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Bibliografische Information der Deutschen Nationalbibliothek

Die Deutsche Nationalbibliothek verzeichnet diese Publikation in der Deutschen Nationalbibliografie; detaillierte bibliografische Daten sind im Internet über <http://dnb.dnb.de> abrufbar.

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http://ireflect-journal.de/wp-content/uploads/2014/04/IR_2018_Volume-5_Issue-1.pdf

Universitätsverlag Potsdam 2019

<http://verlag.ub.uni-potsdam.de/>

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E-Mail: verlag@uni-potsdam.de

Die Schriftenreihe **Staat, Recht und Politik – Forschungs- und Diskussionspapiere = State, Law, and Politics – Research and Discussion Papers** wird herausgegeben von apl. Prof. Dr. iur. Norman Weiß, Universität Potsdam.

ISSN (online) 2509-6974

Kontakt:

weiss@uni-potsdam.de

Online veröffentlicht auf dem Publikationsserver der Universität Potsdam

<https://doi.org/10.25932/publishup-43071>

The Forgotten War: Yemen

Steven Kleemann

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Abstract

The conflict in Yemen seems forgotten considering the worldwide severe humanitarian catastrophes. Nevertheless, since the conflict escalated around four years ago, it became one of the worst humanitarian crises in recent history and has no end in sight. Thousands of people were killed even more displaced and the country is facing tremendous food insecurity as well as the world's largest cholera outbreak. It is no longer just a civil war between the Houthi- and Hadi-Faction. International interests play a major role and made it a proxy war between Saudi Arabia (and its allies) on one side and Iran on the other. This all happens at the expense of the civilian population. Therefore, it is urgent to analyse the actors involved, their interests within the conflict and furthermore searching for possibilities to overcome it.

Zusammenfassung

Der Konflikt im Jemen scheint angesichts der schweren humanitären Katastrophen weltweit in Vergessenheit geraten zu sein. Dennoch hat sich der Konflikt seit seiner Eskalation vor rund vier Jahren zu einer der schwersten humanitären Krisen der jüngeren Geschichte entwickelt ohne dass ein Ende in Sicht ist. Tausende von Menschen wurden getötet und noch mehr vertrieben; das Land steht vor einer enormen Ernährungsunsicherheit und dem größten Cholera-Ausbruch der Welt. Es ist nicht mehr allein ein Bürgerkrieg zwischen der Houthi- und Hadi-Fraktion. Internationale Interessen spielen eine große Rolle. Es handelt sich um einen Stellvertreterkrieg zwischen Saudi-Arabien (und seinen Verbündeten) auf der einen und dem Iran auf der anderen Seite. Dies alles geschieht auf Kosten der Zivilbevölkerung. Daher ist es dringend geboten, die beteiligten Akteure, ihre Interessen im Konflikt zu analysieren und darüber hinaus nach Möglichkeiten zu suchen, diesen zu überwinden.

I. Introduction

1. Outline and Dimension of the Topic

The current conflict in Yemen escalated nearly four years ago in mid-March 2015 but this only constitutes its climax. The origin of the conflict dates back considerably. But even in the recent years, before the upsurge of violent hostilities, the country suffered and needed humanitarian aid. Since the situation has escalated, more than 10.000 Yemenis have been killed and over 3.1 million people displaced.¹ The United Nations (UN) reckons that approximately 75 people are injured or killed every day.² The real, troubling figure might even be higher. Moreover, the country is facing tremendous food insecurity as well as the world's largest cholera outbreak. Therefore, it is important to get the parties involved back to the negotiating table, and even more urgently, to agree on an immediate ceasefire and provide the most vulnerable with humanitarian aid. Otherwise, one of the biggest humanitarian crises to date might happen in front of the international community's very eyes, which could be seen as a significant failure.

In the following there will be a brief overview of how the whole conflict emerged. Afterwards, due to restricted space, the focus of the article will be limited to the current conflict (after 2015), its main actors and their specific positions and interests. Finally, the concluding remarks will describe what a potential conflict solution could look like. These then come full circle and illuminate this article is focused only on certain aspects.

2. Conflict Background

Historically, Yemen was ruled and parcelled by different empires, caliphates and tribes.³ The division between North and South has its origin in the early twentieth century.⁴ This division lasted until 1990 when unification occurred under North Yemen's President Ali Abdullah Saleh.⁵ However, this was not long lasting, and the South declared itself to be separate again, leading to civil war in 1994. Since the end of this war especially, 'tribal identity' has become an important factor regarding matters of fulfilling state functions and organizing civil life.⁶

In 2011 the Arab Spring reached Yemen, and the calls for the resignation of President Saleh, who ruled the country for over 30 years, became loud and violent. During this time of instability, the Houthi seized the opportunity and consolidated their control of Sa'adah and neighbouring areas.⁷ Later in 2011, Saleh assented to an agreement negotiated by the Gulf Cooperation Council (GCC) which, in exchange for immunity from prosecution, transferred power to his Vice President Abdrabbuh Mansur Hadi.⁸ This agreement also included the establishment of the National Dialogue Conference (NDC), designed to bring the diverse political and religious parties concerned together and re-establish governmental structures.⁹ With hindsight, severe mistakes were made during this process. Briefly, despite the fact that civil society, the youth, women, and tribes were involved in the process, only their elites really participated. The population felt that their interests were not represented, and on crucial points like the division of the state, the southern issue and the transfer of power, there was no agreement possible. The so called 'just solution' document which avoided south-

ern secession but left open the major questions mentioned, was rejected within days after signing, including by several important signatory parties. Further, the Hadi Government failed to improve the Yemeni situation in general.¹⁰

The internal crisis was surpassed by the Saudi-led military intervention in March 2015, due to Saudi Arabia holding Iran responsible for backing up the Houthis to gain regional power.¹¹ This intervention brought a multidimensional, nearly insuperable regional conflict between two global players into an already complex civil war, significantly complicating the issue.¹²

Today, at its core the conflict is about political power on the national, regional and international level and involves also forces in every of these layers.¹³ The violence can be divided into four sets: The Houthi - Hadi conflict; the regional conflict between Iran and Saudi Arabia; the extremist organisations AQAP and IS which have seized the opportunity to establish themselves in Yemen; and local power affecting tribal and sectarian divisions.¹⁴

II. Actors

One of the main difficulties with the Yemen conflict is the exorbitant number of actors involved. Moreover, many of them are tied together in cumbersome alliances. The main actors can be identified as the (former) Houthi-Saleh Alliance on one side and the Anti-Houthi Bloc on the other. The Houthi-Saleh Bloc was, despite their mutual mistrust, more of a tactical alliance against what they viewed as a common existential threat.¹⁵ Recent events changed this alliance fundamentally. In August 2017, the Houthis publicly accused Saleh of treason¹⁶ and he annulled the alliance with the Houthis on December 3, whereupon he was killed the day after, presumably by Houthi fighters.¹⁷

The opposing Anti-Houthi Bloc is even more multifarious. On the domestic and regional level it includes various (mostly secular) Sunni Islamists, southern separatists, and tribal or regional fighters, all with various future visions and interests for Yemen.¹⁸ This faction's 'face' is the internationally-recognized government of President Hadi which is on the international level backed by the Saudi-led coalition.

1. The Houthi Faction

Before Saleh's death, the alliance between him and the Houthi arose primarily because of the sober post-NDC outcome. It was an amalgamation of former opponents only after 2011 when Islah, the main Sunni Islamist party became stronger and the local tribes and military dropped in importance.¹⁹ Saleh was originally deposed in 2011 and in the past, the Houthi have fought six wars against him and his political party, the General People's Congress (GPC).²⁰

a) Internal actors

On the domestic level there is the GPC and particularly Saleh's loyal supporters and his money, which backs up the fighters. After Saleh's death, it is uncertain to what extent the Houthis can cover the costs of war.²¹ The Houthi's religious leaders believe they are on a mission to reform the country and are driven by anti-Western,

anti-Saudi, and anti-Salafi/Wahhabi sentiment.²² They have a well-trained militia and can also rely on a network of local fighters.²³ Popular committees and tribes support the Houthis and there are also overlaps with Saleh's vast military, tribal and political loyalist networks.²⁴

b) External actors

Internationally, Iran is termed as the main Houthi supporter. Historically, Iran did not have much influence in Yemen, but the Houthis' founder was motivated by Iran's revolution and the hope of their own, Zaydi-based one in Yemen.²⁵ The Iranian ruling religion, Twelver Shi'ism, is however not consonant with the Houthis' Zaydi beliefs and therefore they often deny Iranian, or their Lebanese ally, Hezbollah's, influence.²⁶ Further, with regard to diplomacy, Russia aligned itself with the Houthi-Saleh Bloc referring to regional dynamics that tie Russia and Iran together against Saudi Arabia.²⁷

2. The Hadi-Faction

The Anti-Houthi Bloc is even more complex than the Houthi Faction, especially when it comes to the entanglement of international actors.

a) Internal Actors

On the domestic level, there is the internationally recognized Hadi government which is highly dependent on external political and military backing.²⁸ The southern separatists (also called Al-Hirak or Southern Resistance) which are themselves divided about how and when the south should be independent.²⁹ The Sunni Islamist can also be divided into the most important group, Islah, which is, like the GPC, a political party with ambitions to rule Yemen; the Salafi Fighters which are mostly non-political and non-violent but sharp Houthi critics; and IS and AQAP, the local Al Qaeda branch, which are controversial prime beneficiaries of the war and ideological enemies of the Houthis even though they reject the Hadi government.³⁰ Further, at the beginning of 2017 in the city of Aden, the Southern Transitional Council (STC) was established. The STC now claims power over the entire southern region.³¹ This fragmentation of the country is propelled by some of the external actors (Saudi Arabia and the United Arab Emirates). And finally the tribal or regionally based groups which defend their territory but are also quite heterogeneous with regard to alliances and whom to blame for the misery of war.³²

b) External actors

With regard to external actors, the weightiest is Saudi Arabia, which runs the military campaign, followed by the United Arab Emirates (UAE).³³ The coalition is further patched up by other regional Sunni-majority Arab states³⁴, including all GCC members except Oman.³⁵ Despite the fact that Saudi Arabia and the UAE form the main part of the coalition, they pursue varying goals and strategies.³⁶ While the Saudi's main objective is to vanquish the Houthis and to bring back Hadi in power, the UAE has more interest in the southern region where they have military forces on the ground.³⁷ A key priority for the UAE is to acquire control over the port of Aden.³⁸

The US, EU, France, and the UK are also involved. While they mostly support the alliance through arms sales, US involvement goes significantly beyond this by providing logistical and intelligence support.³⁹ Thus, it is arguable that at least here, the conflict changed from being a local towards becoming a regional one. Further, there is involvement by the United Nations Security Council (SC), since it passed Resolution 2216 which – tolerated by Russia and China and influenced by Arab states – unambiguously supports the Hadi government.⁴⁰

III. Issues regarding the conflict

Issues concerning the conflict include political, institutional, social and immense humanitarian ones within the country, the Southern issue, the Houthi issue, transitional justice, statebuilding, military, security, good governance, independence of specific entities, development and others.⁴¹

The main concerns of local Yemeni people are “the economic situation, the political crisis, the security situation, the provision of public services and corruption.”⁴²

The Hadi government claimed their issues are also rebuilding the country and defeating the rebels and terrorists. Yemen’s Tourism Minister Qubaty said: “We need to wage war against terrorists, Al-Qaeda and Daesh so people can see a bright future,” and “[t]here are other key matters regarding rebuilding the country, reconstruction and development work [...]”⁴³ Hadi further said that Saudi Arabia provided \$10 billion in aid “for the reconstruction of liberated provinces, [...]”⁴⁴

The Houthi movement was primarily created to revitalise Zaidism, so they have a religious issue, but their stance is actually more political and tribal than sectarian.⁴⁵ Saleh’s primary objective was to regain political power and relevance. Their instable and ultimately broken alliance was bound together by the belief they were defending the nation and honour of Yemen against foreign, existence-threatening invaders.⁴⁶ While the Houthis see a Saudi/US conspiracy to rule the country and import Sunni extremists, Saleh’s supporters feel more threatened by Saudi Arabia.⁴⁷

On the external level there are the geopolitical interests of Iran, Saudi Arabia, the GCC, the US, UK and France. For Saudi Arabia, the security issue is of great importance, for the US and the UAE it is counterterrorism.⁴⁸ Furthermore, US interests include a stable Yemeni government, and free passage in the Bab al-Mandeb⁴⁹, as well as a safe Saudi border.⁵⁰

Iran and the Houthis share comparable geopolitical interests, “Iran seeks to challenge Saudi and US dominance of the region, and the Houthis are the primary opposition to Hadi’s Saudi- and US-backed government in Sana’a.”⁵¹

The UN has raised great concerns about the humanitarian situation in Yemen and also emphasizes social and economic aspects, as stated by Lowcock:⁵² the negative impact of “the non-payment of civil servants’ salaries, [...] has had on slowing or ceasing basic services, [...] or inhibiting efforts to address the cholera epidemic.”⁵³ Further, the UN urged in Resolution 2216 a comprehensive ceasefire and imposed an arms embargo.⁵⁴ The resolution notably targets the Houthis. It states they should

withdraw their forces and lay down their arms, respect the official Hadi government and refrain from threatening neighbouring states.⁵⁵

Nevertheless, it should be considered that the involvement of various foreign actors in Yemen alters nothing in the circumstance that the conflict is still closely linked to local dynamics.⁵⁶

IV. Actors' positions and interests

It is necessary to differentiate between the actors' positions and interests. Positions are what actors publicly say they want, but what the parties really want to achieve - their true interests - might lie beneath⁵⁷

The members of the (former) Houthi-Saleh faction had in common that they wanted to gain political power. Saleh again and the Houthis as they know they cannot effectively control all of Yemen, be at least a part of the internal power structure.⁵⁸ However, the Houthis interests behind this position are, seeking more autonomy and redraw the federal regions and thus provide them possible access to the Red Sea and potentially also to oil pipelines, reserves or export facilities.⁵⁹ Further, they want to keep their militia and perhaps eventually integrate it into the national army.⁶⁰ After the killing of Saleh, his son Ahmed Ali called for revenge on Saudi TV: "I will lead the battle until the last Houthi is thrown out of Yemen"⁶¹

As mentioned, Iran seeks to challenge regional dominances. It is accused of being the Houthis' major supporter, but in fact its influence is much less. Iranian officials also deny having much influence and summarize their interests thusly:

"We didn't need to send arms to Yemen before the war, and now it is practically impossible to do so. But from a strategic perspective, the conflict in Yemen has no cost for us and even has some benefits. The reality is that the Saudis are bogged down there. The war is inflicting a tremendous cost in blood, treasure and reputation on them amid serious financial difficulties."⁶²

The union between Hadi and Saudi Arabia has complex, competing and even partly contrary ambitions and priorities in terms of what they want in Yemen, but they existentially depend on each other. The Hadi government is not strong and has no popular base in Yemen, hence it requires its Gulf sponsors and Saudi Arabia needs Hadi as long as his government is internationally recognized: his invitation for intervention "is the cornerstone of the Saudi justification for war."⁶³ Saudi Arabia itself says its position is implementing Resolution 2216 and it sees their national and international security and interests threatened by Iran through backing up the Houthis. The failed Houthi missile attack in November 2017 against Riyadh's international airport was seen by Saudi Arabia as an attack by Iran. The Foreign Minister Adel bin Ahmed al-Jubei said: "It was an Iranian missile, launched by Hezbollah, from territory occupied by the Houthis in Yemen, [...] We see this as an act of war"⁶⁴. Nikki Haley⁶⁵ also accused Iran and said: these weapons "might as well have had 'made in Iran' stickers all over."⁶⁶ This would have been a violation of the UN's arms embargo. However, a UN panel of experts perceived that despite a certain similarity to Iranian-manufactured Qiam-1 missile, there was "no evidence as to the identity of the broker

or supplier"⁶⁷; furthermore, they found that the missile also contained American-manufactured components.⁶⁸

After Saleh's death, the upcoming increase of the conflict between the STC and the Hadi government in January 2018, the UAE and the Saudis were obliged to find common ground and thus they jointly launched an offensive against the port of Hodeidah.⁶⁹ The international community is afraid that this will drastically worsen the humanitarian situation and thus, Martin Griffith (the Special Envoy of the United Nations Secretary General for Yemen, SESGY) tried to stop the offensive through mediation which ultimately was unsuccessful.⁷⁰ The coalition thought that the attack on Hodeidah port will defeat the Houthis. However, up to now without success. Conversely, as feared, the humanitarian situation has aggravated.⁷¹

Saudi Arabia's underlying interest however is the profiling of crown prince and Defence Minister Mohammed bin Salman. It is said that this is his strict test for gaining domestic political power within Saudi Arabia.⁷² Thus he has also a personal interest, which makes a conflict solution even more complicated. Furthermore, the intense bombing campaign raised concerns among Senior US officials, who pressed for restraint, since it undercuts shared political goals.⁷³ According to leaked e-mails, the crown prince himself told two former US officials that he "wants out" of the long ongoing war he started and that he does not object to US approximation with Iran.⁷⁴ Thus, his actual objective may be a face-saving war exit.

The US position is fighting terrorists to stabilize the country, defeating Iranian proliferation in the region, securing the Saudi border, implementing the NDC outcome, and SC Resolution 2216, as well as a safe and free passage in the Bab al-Mandeb. The interest behind the latter is, however, economic. On the one hand, the US sells almost \$ 110 billion—worth of weapons to the Saudis⁷⁵ and on the other, 4.7 million barrels of oil per day transit through the Bab al-Mandeb checkpoint.⁷⁶

Furthermore, US and European positions of support for their regional ally has recently changed. There is increasing discomfort with regard to the war, the development of AQAP and IS, and especially the humanitarian catastrophe which has worsened dramatically due to the established Saudi blockade. The White House released a statement, surprisingly contrary to its usually unreserved support for the coalition, calling on the Saudis to "completely allow food, fuel, water, and medicine to reach the Yemeni people who desperately need it."⁷⁷ So, the US position is still the same but its interests have recently changed to a more humanitarian focus.

What all parties to the conflict have in common is the goal of achieving peace and also the fight against AQAP and IS. However, both sides blame each other for allowing these groups to gain power and also for not reaching a peace agreement.

V. Roadmap planning and possibilities to overcome the conflict

1. Current situation

The conflict has many domestic and international levels which complicates the road towards peace significantly. UN assisted negotiations have recently stagnated and

political groups fragmented whereby extremist groups like AQAP or IS immediately step into emerging spaces and use this instability to gain power.⁷⁸ On the face of it, the conflict is often seen as a proxy war between Saudi Arabia and Iran, but in fact the conflict is in its roots domestic and therefore a promising way to overcome the conflict is by solving domestic issues. It is highly unlikely to take a business-as-usual approach to Yemen.⁷⁹ “Most peace deals collapse within five years”⁸⁰ and it is far more complicated when multiple factions on the ground, a wide array of third-party state interests, and a former flawed peace deal excluding key parties are present.⁸¹ In Yemen, all of these factors exist.

A peace agreement can be successful when a certain level of the following three factors is fulfilled: the degree of public validity acceptance of the agreement and a unified Yemen; the degree of popular peace and coexistence acceptance; and the degree to which the representatives and interlocutor accomplish to implement the agreement within their community.⁸²

2. Possible future steps

In March 2016 the parties signalled some flexibility to UN Special Envoy Ismail Ould Cheik Ahmed and agreed to stop fighting, swap prisoners for trust building, and start negotiations in Kuwait. This pause could allow Yemenis to focus on AQAP push backs.⁸³ Unfortunately this did not last long and the Kuwait talks ended without any agreement.⁸⁴

The most recent peace attempt was in December 2018 as officials of Yemen’s internationally recognised government and the Houthis agreed during UN-mediated talks in Sweden on the so called Stockholm agreement.⁸⁵ The essential elements in it were again a prisoner swap, consensus about mutual transfers from Hodeida and a “commitment to discuss de-escalation at another front-line city, Taiz.”⁸⁶ Particularly, the Hodeida agreement was significant. This deal is so far the biggest step forward in UN mediation since 2015. However, it can rather be considered as a humanitarian impulse instead of strategic efforts towards peace. The parties made it –through not referring to peace at all– clear in the text, that this did not constitute the beginning of a peace process.⁸⁷ Despite its imperfect- and impreciseness, the Stockholm Agreement was hard-won and if it cannot be maintained, a similar agreement will most likely not be achieved in the near future.

Therefore, future steps should ensure that all involved actors are willing to engage in peace talks with everyone. In the past, Saudi Arabia officially rejected engaging in high level talks with Houthis.⁸⁸ Saudi Arabia’s security concerns should be included and addressed between Saudi-Yemen official talks and informal Track II discussions.⁸⁹ Further, Iran also needs to be involved also in border security relations addressing ‘everyone’s interest’, and fighting AQAP/IS, which might through everyone’s cooperation satisfy the Saudis’ major concern that Yemen could slip into Iran’s orbit⁹⁰ and might give Saudi Arabia the opportunity to exit the war in a face-saving way.

Further, during the past transitional period, the NDC, international resources focused mainly on three tasks: “addressing the political wrangling among the coun-

try's previous elite; maintaining President Hadi's position; and conducting counter-terrorism initiatives."⁹¹ But this overlooked the main concerns of local people. They felt excluded and since the conflict may only be solved by addressing the "deepening sectarian and tribal divides at the local level"⁹² this promising path should be pursued. In the absence of all state functions, Yemeni civil society organizations, local tribes, youth, and especially women managed daily life in the country.⁹³ "Tribal identities are stronger than national ones and the unrest there threatens to break up the state."⁹⁴ 'Lessons learned' from past negotiations should therefore be the inclusion of communities, local mediators and interlocutors, addressing growing divisions within municipalities, and letting local organizations and traditional leaders help overcome obstacles, since they are already present and accepted in the society.⁹⁵

VI. Conclusion

The glimpse provided is just a fraction of the whole issue. There are other ways to look at the conflict, and not every actor, issue, position and interest behind could be addressed here. However, this overview demonstrates the complexity of the conflict and highlights one promising path to overcoming the conflict: ensuring that the peace process is inclusive, participatory and representative across society.⁹⁶ The international community right now has an opportunity to build an inclusive platform for peace talks and even if the international conflict persists, harmonizing the local communities could make them reject violence and protect themselves from staying in a cycle of conflict.⁹⁷ Since previous attempts at peace and the NDC failed, past mistakes must be prevented and a new understanding of policy objectives needs to be addressed. This should include in the long-term: peace talks on every track in the Multi-Track-Diplomacy system and a 'bottom-up approach' to forming sustainable peace in Yemen.

Nevertheless, the most urgent step to stop the acute suffering of the population is an immediate ceasefire widely accepted by the national and international actors. The humanitarian crisis cannot wait until a political agreement is reached.

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