The Tragedy of Yemen - An Integrative Approach to Conflict Resolution to Solve the Humanitarian Crisis

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Abstract

Begun in 2014, Yemen’s Civil War revolves around the control for power between the ousted President Hadi regime and the Houthi Rebels. This conflict turned into a proxy war between the Saudi Arabian Coalition who wants to restore the Hadi regime back into power while the Houthi Rebels, who are Zaidi Shias, are supported by Iran.¹ This civil war has created a humanitarian crisis of both hunger and displacement. This research project will use an integrative approach through the analysis of negotiation data and interviews to find a solution to this conflict.

This study proposes to develop an integrative approach to conflict resolution and conflict negotiation to end the war in Yemen. This study offers a multi-dimensional analysis of the peace negotiations processes to study past and current efforts of the international community in conflict resolution, identifying the partners, goals, and strategies in the peace negotiation process, as well as reconstructing the historic background of the conflict, demands, and claims of the fighting sides. As such, I will take the following steps to study this conflict.

1. Situate the conflict in its historic context, identify all parties of the conflict and their demands, and highlight the main points of disagreement for each side of the conflict.

2. Identify the international agencies and foreign governments involved in peace negotiations and conflict resolution.

3. Identify the main strategic goals of peace negotiations; their motivations, demands and mediating tactics. Provide a chronological reconstruction of peace negotiations, and identify changes in the sides’ positions, pointing at ground for compromise.
4. Systematically analyze the successes and failures of international efforts in mediating a peace agreement, identify their strengths and weaknesses and develop an integrative proposal for peace negotiation reflecting on the analysis of previous negotiation efforts.

Origins

The direct cause of this conflict stems from regional disputes in the country, but the involvement of outside states has exacerbated the roots of this conflict. First, Yemen’s Civil War was most influenced by local and political factors and is not a proxy war nor a religious conflict, but “primarily a domestic conflict, driven by local grievances and local competition for power and resources.”

For the latter half of the 20th century, Yemen was divided into two states. These nations were, “The Yemen Arab Republic (North Yemen), established in 1962 in the wake of the overthrow of the Zaydi imamate which had ruled parts of the area since 897, and the People’s Democratic Republic of Yemen (South Yemen), created following the departure of the British colonial power in 1967, were both weak states.” Seen as an oil poor region, North Yemen’s President Ali Abdullah Saleh unified North and South Yemen through an intricate patronage system until his ousting in 2012.

On the surface, Yemen was functional enough as any other authoritarian state in the Middle East, however, there was growing resistance from the Zaydi Shia minority. This ethnic group on Yemen’s North-West side makes up 30-35% of Yemen’s population. The main distinction is that Zaydism is a branch of Shia Islam while the majority of Yemen is Sunni,
however there are more similarities that Zaydi Islam has to Sunni Islam in contrast to the other branches of Shia Islam.\textsuperscript{6}

Although small in land mass, Yemen has significant geographical inequality. For the Zaydi’s, their region has been plagued with economic underdevelopment, marginalization, and discrimination that has made daily life challenging among this ethnic group.\textsuperscript{7}

Despite being “unified” in 1990, skirmishes continued in Yemen throughout the 1990s and 2000s, that led to the creation of two movements that arose from the lack of opportunities from the unification. The Houthi movement originates from the death of was killed by President Saleh’s troops in 2004.\textsuperscript{8} Hussein al-Houthi established a youth coalition of Al-Haq, a Zaydi oriented political party that sought to contest Yemen’s (Unified) legislative elections in the early 1990s.\textsuperscript{9} The principles of al-Houthis coalition of Al-Haq consisted of Iran’s Revolutionary Principles, anti-establishment views, as well as an emphasis of Zaydism.\textsuperscript{10} To avenge his brother, Abdul Malik al-Houthi, lead the Houthi movement in a more militant direction. Although there are differences between the traditional Shia Islam in Iran and Zaydism, the Houthi movement found an ally in Iran as they both sought greater Shia representation and held anti-American views.

During Yemen’s unification era, many of the former Southern Yemen’s military and government officials were forced to retire, leaving them with few jobs’ prospects and a new resentment to officials who originated from North Yemen and were now ruling Yemen’s new government.\textsuperscript{11} As a result, the Hirak movement emerged, which demanded the reinstatement of and improved pensions of these former officials.\textsuperscript{12} From the perspective of a democratic nation, the demands of the Hirak movement may seem insignificant, however, the military and its
culture played a significant role for these officials who ruled Southern Yemen, just like any other military controlled state.

While President Saleh was able to keep these two movements in check during much of his rule, by the early 2010s and the onset of 2011’s Arab Spring, Saleh had little hope that he could maintain his power with a weak economy, growing dissatisfaction among the public, and declining health. Having close ties with the military and security forces, Saleh entered an immunity agreement that requires he steps down from power and transfers power to his Vice President, Abdrabbuh Mansur Hadi, which created temporary hope for the Houthi movement that change could occur.  

Despite new leadership, little changed. This false hope made the Houthis feel less optimistic that greater autonomy could occur for two reasons. The first is that Hadi failed to undo the patronage and to include marginalized political groups. The second idea involves the federation of six states and greater autonomy, which was seen as a promising idea on the surface but was designed in a way that would weaken each state and provide Hadi with more power. With growing dissatisfaction, Hadi is ousted by Houthi forces who had formed a coalition with Saleh, their former enemy, in January 2015. Since then, the Hadi backed coalition and the Houthi rebels have been in fierce fighting that has worsened Yemen’s economy and the wellbeing of its people.

How this Conflict Turned into a Crisis

Without the support of other countries, this conflict would have ended within a few years. It was through the backing of each group from different alliances that turned this conflict into a stalemate. As mentioned earlier, the Houthis are backed by Iran. The other state in the Middle
East that has contributed to this conflict is Saudi Arabia, which has a more complicated relationship with its southern neighbor, Yemen.

Throughout the years, Saudi-Yemeni relations have been fraught. Despite being Sunni, each country had quite different outcomes in terms of development. For Saudi Arabia, the discovery of oil has seen the state go through rapid modernization and new development, thanks to the funds of the profits the state receives from its vast oil reserves. This stable cash flow has allowed the Saudi Royal Family to maintain their power and influence that has spread throughout Saudi society. Prior to discovering oil, Yemen and Saudi Arabia were at similar stages in terms of development. Yemen has a lack of natural resources and is oil poor, which has caused economic stagnation for the state. Journalist Peter Salisbury describes the relationship between Yemen and Saudi Arabia as, “Many Yemenis view the northern Kingdom as a young, nouveau riche upstart that wields excessive influence in the region, while the Saudis see Yemen as a problematic and populous state in their own ‘back yard’ – requiring both careful attention and caution.”

Faced with less influence in the Arab Gulf region, many Yemenis feel policed by the Saudis who see Yemen as a backward country. Saudi Arabia’s foreign policy toward Yemen has been ”containment and maintenance” So long as Yemen remained a stable state and the conflict did not spill over to Saudi Arabia, the Saudis would maintain the situation in Yemen even if it was to remain dysfunctional. The former King of Saudi Arabia, King Abdulaziz, stated on his death bed, ”Keep Yemen weak.”

Although unfond of President Saleh’s support of Iraq’s invasion of Kuwait, Saudi Arabia supported their southern neighbors in the years that followed to maintain stability in Yemen that continued through the Hadi Administration.

Both sides have an endless amount of funding thanks to their supporters: the Saudis supporting the Hadi-Government, and Iran supporting the Houthis. Iran has little to lose as it is
regionally distant from Yemen and has continued to support the Houthis to irk their enemies, the Saudis. On the other hand, the Saudis worry that this conflict will spillover to their own country which poses a threat to their national security.

Although Saudi Arabia has not sent troops to fight in Yemen, it has provided military assistance in the form of military aid. This aid has included, military strikes designed to target Houthi hideouts as well as embargos that block all imports from moving into Yemen’s ports. Much of Saudi Arabia’s military assistance to Hadi forces originates from U.S. aid. By the end of Obama’s Presidency, the Saudis had received,” more than a hundred and fifteen billion dollars' worth of arms to Saudi Arabia, the largest amount under any President, including warships, air-defense systems and tanks.”21 The U.S. has been a close ally for decades and continues to provide military aid to the Kingdom to prevent security issues in the region.

Effects

With years of stalemate, this conflict has led to devastating humanitarian consequences. While Saudi Arabia claims that these air strikes are not intended to harm civilians, these attacks have had devastating impacts for the Yemeni population. As the Houthis hide among civilians in cities such as Sana’a, airstrikes have been targeted in bustling places such as schools, hospitals, and areas of commerce. These strikes are devastating for civilians who are deprived of essential public resources, destroy infrastructure that harms the economy, and further threatens safety. As it has been challenging for Hadi forces to penetrate Houthi held areas, air strikes continue to be the focal point in gaining territory. According to the Center for Disaster Philanthropy (CDP), “more than 4.3 million people have been internally displaced.”22 Furthermore, trade blockades have prevented food and essential medicines from entering Yemen. The Saudis claim this
blockade is essential to preventing Houthi rebels from accessing this aid, though this method by
the Saudis has been widely criticized in world politics. This consequence has led to severe
malnutrition as, “17 million people that are acutely food insecure in Yemen, 3.5 million are
acutely malnourished”.

Both the Saudi-Hadi coalition and the Houthi rebels committed violations of international law and war crimes. The Houthi-Saleh coalition has been accused of randomly shelling residential areas, conducting illegal detention practices, and torturing their enemies and civilians.

**Latest Developments**

In April 2022, Yemen’s exiled president Hadi stepped down as president and turned his leadership over to a Presidential Council, which operates in Riyadh, Saudi Arabia. This change in leadership brought new enthusiasm to peace talks, in which a ceasefire between the warring factions went into effect in the Spring of 2022. For the duration of six months, Yemen saw some of its lowest rates of wartime violence in years. Ned Price, spokesperson for the U.S. Department of State at the time, noted that there was, "four times more fuel flowing into Yemen’s northern ports, and commercial flights enabling over 25,000 Yemenis to seek medical care and reunite with loved ones abroad."

This was an incredibly optimistic time for Yemen. Sadly, the Houthis did not agree to the extension of the ceasefire, which expired October 2nd of 2022. Political analysts cite the Houthis refusal to extend the ceasefire as an attempt to extend their rule across the country.

Although the UN brokered ceasefire was not extended past October 2022, Yemen witnessed relative stability for much of 2023. However, escalations have intensified following Hama’s October 7th, 2023, attack on Israeli civilians. In response to this attack, Israel has led a
campaign against Hamas in the Gaza strip, which has caused tens of thousands of deaths for innocent Palestinian civilians. To show solidarity with their ally Hamas, the Houthis began their own campaign against Israel and its allies. With Yemen bordering the Red Sea Corridor, a vital region for shipping that leads to the Suez Canal, the Houthis have been attacking commercial cargo ships that go through this corridor.\textsuperscript{28} This action by the Houthis has irked U.S. interests as the U.S. is a staunch ally of Israel and many U.S. companies are active users of the Red Sea Corridor. The Houthi leadership asserts that they will continue these attacks until humanitarian aid is no longer withheld from Gaza.\textsuperscript{29}

In response to these attacks by Houthi forces, several major shipping countries announced plans to avoid sailing through the Red Sea Corridor because this decision by many maritime transportation companies has many world leaders concerned, particularly those in the Western World, is that shipping delays would have negative effects on the global economy by raising oil prices.\textsuperscript{30}

From a political perspective, the U.S. has been much more present around Yemen since December 2023. Beginning in late December 2023, “US Defense Secretary Lloyd Austin announced a multinational maritime task force involving 10 navies aimed at securing the Red Sea from what he described as a ‘reckless ’escalation by the Houthis.”\textsuperscript{31} These efforts have helped shipping companies’ security but are not a long-term solution as this is very costly for the U.S. Aside from security, the U.S. government is taking greater aim at reducing the Houthis power. As of January 2024, the Houthis have been designated as a terrorist group by the U.S. government.\textsuperscript{32} With this designation, the U.S. military has been carrying out several airstrikes against the Houthis.\textsuperscript{33} Overall, these steps to deter the Houthis can be seen as a warning should tensions continue. For many Yemenis civilians, there is much anxiety as what will happen to
their country. Regardless of where they stand politically, Yemenis are angry at the ongoing violence, malnourishment, and economic decline in. These latest skirmishes fear a continuation of escalated violence.

**Paths to Peace**

Although a path to peace appears challenging, there are several steps that could help bring this conflict to an end and to implement an economic revitalization plan. Although U.S. or Western involvement would be seen as effective among many in the Western world, these countries have lost their credibility for many Middle Eastern Countries. For this reason, a non-western country must intervene to end this prolonged conflict. Additionally, leaders of Yemen, Saudi Arabia, and Iran would be much more likely to listen to religious leaders of the Sunni and Shia faiths to call for proper peace negotiations.

After careful consideration, China could be the lead mediator in solving this conflict. While this may seem odd for Westerners as China is viewed as America’s adversary, China is just as invested in the Middle East as is many world powers around the world. In the Russian-Ukrarian War, President Xi Jinping has emphasized the importance of Ukraine’s sovereignty that Russia, China’s ally, should have any right to annex eastern parts of Ukraine.\(^{34}\) China is Ukraine’s top trading partner, who has invested heavily in Ukraine for quite some time.\(^{35}\) China does not want its supply chain to be disrupted by high shipping costs, particularly with Ukraine’s grain exports. This trading relationship Red Sea Corridor, which is a vital route for China to send its exports to Europe via the Suez Canal. By bringing stability to this region, along with heavy investment, Yemen could become an important shipping and trading hub for the Middle East and
East Africa. Additionally, China has good relations with Saudi Arabia and Iran, who would be much more likely to listen to its eastern ally, than they would be to Western nations.

**Implementing a New Political System in Post-War Yemen**

The next step for an effective governmental system in Yemen is to implement a federalist system to grant the Zaydis, the minority group that makes up majority of the Houthis, greater political power. To be clear, this does not mean the Houthis would be given the power, but for the Zaydis to choose policies and reforms to prosper their region of Yemen. With federalism, “each entity manages its own affairs by itself. Consequently, we find state-level ministries to look after the affairs of the population living in each entity. This means that each entity has its own laws, judiciary, tax system, educational policy, and security apparatus.” Yemen’s old political system had been, dysfunctional and with a federal system there would be better representation and oversight of each province to make sure that grievances are resolved so that tensions do not heighten into war. By giving the Zaydi’s a greater say in their government, this would resolve many decades long grievances from this region of Yemen.

**Steps to Ensure Stability**

Three measures should be taken to ensure that Yemen remains stable post war. First is to establish high security, rather than immediate economic improvements. Strong security is needed to create a sense of public confidence in its officials as well as to prevent terrorist attacks from being a significant issue in the future. Within security, it is important to emphasize gender equity. Although Yemen and its neighbors are some of the most conservative countries in the world when it comes to women’s rights, having women involved in security and politics is
shown to restore public confidence. In repressive regimes and violent conflicts, women are rarely seen in public due to safety concerns. The representation of women in sectors of security, whether that be police or private security, as well as in political roles for security oversight would improve public trust. This step would be significant as it gives power to a segment of the population that is often overlooked. By providing under-representative groups a role in this planning, it would send a message that Yemen is a more democratic and free society. This approach is not to critique Yemen or Islamic culture in any way. If women were not visible for these steps, many both in and outside of Yemen would feel that the country is returning to the status quo before the war.

Second, there must be an understanding that development and normalcy will take a generation. According to the World Bank, “no nation has made significant and sustainable progress toward reducing corruption in less than 14 years, and that on average it took successful nations 27 years. Reducing the role of the military in politics? No less than 10 years, 17 years on average.” Economic development will take time and it is essential that economic aid, with oversight, is provided to Yemen. For many countries recovering from violent conflicts, corruption and misuse of aid is a problem. A clear report of how this aid is being distributed for its intended purposes must be submitted and by multiple parties both from a governmental and an NGO perspective, to keep these institutions accountable. A clear plan for aid distribution must be followed that lays out an effective strategy as to how much aid should be directed at each issue to ensure that there is a well-rounded recovery. If at any point, the aid received is mismanaged, there needs to be restructuring of management to ensure that this abuse does not happen.
When scandals that involve the mismanagement of humanitarian and developmental aid occur, it is common for donors to withdraw funding. Instead of withdrawing aid, donors should change management to ensure that this aid is properly received. What this change in management looks like is to make sure that the source is this corruption is rooted out, that is to keep tabs on administrators who are abusing the relief system. Thorough background checks must be done to assess who is fit for these roles and who is not. In extreme cases, there must be an outside actor, such as an NGO leader, to oversee proper management if this aid is not being distributed properly.

Third, the new political order must focus on a select few areas for new improvements rather than a list of goals to establish legitimacy. By providing more resources for a select service such as public health, education, agriculture. With more money provided for only a few services, these services will be of better quality and the public will take notice of this. Improved services mentioned above could mean better health care, children completing more years of schooling, and a stable food supply chain. The results would lead to a drastic reduction in malnourishment, new wealth creation through more education, and less dependence on other countries for agriculture.

Lastly, donors must provide continuous and reliable funding to ensure that Yemen stays on the path for recovery, rather than provide support that dwindles over time.

**Economic Prosperity**

In the past, countries in the Arab Gulf viewed Yemen as a security threat and invested heavily at deterring potential security threats. Instead, there should be more focus on investment as this is essential in reducing future problems. This can involve infrastructure building,
investments in shipping and ports. Since Yemen is an oil poor nation, investments in green-energy, particularly solar, could create a successful industry for Yemen that will have relevance into the future.

Lastly, the long-term solution to economic stagnation is education. A country may be resource poor but can still have in the knowledge economy that can be lucrative. These sectors can range from anything involving research and development to healthcare. For Yemen to become competitive in its region is through education, which should be the number one priority for building back the country for peacetime. NGOs can only lay the groundwork for economic development. There must be greater access to education with an emphasis in these job sectors for Yemen to achieve long term economic stability.

**Conclusion**

For a decade, Yemen has suffered through a horrific war, that revealed the country’s long-standing problems. There was continuous ethnic tension between the Zaydis and Sunni Muslims, along with poor leadership, and decades of economic stagnation. The 2011 Arab Spring led to further political stability, ultimately sliding Yemen into war beginning in 2014. World leaders such as China should intervene in these matters due to the good relations, they have with both Saudi Arabia and Iran. The next step should be to implement a federalist system to grant the Zaydis, the minority group that makes up most of the Houthis, greater political power, on the condition that the Houthis and their rivals dissolve their military operations. From that point on, UN Peacekeepers would remain in the country to ensure order. With a federal system the Zaydis would gain greater autonomy and would be able to choose policies that would benefit their region. By no means will this federalism system resolve all conflict in Yemen, but it
would provide the Zaydis with a greater platform to voice their opinions. With the collaboration of UN Peacekeepers, strong security is needed from non-partisan Yemenis to create a sense of public confidence in its officials as well as to prevent terrorist attacks from being a significant issue in the future. What should be most emphasized is that economic development will take time, a given estimate would be 25 years. Aid must be properly managed. With this condition, several steps must be implemented which include, a checks and balance systems that demonstrate that aid is being properly managed in monthly reports that are verified from both the private and public sector, a proper plan to resolve aid management should issues arise, and concentration on a few aspects of government to show positive development, and continuous aid donations. This could be seen through education, healthcare, and tangible services that the public will benefit from. From an economic standpoint, Yemen has the potential to be an important shipping hub with its geographic location as well as for renewable energy. Yemen’s neighbors, particularly Saudi Arabia and other wealthy Gulf countries could support Yemen in this plan for Yemen to not repeat the cycle of economic stagnation. Lastly, education and entering the knowledge economy is essential for Yemen to have long term economic growth. Being a resource poor country, pursuing different sectors of the knowledge economy could generate new wealth for Yemen. Only with global cooperation can there be a path to peace.

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Annotated Bibliography


