuilding cannot be extraneous to the setting and follow the determinants set a priori for a “sustainable peace” according to the United Nations. To overcome it, the international community should involve regional players in the rhetoric of peace, being valuable diplomatic stakeholders with a high degree of regional *expertise*. Finally, this work identifies the SMALL methodology as the best well-suited theoretical peacebuilding approach to foster peace in Yemen.

In conclusion, this work drew the deduction that peacebuilding is feasible if following the aforementioned analysis.

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## EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

### **Premise:**

Yemen is the sole republican country in the Arabian Peninsula. However, the uniqueness of its political structure did not trigger further interest in this subject of study, confining the Gulf state almost to oblivion. This work aims at shedding some light on the roots and the evolution of the country by adopting a geopolitical perspective purposed to understand the dynamism of Yemen and the extreme mutability of its internal dynamics. Furthermore, the aim of the study concerns the investigation over the significance of this territory in geopolitical terms to furnish a hint of reflection in the peacebuilding studies.

Given this framework, the research question of this thesis regards the feasibility of a long-standing and sustainable peace in light of the actual drawbacks and opportunities.

This analysis proposed to research the continuities inherited by today's Yemen from the past and the ruptures with the old patterns. In this sense, this study aims to be dynamic, considering the evolutionary path of Yemen as vital to scrutinize for a correct understanding of the current conflict and its prospects for peace.

The research question of this study is the result of the hypothesis constructed before the conduction of this analysis. Precisely, it stands on the assumption that peacebuilding in Yemen is feasible despite the controversy of the interests at stake in the conflict, the multitude of layers of the dispute, and the diverse *agendas* of the players involved. In further detail, the initial conjecture regarded the inadequacy of the peace initiatives offered for Yemen and identified this unsuitability as accountable for failure.

Concerning the theoretical basis of the work, it considers the field of international relations applied to the logic of geopolitics. Specifically, this work insisted on explaining the interventions in Yemen as status-oriented behaviors. This theoretical line found support by the "Machprestige" theory by Weber, the cultural theory of international relations by Lebow and Morgenthau's "Politics Among Nations."

Furthermore, the analysis included official documents released by governmental *apparatus*, domestic organized groups, and international organizations to decrypt the underlying justifications advanced by the players, their reasons for action, and ultimately their conduct.

About the methodology, the research moved from a historical contextualization of the Yemeni *panorama* aspiring to establish the time horizon considered by the work. According to this study's perspective, historical elements concerning the subject of analysis are tantamount to introduce the reader to the object of the same, namely the conflict. Hence, the first chapter focused on overviewing Yemen historically, geographically, and ethnically. More in detail, this section concentrated on the politics of the country analyzed in light of the complex intertwining factors and the diverse political settlement experimented by the Gulf state. About the political settlement, two subjects of analysis intervened in the discourse, namely the Houthis and the southern exponents, as they were central in the following discussion. In addition, the first section introduced the transition period following the uprisings of 2011, analyzing the reason behind the failure of the interventions promoted by the international community to stabilize the situation in Yemen.

Then, in the second chapter, the object was the narratives of the conflict, namely the layers of the dispute. The analysis investigated the religious element, the dualism between the periphery and the center, the power of the élites, and the narrative of the terrorist organizations relevant when it comes to the Yemeni domestic environment. Furthermore, the section dedicated some time to explore the reality of the political parties. In the end, it drew conclusion about the present political framework of Yemen to trace a line inherent to the complex internal panorama and give insights concerning the functioning of politics in Yemen.

The third chapter related to foreign players intervening in the originally domestic conflict. Putting it in different terms, it aimed at describing the world-systemic opening of the war, begun as a civil one, and then transformed into a mixture of proxies and regional rivalries. The chapter gave specifications about the major involved regional powers, namely Saudi Arabia, Iran, and the United Arab Emirates, to provide a regional framework. Later, the work proceeded to introduce global actors like the United States and the Russian Federation. In the end, Oman entered the narrative as a potential mediator between the parts of the conflict.

Finally, the last section concluded the study. More specifically, after having operated a historical analysis and dealt with the domestic and foreign players, the thesis furnished its views about the peacebuilding process in the light of what emerged from the previous investigation. In so doing, the study proposed the SMALL approach as well-suited for Yemen, that will be later illustrated.

At follow, the chapters will be introduced in further detail, furnishing specifics for all of them.



## **Chapter One:**

The first chapter introduced the historical facts that led Yemen to pour into the current situation, deepening the period up to the unification and the advent of President Saleh. Then, the analysis explored the transition interval triggered by the events of 2011. Notably, it focused on its outcome. As a matter of fact, it culminated into the opposite of the values of the revolution, namely the consolidation of the power of the élites and the narrow circle around them.

Therefore, the work proceeded with the analysis of the interval precluding the outbreak of the civil war in 2014. Subsequently, it moved to analyze the war and its players, lastly outlining the several interests at stake.

In so doing, the research inspected a temporal horizon starting with the outburst of hostilities until now.

About the former, the terrain proved fertile for advancing the aspirations of autonomy of the Houthis and the Southern secessionists who exploited this chance. In this domain, it is relevant to highlight the failure of the Gulf Cooperation Initiative as its miscarriage set the basis for non-statal actors to emerge vigorously. The driver to instigate the fights was that the GCC Initiative, assuming the form of the National Dialogue Conference (NDC), failed to oust Saleh from politics. Indeed, he could continue influencing the Yemeni domestic affairs, thus heightening domestic tensions, eventually leading the country to war. In detail, the transition period that charged President Hadi to lead the country to good governance proved weak and unable to shift the political pendulum away from Saleh. Furthermore, the constitution, which should have theoretically overcome Saleh's era, was implemented formally but not practically. And this work assumed that the constitutional insubordination of the military and security sector was a driver for the transition failure.

Concluding the first chapter, the analysis described the present state of affairs by assessing constancy, metamorphosis, conversion, departures, and novelties. In so doing, the research aimed at providing the reader with an exhaustive groundwork.

## **Chapter two:**

The second section inspected the narratives of the conflict, namely the several rhetorics shaping the war and inflaming it. It was vital to understand the inner functioning of the compound Yemeni milieu as it decayed the chronicles of the players in fragments to dredge them adequately.

It emerged that the narratives used by the actors are highly subdued to power logics, de facto abandoning or subjecting their pure scope to dominion and vigor reasonings. Characteristically, the religious identities served politics and politicians and still do it. As a matter of fact, after the Saudi intervention, the tones of the conflict assumed the likeness of previous Middle Eastern phenomena describing the politicization of religious identities to gain power and consensus. In the case of Yemen, it concretized into the fallacious equation of the Houthis with Iran for their belonging to the Shia side of Islam, despite it is misleading. Indeed, it is instead the Saleh and Saudi interference that tinged the conflict with sectarianism. In other terms, the division between Sunni and Shia groups and the following equalization of the rebels with the Islamic Republic of Iran was not innate. Instead, it was a construction operated by those players aiming to ingenerate the threat of a Houthi takeover. In addition to this, the sectarian rift also enlarged after the gateway of terrorist organizations into the conflict. Precisely, Al-Qaeda in the Arabian Peninsula (AQAP) and the Islamic State in Yemen (ISY) further stirred sectarian hatred.

In conjunction with sectarianism, the chapter also investigated the inter-élites rivalry, namely the fight for resources. It is primary in the Yemeni milieu as the protests that exploded in 2011 represented an attempt by the Yemeni population to change the power logic in Sanaa by ousting the then-President Saleh. Withal, the regime change happened de jure, not de facto. Indeed, the values of the revolution remained unheard of. And the outcome of the civil protests happened to be opposite to expectations. Finally, the transition period did not lead to the expected results. Differently, it further consolidated the powerfulness of the élites in charge.

In addition to ad hoc sectarianism, regional rivalries, and inter-élite enmities, another kind of dispute inform the Yemeni conflict: the division between center and periphery. In this sense, the demarcation line does not substantiate in a "north versus south" rhetoric. Instead, the domestic segmentations are more sophisticated than this dichotomist narrative. Ethnic factors, tribal politics, and resources allocation also instruct the internal milieu. It follows that many cleavages exist, and the willingness of Yemenis to detach from the center, namely the bulk of power, is high. However, the study primarily focused on the Houthis and the Southern experience since these movements are those opposing the interim government of Hadi more boldly.

Finally, the second section of the work also provided specifications about the reality of Yemeni parties by analyzing the party of Saleh, namely the General People Congress (GPC) and al-Islah. This ground of research served to assess the impact of political parties within the compound Yemeni environment.

In conclusion, chapter two inspected the roots of the conflict by examining the narratives informing the war and substantiating into the domestic players involved, both statal and non-statal.

### **Chapter three:**

The third section explored the political *agendas* of the external actors intervening in Yemen. Primarily, the chapter analyzed the hugely discussed proxy war between Saudi Arabia and Iran to demystify the myth pointing at it as the driver for the Yemeni conflict. Following this line of reasoning, the study analyzed the real interests at stake for supremacy in the region and the eventual overstatement of the Houthis' dependence on Tehran. More in detail, this work sustained an overestimation of the Iranian fingerprints in the conflict. Therefore, the thesis pointed to the exaggeration of the role of the Islamic Republic, and asserted it as artificially made. In a nutshell, the work portrayed it as strategically constructed by Riyadh.

Concerning Iran, the section also investigated the significance of the Shiite country in the peacebuilding process for Yemen. Specifically, it defended the idea of Iran as a vital diplomatic stakeholder for the settlement of the war, given its relationship with the Houthis.

Regarding Saudi Arabia, the section moved from realist theoretical assumptions by Lebow, Morgenthau, and Weber to demonstrate the status-seeking posture adopted by the Kingdom. Then, after this conceptualization, the Saudi intervention was practically explored from its beginning with Operation Decisive Storm up to the present moment, and perspectives of an eventual victory also entered the discourse with a negative connotation. In assessing the Saudi performance in Yemen, the study researched it along with the United Arab Emirates' posture and conduct. Indeed, the two countries formally intervened altogether in Sanaa. Nevertheless, discrepancies over relationships with other players and diverse political *agendas de facto* led the coalition to dissolve. About this point, the analysis deepened Abu Dhabi's stance in Yemen and investigated its priorities and objectives. In addition, the focus fell over the bond of the UAE with the Southern Transitional Council (STC) and with the al-Islah party. This exploration had the double aim of understanding the geopolitics of the Emirates and explaining its political divergence with Saudi Arabia. Moreover, the study excavated the supposed UAE's withdrawal from the scenes, evaluating the retirement given the current situation and discussing the future implication of the move in question.

Subsequently, the work moved to analyze the United States foreign policy's strategy in Yemen, standing in between the American commitment to degrade the terrorist threat and the American aids to the Saudi-led coalition. To so do, the work exposed the dissimilarities and the continuities of the American presidencies that have lived at the White House, with the final aim of understanding the

foreign policy of the Biden Administration and assessing it in light of previous Administrations, rhetoric, and practical actions.

Furthermore, the section also investigated the Russian factor. Alternatively stated, the study introduced the Russian Federation into the discourse to highlight its potential as a mediator. Intending to do so, the thesis explored the Muscovite foreign policy and the historical bonds of the then U.S.S.R with Yemen, and broadly the Middle East. At long last, the artistry in bargaining of Moscow emerged imperatively, resulting from the reluctance of Russia to partisan in an overt manner and given its alright relationship with the Yemeni rebels.

Finally, the section concluded with the exploration of the role of Oman in Yemen. Notably, the center of the analysis regarded the diplomatic strategy of Muscat, named “omanibalancing” by the scholar O’Really. The present research pinpointed the pivotal role of the Gulf country in the fluid Yemeni *milieu* and insisted on the pertinence of Muscat to the variable context of contemporary Yemeni politics.

#### **Chapter four:**

The final section of the work pivoted around geopolitics. Notably, it detached from the previous level of analysis, namely inherent to the single players, to move towards an understanding of the relevance of Yemen in the global *panorama*. In further detail, the chapter focused on waterways bordering Yemen, primarily concentrating on the Red Sea and narrowly the Strait of Bab-el-Mandeb. Therefore, the analysis considered regional and non-regional actors' interests in the maritime *route* at issue. Characteristically, three argumentations entered the scene: security, economy, and commercial exchanges. The first issue is sensitive to the neighboring countries as an eventual destabilization of the waterways around Yemen could spill over in the region and beyond. In addition, securitarian logic also presses the United States. Washington intends the area as a security prism given its proximity to the Horn of Africa, where Moscow and Beijing are advancing and investing. Finally, the Houthis exploit it to make naval voyages insecure and precarious. Thereupon, security occupies a primary place in the reasons to geopolitically consider it.

Concerning the economic motive, it is primary for the Chinese and Russian political *agendas*. For Beijing, it is a crucial maritime junction for the “Road and Belt Initiative”. About the latter, a way to expand its influence. However, capitalize on the area is not the sole purpose.

Regarding the shipping routes, it is vital to Saudi Arabia and its distribution of the products of petroleum, being it a giant in oil manufacturing. Almost more hard-hitting is the presence of Abu Dhabi in and around Yemen to gain terrain over the southern shipping routes. Specifically, the UAE assured its military presence in the Strait and the Yemeni Socotra *archipelago* to expand its

commercial activities. Equally, this move also intended to deepen the connection with its naval bases in the Horn, namely Barbera, Somaliland, and Eritrea.

Hence, the Red Sea is a new frontier for the game of the great powers, and at the same time, it is also a priority line for the foreign policy's *agendas* of regional players. Thus, Sanaa ends to be very prominent.

After the Red Sea, the study described the underlying cause for the failure of the Western-sponsored initiatives for making peace in Yemen. Precisely, the thesis invoked a recalibration of the whole peacebuilding mechanism, intending it as crucial to achieving satisfying results.

This research had its analytical basis on the major deals, namely the Riyadh Agreement and the Stockholm one. The investigation identified the lack of inclusiveness and the attempt to impose solutions extraneous to Yemen, its domestic *milieu*, and its power dynamics as the utmost factors for failure. Then, the work proposed alternatives for sustainable peacebuilding for Yemen and insisted on the need for a grand bargain strategy including the diverse factions and interests at stake within a single package to provide pluralism and heal to roots of the conflict rather than the symptoms.

Additionally, the study foregrounded the meaning that conflict-resolution should incarnate in the Yemeni case, underlining how the sustainability invoked by foreign sponsoring players proved inadequate and misleading. Therefore, it elaborated that the peace process must change in its premises, primarily correcting the often-spoken oversimplification of the drivers of the conflict that leave its original causes unaddressed. Specifically, the present thesis recognized the breadth between the social fabric and the institutional machinery as the more pronounced problem to resolve. In other terms, it found Yemen lacking "civil trust".

Finally, the work provided solutions to correct this unfruitful orientation for forging peace weighing the SMALL methodology proposed by Abdi and Mason as suitable to the country at issue. In detail, this approach suggests a mediation process involving inner and outer mediators and a spatial and temporal decomposition. At greater length, it assumes that in shrink states exposed to high political, economic, and social volatility, a sophisticated approach intertwining both short-, medium-, and long-term strategies are needed. Additionally, given this environmental mutability, a refined brokerage must occur. Consequently, it follows that insiders' needs must encounter and interbreed with external views to forge an informed and thoughtful perspective for peacebuilding.

**Findings of the thesis:**

In conclusion, this work aimed to introduce the reader to the Yemeni conflict by adopting a perspective focusing on geopolitics as the factor to follow to stimulate peacebuilding.

Precisely, the thesis started with the historical contextualization to clarify the drivers of Yemeni politics. Then, it moved towards the framing of the civil war and its protagonists. Finally, given this backdrop, it proceeded towards the analysis of future perspectives holding a line of reasoning standing on the feasibility of peacebuilding despite the critical situation. More in detail, the study terminated that a long-lasting peace for Yemen is feasible despite its difficulties, and in defiance of the multiple present challenges. However, it needs to consider the anguished history of the country, highly including the ethnicity factor into the discourse, and adopt an approach considering the context specificity widely. More precisely, peacebuilding cannot be extraneous to the setting and follow the determinants set *a priori* for a “sustainable peace” according to the United Nations. To overcome it, the international community should involve regional players in the rhetoric of peace, being a valuable diplomatic stakeholder with a high degree of regional *expertise*. Finally, this work identified the SMALL methodology as the best well-suited theoretical peacebuilding approach to foster peace in Yemen.