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THESIS

**ENDING YEMEN'S CIVIL WAR: BARRIERS TO PEACE
AND PROSPECTS FOR A NEGOTIATED SETTLEMENT**

by

Mithaq Ali Ahmed Aljarf

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Thesis Advisor:

Second Reader:

Mohammed M. Hafez

James A. Russell

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FOR A NEGOTIATED SETTLEMENT**

Mithaq Ali Ahmed Aljarf
Civilian, Yemen, Ministry of Foreign Affairs
BAPS, Sana'a University, 2008

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**NAVAL POSTGRADUATE SCHOOL
December 2023**

Approved by: Mohammed M. Hafez
Advisor

James A. Russell
Second Reader

Afshon P. Ostovar
Associate Chair for Research
Department of National Security Affairs

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ABSTRACT

The Houthi movement has been engaged in conflict with the Yemeni government since 2004. In September 2014, after Houthis took over the Yemeni capital Sana'a, the conflict escalated to a full-scale civil war between the Yemeni government and the Houthis. The conflict reached its climax in 2015, when the Saudi-led Coalition intervened to restore legitimacy in Yemen. Since then, Yemen has been mired in a civil war. This research delves into the core question of why peace continues to elude Yemen, offering crucial insights into the challenges and potential solutions for conflict termination. Analyzing the history and dynamics of the Yemeni civil war, this study finds that the failure of past peace talks that took place in Geneva, Kuwait, and Stockholm reflects the persistent mistrust between the government and Houthis, coupled with a lack of effective trust building and enforcement mechanisms. This study also highlights the impact of external actors, further complicating the peace process. Ultimately, this research underscores the need for multifaceted, coordinated efforts to achieve a lasting and meaningful peace. With the international community's support, there is a potential window of opportunity to bring the warring parties together and pave the way for a brighter future in Yemen.

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LIST OF ACRONYMS AND ABBREVIATIONS

BYF	Believing Youth Forum
EFPs	Explosive Formed Penetrators
FARC	Fuerzas Armadas Revolutionarias de Colombia
GCC	Gulf Cooperation Council
GPC	General People's Congress
IEDs	Improvised Explosive Devices
IRGC	Islamic Revolutionary Guard Corps
ISIS	Islamic State in Iraq and Syria
JMP	Joint Meetings Parties
NDC	The Yemeni National Dialogue Conference
PNPA	the Peace and National Partnership Agreement
RCC	UN-led Redeployment Coordination Committee
STC	the Southern Transitional Council
U.S.	United States of America
UAE	United Arab Emirates
UAVs	Unmanned Aerial Vehicles
UN	United Nations
UNMHA	United Nations Mission in Support of the Hudaydah Agreement
UNSC	United Nations Security Council
USSR	Union of Soviet Socialist Republics

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I. INTRODUCTION

The primary aim of this introductory section is to provide a comprehensive context for this research on the ongoing Yemeni conflict, outlining its historical progression from 2004 to its status as a full-scale civil war. In parallel, this chapter introduces the central research question and underscores its significance across academic, practical, and humanitarian dimensions. The academic goal is to advance existing theories on civil wars and conflict resolution, offering insights that can benefit both researchers and practitioners in the field of peacebuilding. On a practical level, it aims to present strategies to overcome the key obstacles to resolving the Yemeni civil war, with the ultimate humanitarian objective of alleviating the suffering experienced by those affected by the conflict and fostering peace in a region characterized by persistent instability. This introductory section serves as a sturdy foundation for the subsequent chapters, guiding readers through our exploration of the Yemeni civil war and its potential avenues toward resolution.

A. MAJOR RESEARCH QUESTION

Since 2004, the Houthi movement has been engaged in conflict with the Yemeni government. The situation deteriorated into a civil war between the government and the Houthis after the latter seized the capital, Sana'a, in September 2014. The conflict reached its climax in 2015 when the Coalition to Restore Legitimacy in Yemen, led by Saudi Arabia and the United Arab Emirates (UAE), intervened to prevent the Houthis from controlling more cities, and to restore the authority of the internationally recognized government. Since then, Yemen has been mired in a civil war, regional intervention, and Saudi-Iranian proxy warfare. The humanitarian toll has been unbearably high. Since 2015, the United Nations (UN) has facilitated four major peace talks between the Houthis and the government to end the crisis in Yemen. The first was held in Geneva in June 2015, the second peace talks took place in Geneva in December 2015, the third one was in Kuwait in April 2016, and the fourth major negotiation was in Stockholm in December 2018. However, all these initiatives have failed to deliver a peace agreement to end the conflict. The scholarly literature on civil conflict termination suggests that peace settlements are hard to achieve

because of the credible commitments problem, the role of external state interference, and the absence of international peacekeeping forces. This thesis will probe these potential explanations to answer the question: Why is peace missing in Yemen and what can be done to terminate this conflict?

B. SIGNIFICANCE OF THE RESEARCH QUESTION

The research has significant academic, practical, and humanitarian significance, and its findings could have implications for conflict resolution and peacebuilding efforts. From an academic perspective, this research contributes to the scholarly literature on civil wars and conflict resolution. By building on existing theories and applying them to a specific case study, the research can help to refine and validate existing theories. This can lead to a deeper understanding of the causes of civil wars, the factors that contribute to their termination, and the effectiveness of various strategies for achieving peace. Such insights can help researchers and practitioners to better design and implement peacebuilding interventions in conflict-affected countries.

From a practical perspective, this research has implications for policymakers and practitioners involved in conflict resolution and peacebuilding. By identifying the main obstacles to ending the Yemeni civil war and proposing strategies for addressing them, the research can inform the design and implementation of peacebuilding interventions in Yemen and other conflict-affected countries. This can help to improve the effectiveness of such interventions, reduce human suffering, and promote stability and prosperity in conflict-affected regions.

Finally, the research has significant humanitarian significance. The civil war is a major cause of human suffering, displacement, and death in Yemen.¹ The conflict has resulted in the displacement of more than four million individuals, precipitating challenges such as cholera outbreaks, shortages of essential medicines, and the looming specter of

¹ Human Rights Watch, “Yemen: Events of 2020,” in *World Report 2021* (New York: Human Rights Watch, 2021), <https://www.hrw.org/world-report/2021/country-chapters/yemen>.

famine.² If successful, efforts to end the conflict could lead to a reduction in violence, a decrease in human suffering, and an improvement in the economic and political stability of the region. The research's findings could help policymakers and practitioners to identify and address the root causes of the conflict, develop effective strategies for peacebuilding, and facilitate the negotiation and implementation of a peace agreement.

C. LITERATURE REVIEW AND HYPOTHESES

Civil war termination is a major puzzle in the civil conflicts' literature. Many conflicts endure because the combatants cannot agree on a peace settlement. According to data from the Uppsala Conflict Data Program, the average duration of intrastate armed conflicts (which includes civil wars) since the end of World War II is around seven years. However, many civil wars last much longer than this average, with some conflicts lasting for decades. For example, the civil war in Sudan lasted for more than 20 years, while the conflict in Colombia stretched on for more than 50 years. Yemen is entering its ninth year of civil war.³

Ending civil wars quickly is important for several reasons. Firstly, the length of a civil war is connected to casualty rates. Studies have shown that longer civil wars tend to result in higher numbers of casualties, both among combatants and civilians. For example, Collier and Hoeffler found that longer civil wars had significantly higher rates of battle deaths, which are deaths resulting from direct combat between opposing forces.⁴ Similarly, Lacina and Gleditsch found that the duration of a civil war was positively correlated with the number of civilian deaths.⁵

² World Bank, *Voices from Yemen* (Washington, DC: International Bank for Reconstruction and Development, 2023), 4–45, <https://documents1.worldbank.org/curated/en/099090823085037549/pdf/P17919407443d608809f1d00ce0f6561311.pdf>.

³ “Countries in Conflict,” UCDP – Uppsala Conflict Data Program, accessed November 8, 2023, <https://ucdp.uu.se/>.

⁴ Paul Collier and Anke Hoeffler, “Greed and Grievance in Civil War,” *Oxford Economic Papers* 56, no. 4 (2004): 563–95.

⁵ Bethany Lacina and Nils Petter Gleditsch, “Monitoring Trends in Global Combat: A New Dataset of Battle Deaths,” *European Journal of Population* 21, no. 2–3 (2005): 145–66, <https://doi.org/10.1007/s10680-005-6851-6>.

Secondly, countries can easily fall into conflict traps where violence destroys the economy, and the destruction of the economy breeds more violence.⁶ This is why it is common for countries that have experienced one civil war to experience a second one, and poorer countries like Yemen are particularly vulnerable to falling into a conflict trap because it is already underdeveloped economically.

Lastly, enduring conflicts become breeding grounds for transnational violent extremist organizations. One example is Afghanistan in the 1990s, following the Soviet withdrawal and the subsequent civil war. The Taliban emerged during this period and capitalized on the power vacuum and instability to establish control over large parts of the country, and they hosted Al-Qaeda bases.⁷ Another example is Lebanon in the 1980s, which was marked by a long and devastating civil war. During this period, Hezbollah emerged as a major powerbroker in Lebanon and in the region.⁸ Similarly, the ongoing conflict in Syria since 2011 has created a breeding ground for transnational violent extremist organizations. Groups like the Islamic State in Iraq and Syria (ISIS) and Al-Qaeda have taken advantage of the instability and the power vacuum to establish a presence in the country and recruit new members.⁹ That is why it is critically important to end the civil war in Yemen, a country in a region already mired in endless conflict and instability.

Scholars have theorized why civil wars do not come to an end quickly. There are at least four major theories focused on *credible commitments problem*; the role of *international mediation and peacekeeping intervention*; *proxy conflicts*; and *power sharing agreements*. Subsequent sections will cover each of these theories and their implications on how it contributes to end the conflict in Yemen.

⁶ Paul Collier, “The Market for Civil War,” *Foreign Policy*, November 2, 2009.

⁷ Thomas Hegghammer, “The Rise of Muslim Foreign Fighters: Islam and the Globalization of Jihad,” *International Security* 35, no. 3 (2010): 53–94.

⁸ Counter Extremism Project, *Lebanon: Extremism and Terrorism* (New York: Counter Extremism Project, 2023), <https://www.counterextremism.com/countries/lebanon-extremism-and-terrorism>.

⁹ Florian Waetzel, review of *Review of The Syrian Jihad: Al-Qaeda, the Islamic State, and the Evolution of an Insurgency*, by Charles Lister, *Democracy and Security* 12, no. 2 (2016): 127–31.

1. Credible Commitments Problem

Ending a civil war is a complex and multifaceted challenge, with peace settlements often hindered by formidable obstacles. Walter explains that civil conflict settlements fail because parties struggle to persuade one another to comply with the terms of the agreement that lead to disarmament and because parties are skeptical of any plan or settlement that they believe poses an existential threat. Since the warring parties cannot fully trust institutions that make promises, the parties have little incentive to lay down their arms for fear of betrayal in the future.¹⁰

In civil wars, credible commitment problems arise because of the lack of trust between warring factions. Rebel groups may be skeptical of the government's willingness to negotiate in good faith, and vice versa.¹¹ Each side may fear that the other will use the negotiation process to gain time, regroup, and launch a renewed attack. As a result, parties may be unwilling to make concessions, fearing that the other side will not reciprocate. For example, Thompson shows how armed groups fall into the credible commitment problem and the emergence of a security dilemma among demobilized Fuerzas Armadas Revolucionarias de Colombia (FARC) members in the context of multilateral conflict. It shows how FARC members' confidence in the government's implementation of the peace agreement was affected.¹²

Thomas, Reed, and Wolford argue that rebel groups face a credibility dilemma in which they must demonstrate their strength and commitment to their cause to maintain support from their followers, while also demonstrating their willingness to negotiate with the government to achieve their goals.¹³ Making large demands allows rebels to

¹⁰ Barbara F. Walter, "The Critical Barrier to Civil War Settlement," *International Organization* 51, no. 3 (1997): 335–64, <https://doi.org/10.1162/002081897550384>.

¹¹ Walter.

¹² Andrew Thomson, "The Credible Commitment Problem and Multiple Armed Groups: FARC Perceptions of Insecurity during Disarmament in the Colombian Peace Process," *Conflict, Security & Development* 20, no. 4 (2020): 497–517, <https://doi.org/10.1080/14678802.2020.1794139>.

¹³ Jakana L. Thomas, William Reed, and Scott Wolford, "The Rebels' Credibility Dilemma," *International Organization* 70, no. 3 (Summer 2016): 477–511, <https://doi.org/10.1017/S0020818316000175>.

demonstrate their strength and commitment to their cause, which can help maintain support from their followers.¹⁴ Moreover, the authors argue that even if these demands are ultimately rejected by the government, they can still serve a strategic purpose for the rebels. Making large demands can put pressure on the government to make concessions and may also serve as a signal to the international community that the rebels are serious about their cause. Additionally, the authors suggest that making large demands can help rebels establish their reputation as a credible negotiating partner, which can be beneficial in future negotiations.¹⁵

The credible commitment problem can make it difficult to resolve civil wars through negotiation and compromise. To overcome this problem, third-party mediators may be brought in to help build trust and facilitate negotiations. Walter found that peace talks fail if there is no “third-party intervention.”¹⁶ Thus, my first hypothesis:

H1: The main reason that combatants in the Yemeni civil war cannot terminate the conflict is due to the mutual mistrust between the Houthi rebels and the government of Yemen. Absent enforceable guarantees, the conflict is likely to endure. Therefore, trust-building measures and enforcement of negotiated agreements are necessary steps to advance the peace process toward conflict termination.

2. International Mediation and Peacekeeping Intervention

Peacekeeping is a key tool for promoting conflict resolution and settlement in international relations. Peacekeeping operations aim to help manage and resolve conflicts by providing a neutral and impartial third-party presence on the ground. Enforcement mechanisms such as peacekeeping forces and international monitoring can help create conditions for credible commitments and sustained peace. Fortna argues that the presence of peacekeepers is important to prevent a slide back into civil war. The post-cold war period has proven the importance of the international community’s intervention as a tool for

¹⁴ Thomas, Reed, and Wolford.

¹⁵ Thomas, Reed, and Wolford.

¹⁶ Walter, “The Critical Barrier to Civil War Settlement.”

conflict management.¹⁷ Also, Fortna examines the role of peacekeeping in the termination of interstate conflicts and finds that peacekeeping can be effective in promoting settlement. She argues that peacekeeping can reduce the uncertainty and mistrust between conflicting parties and can provide a secure environment for negotiation and compromise.¹⁸

Hultman, Kathman, and Shannon presented evidence that large-scale UN troops reduce civilian deaths; in addition, isolating groups reduces the prospect of one side pushing militarily on the other, opening opportunities for ceasefires and peace negotiations.¹⁹ Peacekeeping operations may also be more effective when they are conducted by a coalition of countries rather than relying on a single country to lead the effort. Sandler also discusses the issue of burden sharing, where some countries contribute more to peacekeeping operations than others. He argues that burden sharing is important for the long-term sustainability of peacekeeping operations, and that countries should be incentivized to contribute more.²⁰

It is important to also examine the factors that influence the success of peacekeeping operations, including the nature of the conflict, the level of violence, and the political environment. Sandler emphasizes the importance of having clear goals and a strong mandate for peacekeeping operations, and of ensuring that the host country is committed to the peace process.²¹ On the other hand, if the peacekeeping mission to monitor the agreement implementation and report violations falters, mistrust arises between the warring parties, and the committee fails to build trust between the parties, and thus fails to implement the agreement. For example, Palik found that the United Nations Mission in Support of the Hudaydah Agreement (UNMHA) failed to carry out the mission

¹⁷ Virginia Page Fortna, “Does Peacekeeping Keep Peace? International Intervention and the Duration of Peace After Civil War,” *International Studies Quarterly* 48, no. 2 (June 2004): 269–92, <https://doi.org/10.1111/j.0020-8833.2004.00301.x>.

¹⁸ Fortna.

¹⁹ Lisa Hultman, Jacob Kathman, and Megan Shannon, “United Nations Peacekeeping and Civilian Protection in Civil War,” *American Journal of Political Science* 57, no. 4 (2013): 875–91.

²⁰ Todd Sandler, “International Peacekeeping Operations: Burden Sharing and Effectiveness,” *The Journal of Conflict Resolution* 61, no. 9 (2017): 1875–97.

²¹ Sandler.

due to the restrictions imposed on its members by the Houthis as well as the manipulation of information, which led to the failure of the confidence-building process between the Yemeni government and the Houthis.²² Thus, my second hypothesis:

H2. Peacekeeping forces are necessary to enforce a peace deal by addressing the credible commitments problem. Peacekeeping forces can act as a neutral third party that can monitor and enforce the terms of the agreement, ensuring compliance from both sides. This can help to build trust between the parties and prevent a breakdown in the peace process.

3. Proxy Warfare as Barrier to Peace

The literature on proxy war theory is extensive and has contributed significantly to our understanding of the dynamics of conflict and the role of external actors in shaping the outcomes of conflicts. Proxy war occurs when external actors use local proxies, such as rebel groups or political factions, to wage conflict on their behalf in a civil war. The aim of proxy wars is to achieve strategic objectives while minimizing the risk of direct confrontation between major powers.²³

Shapiro examines the use of proxy wars as a strategy for suppressing violence in weak and fragile states. He argues that external actors can use local proxies to maintain order and stability in these contexts, but that this approach can have unintended consequences and lead to long-term instability. Shapiro provides several case studies, including the conflicts in Afghanistan, Colombia, and Somalia.²⁴

Proxy wars can create a situation in which external actors have a vested interest in perpetuating the conflict, either to maintain their strategic advantage or to prevent a rival from gaining ground. This can undermine efforts to negotiate a peace agreement and can

²² Julia Palik, “Watchdogs of Pause: The Challenges of Ceasefire Monitoring in Yemen,” *International Peacekeeping* 28, no. 3 (2021): 444–69, <https://doi.org/0.1080/13533312.2021.1918004>.

²³ Idean Salehyan, Kristian Skrede Gleditsch, and David E. Cunningham, “Explaining External Support for Insurgent Groups,” *International Organization* 65, no. 4 (October 2011): 709–44, <https://doi.org/10.1017/S0020818311000233>.

²⁴ Eli Berman and David A. Lake, eds., *Proxy Wars: Suppressing Violence through Local Agents* (Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press, 2019), <https://www.jstor.org/stable/10.7591/j.ctvvndp0>.

prolong the conflict.²⁵ Furthermore, external intervention in civil wars can have both positive and negative effects. On one hand, external actors can provide critical support to one side of the conflict, potentially tipping the balance of power and bringing an end to the violence. Additionally, external actors can use their leverage to negotiate a peace settlement between the warring parties. Salehyan, Gleditsch, and Cunningham found a high probability of supporting rebel groups in competitive environments between states, as well as a higher rate of support for the rebels in the case of the existence external support for the government.²⁶

On the other hand, external proxy intervention can also prolong or exacerbate the conflict, as external actors may have their own interests and agendas that are not aligned with those of the parties to the conflict. For example, external actors may be motivated by access to natural resources or strategic positioning in the region, rather than by a desire to end the conflict. Salehyan, Gleditsch, and Cunningham found that external support prolongs the conflict and makes an agreement hard to reach.²⁷ Thus, my third hypothesis:

H3. State sponsorship of proxy actors by Saudi Arabia and Iran is a negative factor for peace making. Therefore, encouraging neighboring rivals to withdraw their support for the combatants is a necessary step to ending the Yemeni civil conflict.

4. Power Sharing Agreements

The literature on power sharing theory provides a nuanced understanding of the conditions under which power sharing can be an effective tool for conflict prevention and democratic governance. While there is no consensus on the benefits or risks of this strategy, the literature highlights the importance of careful consideration and analysis before implementing power sharing arrangements. Lijphart argues that power sharing is necessary in societies that are characterized by deep ethnic, linguistic, or religious divisions.²⁸ He

²⁵ Dylan Balch-Lindsay, Andrew J. Enterline, and Kyle A. Joyce, “Third-Party Intervention and the Civil War Process,” *Journal of Peace Research* 45, no. 3 (2008): 345–63.

²⁶ Salehyan, Gleditsch, and Cunningham, “Explaining External Support for Insurgent Groups.”

²⁷ Salehyan, Gleditsch, and Cunningham.

²⁸ Arend Lijphart, *Democracy in Plural Societies: A Comparative Exploration* (New Haven, CT: Yale University Press, 1977), 53–103, <https://www.jstor.org/stable/j.ctt1dszvhq>.

suggests that power sharing can take various forms, such as consociationalism (where different groups are represented in government) or proportional representation (where seats in government are allocated based on the proportion of votes received).²⁹

Building on Lijphart's work, scholars have examined the conditions under which power sharing is most effective. For example, O'Leary argues that power sharing is most effective when it is combined with other measures, such as constitutional reform and the provision of minority rights.³⁰ Other scholars have focused on the challenges of implementing power sharing in practice. For example, McEvoy argues that power sharing can be difficult to implement in societies that are deeply divided, as it requires a significant degree of trust and cooperation between different groups.³¹

More recent scholarship has examined the potential benefits of power sharing beyond conflict prevention. For example, Ottmann argues that power sharing can reduce the likelihood of a return to conflict by creating incentives for former rebels to participate in the political process rather than resorting to violence. The author argues that power-sharing can address the underlying causes of conflict by providing a means for previously excluded groups to participate in the political process.³²

However, the effectiveness of power sharing depends on its design and implementation. Ottmann suggests that power sharing agreements must be inclusive and provide meaningful participation for all groups to be effective. The author also argues that power sharing is not a panacea, and that other factors such as economic development and the provision of basic services are also important for preventing postwar rebellions.³³ A useful tool for analyzing different forms of power sharing arrangements and understanding how they can be used to promote peace and stability in post-conflict societies is the

²⁹ Lijphart, 104–41.

³⁰ Joanne McEvoy and Brendan O'Leary, *Power Sharing in Deeply Divided Places* (Philadelphia, PA: University of Pennsylvania Press, 2013), 1–64, ProQuest Ebook Central.

³¹ McEvoy and O'Leary, 30–41.

³² Martin Ottmann, "Peace for Our Time? Examining the Effect of Power-Sharing on Postwar Rebellions," *Journal of Peace Research* 57, no. 5 (2020): 617–31, <https://doi.org/10.1177/0022343319883676>.

³³ Ottmann.

framework discussed by Hartzell and Hoddie that categorizes different forms of power sharing based on dividing power along political, territorial, military, and economic dimensions. The authors argue that power sharing can be an effective means of promoting peace and stability in societies emerging from civil war by addressing the root causes of the conflict and creating a sense of inclusivity among different groups.³⁴ Thus, my final hypothesis:

H4. Power sharing provides a framework for the inclusion of rival factions and can help secure a peace deal. This can happen through sharing power on four dimensions: political, territorial, economic, and military dimensions.

D. RESEARCH DESIGN

This study will use qualitative comparative case study analysis of the four major peace negotiations between the combatants in Yemen. The comparative analysis will provide an in-depth understanding of the Yemen civil war and the factors that have contributed to its longevity by analyzing each episode of negotiations to explain the underlying factors for its failure.

The qualitative data for this study will be collected through a review of existing literature on the Yemeni conflict, including academic articles, reports by international organizations, and news articles. It will draw upon both English and Arabic source materials. By testing the hypotheses proposed in the literature review, this study could provide insights into the factors that contribute to the termination of civil wars and the effectiveness of different strategies for achieving peace.

E. THESIS OVERVIEW AND CHAPTER OUTLINE

Chapter II will provide a brief history of the conflict between the Yemeni government and the Houthi movement from 2004 to 2014. This chapter will describe the key parties involved and how the conflict escalated into a full-fledged civil war. This

³⁴ Caroline Hartzell and Matthew Hoddie, "Institutionalizing Peace: Power Sharing and Post-Civil War Conflict Management," *American Journal of Political Science* 47, no. 2 (April 2003): 15.

chapter will then discuss how the Houthis were able to capture the capital Sana'a and take control of much of the country in 2014.

Chapter III will analyze the regional rivalry between Iran and Saudi Arabia, and how this conflict played out in Yemen. I will describe Iran's support and sponsorship of the Houthis, including arms and funds. This chapter will also discuss Saudi Arabia's formation of a coalition force to intervene in Yemen in 2015 to counter the Houthis.

Chapter IV will evaluate the major peace initiatives undertaken to resolve the conflict, including UN-sponsored peace efforts. This chapter will analyze why these initiatives failed to successfully end the violence.

The conclusion will propose some recommendations on how to resolve the conflict in Yemen. This could include power sharing agreements between parties, outside peacekeeping forces, economic reconstruction, or trust-building measures.

Overall, this research will aim to provide a comprehensive understanding of the roots and trajectories of the conflict, evaluate failed peace efforts, and suggest a framework for resolving one of the region's most intractable crises.

II. HISTORY OF THE CONFLICT, 2004–2014

To understand the conflict in Yemen, we should explore the historical and ideological journey of the Houthi movement, this section delves into the historical context, from the emergence of Zaydi states in Yemen to the republican government's establishment in the 1960s and the introduction of Wahhabi ideas. This section traces the origins of the Houthi movement, rooted in Zaydi Shia Islam and the concept of Imamate. It highlights their transition from an intellectual pursuit to an armed insurgency, with a focus on the conflicts and confrontations that ensued. The narrative then explores the Yemeni uprising in 2011, regional and international interventions, the Houthi movement's takeover of Sana'a, Saudi-led airstrikes, and the humanitarian crisis as the conflict evolved into a protracted civil war.

A. HISTORICAL ORIGINS AND GRIEVANCES

The Houthi movement, which originated in Yemen's northern Saada province, has significantly expanded its influence across the country, including the capital, Sana'a. This expansion can be traced back to the historical emergence of the Zaydi state in 893 ADS under the leadership of Yahya bin al-Husayn, known as al Hadi ila al-Haqq, whose theological teachings formed the basis of the Zaydi sect in northern Yemen.³⁵ Central to the Zaydi sect's beliefs was the concept of legitimate authority vested in individuals with the title of "sayyid," linked by lineage to Prophet Muhammad through 'Ali and Fatima, who served as both the spiritual leader and the state's leader. Yahya bin al-Husayn's approach, characterized by respect for local customs and tribal mediation practices, facilitated a harmonious blend of religious and cultural traditions between the Hadawis and highland tribes, a fusion that not only allowed Zaydi Imamates to thrive until 1962 but also continues to influence Yemeni society to this day.³⁶

³⁵ Barak Salmoni, Bryce Loidolt, and Madeleine Wells, *Regime and Periphery in Northern Yemen: The Huthi Phenomenon* (Santa Monica, CA: RAND Corporation, 2010), 65, <https://www.rand.org/pubs/monographs/MG962.html>.

³⁶ Salmoni, Loidolt, and Wells, 65.

In the early 1960s, Yemen underwent a revolution that led to the establishment of a republican government, breaking away from the preceding imamate regime led by the ancestors of the Houthis.³⁷ Under the previous Imami system, Hashemite families held prominent roles in government, grounded in the belief of their divine entitlement to rule.³⁸ Consequently, this revolution aimed to challenge the religious and social dominance of this system and aimed to erase disparities and privileges among different social classes in Yemen. Following the success of the revolution in instituting a republican system, the perception of the native Yemeni population towards the Hashemites underwent a transformation, as they came to view them as integral members of society without any religious bias. Nonetheless, concerns lingered about the potential resurgence of the strict religious imamate system that existed prior to the revolution. This apprehension materialized with the emergence of the Houthi movement. Some observers speculated that the Hashemites might be striving to reinstate a rule rooted in the same religious principles as before, possibly repeating their past actions against the Yemeni populace.

The evolution of the Houthi movement and the resurgence of Zaydi identity in Yemen can be attributed to various historical, ideological, and socio-political factors, including the “divine right of the Hashemites” to govern and restore the Imamate, the oppression faced by the Zaydi Shia community post-1962 revolution, and the challenge posed by the introduction of Wahhabi ideas in the 1970s. As noted by Sarhan et al., the rise of “Houthism” emerged from the belief in the “Hashemites’ divine right to rule Yemen and to restore the Imamate system that had collapsed after the revolution of 1962.”³⁹ The Houthis utilized this ideology to mobilize Hashemite families, providing a solid foundation for their mission to revive the long-gone theological Imamate system.⁴⁰

³⁷ Mugahed S. Sarhan, Mohd Irwan Syazli Saidin, and Zarina Othman, “The Religious-Political Ideology of Houthis’ Rebellion in Yemen: Theoretical Perspective of the Divine Right to Rule,” *Islamiyyat* 44, no. 1 (2022): 231–40, <https://doi.org/10.17576/islamiyyat-2022-4401-20>.

³⁸ Sarhan, Saidin, and Othman, 234.

³⁹ Sarhan, Saidin, and Othman, 234.

⁴⁰ Sarhan, Saidin, and Othman, 234.

As per Riedel's analysis, the escalation of oppression and mistreatment faced by Yemen's Zaydi Shia community can be traced back to the aftermath of the 1962 revolution, which marked the dismantling of the Zaydi Imamate and the establishment of a republican system aligned with Sunni Islam and Arab nationalism. Subsequently, this shift in political dynamics resulted in the systematic marginalization of the Zaydi community, wherein they encountered profound limitations in both political participation and access to economic opportunities within the nation. Consequently, this sustained a pattern of persecution and severe maltreatment directed at the Zaydi Shia population, a condition exacerbated by the actions of not only the central government but also its principal regional ally, Saudi Arabia.⁴¹ Hussein al-Houthi highlighted the humiliation endured by Zaydis in Yemen as well as the authorities' and Sunnis' disregard for their beliefs. He even posed the question, "Don't Sunnis brand us as apostates destined for Hell? . . . Aren't we subjected to their humiliation?"⁴² On another occasion, he stressed the humiliation suffered by Zaydis at the hands of Arabs, particularly Sunnis, and bemoaned the power imbalance between Sunnis, who hold sway in the country, and Zaydis, who lack influence.⁴³

In the 1970s, Wahhabi ideas were introduced from Saudi Arabia. Wahhabism, an austere strain of Sunni Islam, contested the fundamental tenets of Zaydi beliefs and challenged the authority of Zaydi elites. As noted by Nevola, there has been a resurgence of Zaydi identity and principles in reaction to the perceived menace of Wahhabism.⁴⁴ The establishment of a Wahhabi seminary near Saada, the heart of Zaydi society, sparked concerns within the Zaydi community, as it was seen as a threat to their existence. In response, a Zaydi awakening took place in the 1980s, characterized by the adoption of

⁴¹ Bruce Riedel, "Who Are the Houthis, and Why Are We at War with Them?," Brookings Commentary, December 18, 2017, <https://www.brookings.edu/articles/who-are-the-houthis-and-why-are-we-at-war-with-them/>.

⁴² Hamad H. Albloshi, "Ideological Roots of the Ḥūthī Movement in Yemen," *Journal of Arabian Studies* 6, no. 2 (2016): 155, <https://doi.org/10.1080/21534764.2016.1247522>.

⁴³ Albloshi, 155.

⁴⁴ Luca Nevola, "Houthis in the Making: Nostalgia, Populism, and the Politicization of Hashemite Descent," *Arabian Humanities*, no. 13 (2020), <https://doi.org/10.4000/cy.5917>.

distinctively Shia symbols that distinguished them from the Wahhabi interpretation of Sunni Islam.⁴⁵

The Houthi movement takes its name from its founder, Hussein Badruddin al-Houthi, who was a Zaydi religious scholar hailing from the Saada governorate in northern Yemen. He played a pivotal role in shaping the ideology and direction of the Houthi movement as he was known for his charismatic leadership and ability to mobilize supporters around the cause of Zaydi revivalism.⁴⁶ Hussein al-Houthi created the Al-Haqq party alongside Hashemites' clerics at the start of his political career, and it gained two seats in the 1993 legislative elections. The party acts as a political venue for their religious convictions while also protecting their interests. The party stood in opposition to the more powerful Islah (Reform) Party.⁴⁷ In 1997, the al-Haqq Party gained the ministerial post for religious endowments, leading to a political dispute between Islah and President Ali Abdullah Saleh.⁴⁸ To alleviate the concerns of the Yemeni government regarding the political involvement of Zaydis, al-Haqq leaders made a declaration in 1990 stating that the Imamate was no longer functioning as a Zaydi institution. They also renounced the doctrine of khurooj.⁴⁹ As a condition for being included in the political sphere, al-Haqq had to give up the fundamental aspects of Zaydism. Despite claiming to have a distinct Yemeni Islamic perspective, it was challenging for outsiders to comprehend this viewpoint without the Imamate, except for their constant criticism of the presence of Wahhabis in Yemen.⁵⁰ Hussein al-Houthi then abandoned the party to concentrate on the "Believing Youth Forum" (BYF), and by strategically capitalizing on shared grievances directed at the

⁴⁵ Salmoni, Loidolt, and Wells, *Regime and Periphery in Northern Yemen*, 22.

⁴⁶ Salmoni, Loidolt, and Wells, 277.

⁴⁷ Salmoni, Loidolt, and Wells, 6.

⁴⁸ Albloshi, "Ideological Roots of the Hūthī Movement," 145–46.

⁴⁹ The doctrine of khurooj, in the context of Islamic history and theology, refers to the concept of rebellion or armed uprising against a ruler or authority that is deemed unjust or oppressive. It has been historically associated with certain factions or groups within Islam that believe in challenging rulers who are perceived as deviating from or violating Islamic principles. For more details see: Shehryar Najam, "Khurooj and the Method of Hizb Ut Tahrir," *Ahkaam Islam* (blog), August 18, 2015, <https://ahkaamislam.wordpress.com/2015/08/18/193/>.

⁵⁰ Salmoni, Loidolt, and Wells, *Regime and Periphery in Northern Yemen*, 95.

central government, he transformed the forum into a political apparatus, culminating in its evolution into a military insurrection.⁵¹

Marginalization and socio-economic disparities played a significant role in laying the foundation for the Houthi insurgency in Yemen. For example, the systematic neglect, underdevelopment, and unequal distribution of resources and opportunities affected the northern regions of Yemen, where the Houthi movement emerged.⁵² Furthermore, upon taking office in 1978, President Saleh adeptly harnessed the changing social dynamics in Yemen. His approach involved forming partnerships with influential tribal chiefs and instituting a framework of political patronage. Under this arrangement, critical government positions and state assets were traded in exchange for the backing of these tribal, military, and political allies.⁵³ These difficulties have exacerbated development gaps and produced a climate in which underprivileged populations feel detached and left behind.⁵⁴ Saada serves as a notable illustration of a broader contrast between urban and rural areas within Yemen. Around 1979, approximately 90% of the northern population was situated in rural locales.⁵⁵ After the unification, the predominantly rural tribes of north and east conveyed grievances about the encroachment of urban influences into their own domains.⁵⁶ By the conclusion of the previous century, more than 70% of Yemen's population still resided in rural settings, thereby upholding the awareness of a disconnect between rural and urban spheres, which has become intertwined with the geographical disparities.⁵⁷

On the other hand, the involvement of both regional and international players in either endorsing or opposing the Houthi movement has been driven by their distinct

⁵¹ Sarhan, Saidin, and Othman, "The Religious-Political Ideology of Houthis' Rebellion in Yemen," 235.

⁵² Salmoni, Loidolt, and Wells, *Regime and Periphery in Northern Yemen*, 19–23.

⁵³ Equal Rights Trust, *From Night to Darker Night: Addressing Discrimination and Inequality in Yemen* (London: Equal Rights Trust, 2018), 27, https://www.equalrightstrust.org/ertdocumentbank/Yemen_EN_online%20version.pdf.

⁵⁴ Salmoni, Loidolt, and Wells, *Regime and Periphery in Northern Yemen*, 21.

⁵⁵ Salmoni, Loidolt, and Wells, 21.

⁵⁶ Salmoni, Loidolt, and Wells, 21.

⁵⁷ Salmoni, Loidolt, and Wells, 21.

strategic agendas. On one side, Iran and Hezbollah are accused of extending financial, military, and ideological backing to the Houthis, as part of their broader rivalry with Saudi Arabia and its regional allies. Conversely, Saudi Arabia and its coalition partners have initiated a military campaign against the Houthis since 2015, prompted by the Houthi takeover of Sana'a, which resulted in the flight of President Abdrabbuh Mansur Hadi.⁵⁸ Chapter III will discuss the Iran-Saudi intervention in Yemen.

B. IDEOLOGICAL ORIGINS

The Houthis draw their ideological inspiration from Zaydi Shia Islam, which has a significant historical presence in Yemen. Zaydi Islam emphasizes the role of the Imamate, a line of spiritual and political leaders believed to be the rightful successors of the Prophet Muhammad. The Houthi movement aligns with Shia beliefs regarding the concept of Imamate, considering it a crucial aspect of their religious and political ideology. The notion of Imamate, in the Shia context, entails the belief that there should be an infallible Imam from the household of the Prophet Muhammad (*ahl al-bayt*) to lead the Muslims and bear the responsibility of governance and interpreting religious laws.⁵⁹ According to Shia doctrine, Imamate is a divine authority that persists even after the death of an Imam.⁶⁰ The notion of divine legitimacy in governance centers on the claim of direct descent from Prophet Mohammed, specifically through his daughter Fatimah and her sons, Hassan and Hussein. This genealogical connection assumes paramount importance due to its role in designating them as rightful leaders of the Muslim community, as they are considered inheritors of the Holy Quran and the Sunnah following Prophet Mohammed's demise.⁶¹

⁵⁸ Riedel, "Who Are the Houthis, and Why Are We at War with Them?"

⁵⁹ Sarhan, Saidin, and Othman, "The Religious-Political Ideology of Houthis' Rebellion in Yemen."

⁶⁰ Majid bin Ali Ahmed Al-Hakami, *معابنة حقيقة الحركة الحوثية وعلاقتها بالاثني عشرية* [The truth about the Houthi movement and its relationship with contemporary Twelver Shiism] (Shah Alam, Malaysia: Al-Madinah International University, 2016), 222, <http://ojs.mediu.edu.my/index.php/majmaa/article/view/222>.

⁶¹ Sarhan, Saidin, and Othman, "The Religious-Political Ideology of Houthis' Rebellion in Yemen," 231–40.

In essence, this claim establishes the authority of these descendants to rule over the entirety of the Islamic world.⁶²

From the Houthi perspective, they identify themselves as the Zaydi Shia faction in Yemen, which holds firm to the concept of Imamate. They consider Imam Zaid bin Ali bin Al-Hussein as the final Zaydi Imam. They believe that Imam Zaid and his descendants have vowed to seek retribution for the perpetrators of the tragedy of Karbala, where Imam Hussein bin Ali was martyred. Their mission, as they perceive it, is to restore justice and bring about reforms in Yemen, leading people towards truth, resisting oppression, and tyranny.⁶³ It is essential to establish the Shia's position within the broader Sunni Muslim community and specifically among the Yemeni population. For Houthis, the decline of Muslims in the world began when they deviated from obeying God's commands. Furthermore, they believe that various groups and nations, including Jews, Christians, Israel, and the United States, collaborated to undermine Muslims. They also believed that some Muslims, particularly Sunnis, contributed to this vulnerability. To strengthen the global position of Muslims, they claim that it was necessary to re-embrace the teachings of the Qur'an, adhere to the authentic interpretation of Islam found in Shiism, and engage in a holy war against the adversaries of Islam.⁶⁴

When the BYF was established in early 1990s, the movement focused on intellectual pursuits, emphasizing research and education within the Zaydi school of thought.⁶⁵ In the mid-1990s, the BYF movement saw a surge in summer camps aimed at a broader age group. Influential Hashimi elders like Badr al-Din, Ahmad al-Shami, and Salah Falita took notice of the movement within schools and supported it, potentially with the intention of co-opting it and securing the loyalty of the younger generation. They set up a camp called Hamazat in a well-known migration area north of Saada, where wealthy

⁶² Sarhan, Saidin, and Othman, 231–40.

⁶³ Al-Hakami, *معابنة حقيقة الحركة الحوثية وعلاقتها بالاثني عشرية* [*The Truth about the Houthi Movement and Its Relationship with Contemporary Twelver Shiism*], 81–82.

⁶⁴ Albloshi, "Ideological Roots of the Hūthī Movement," 159.

⁶⁵ Albloshi, 45.

Hashimi landowners resided.⁶⁶ The camp gained popularity through positive word-of-mouth among Zaydi youths and teachers. Distinguished figures hailing from the Khawlan bin ‘Amr and Hamdan tribes regarded the enrollment of their offspring in these encampments situated within migration areas as an emblem of social distinction, thereby augmenting their already substantial prestige and public appeal. By 1994–1995, an estimated 10,000 to 15,000 students from the governorate and neighboring regions had attended the BYF camps in Hamazat and other areas of Saada.⁶⁷ Similar camps, known as centers or marakiz, were subsequently established in ‘Amran, Hajja, the capital city governorate, Mahwit, Dhamar, Ibb, and Taiz, as indicated by local sources.⁶⁸

As the number of active participants within the BYF, particularly among the younger generation, increased, it began to attract greater attention. These individuals adopted a powerful slogan: “God is Great, Death to America, Death to Israel, May God Curse the Jews, and Victory to Islam.”⁶⁹ The chant bears resemblance to Imam Khomeini’s slogan utilized during the Islamic Revolution in Iran, albeit with certain adaptations and became a customary practice after each prayer.⁷⁰ Although the movement focused on religious and cultural activities, establishing religious schools, and engaging in community outreach, it gradually transformed into an armed insurgency as grievances against the government intensified and culminated in direct military confrontations with the government, a development that commenced in the year 2004.⁷¹ The movement also gained momentum during the Yemeni uprising in 2011, which led to the resignation of president Ali Abdullah Saleh. This period provided an opportunity for the Houthis to

⁶⁶ Salmoni, Loidolt, and Wells, *Regime and Periphery in Northern Yemen*, 99.

⁶⁷ Salmoni, Loidolt, and Wells, 99.

⁶⁸ Salmoni, Loidolt, and Wells, 99.

⁶⁹ Abdulmalik Mohammad Abdullah Eissa, “Islamist Political Movements in Yemen,” *Contemporary Arab Affairs* 6, no. 1 (2013): 45.

⁷⁰ Albloshi, “Ideological Roots of the Hūthī Movement,” 152.

⁷¹ Michael Knights, “The Houthi War Machine: From Guerrilla War to State Capture,” *CTC Sentinel* 11, no. 8 (September 2018): 15.

expand their influence and solidify their position as a prominent political military force in Yemen.⁷²

C. WARS BETWEEN THE HOUTHIS AND THE GOVERNMENT

The Houthi movement started protesting in January 2003 in Saada province, stemming from the growing discontentment of the Houthi establishment and its supporters towards the Yemeni government. Their grievances were centered around perceived economic discrimination against Saada and the government's alleged tolerance of anti-Shi'ite provocations influenced by Saudi Arabia in northern Yemen.⁷³

Following the January 2003 demonstrations, President Saleh's attempts to reconcile with Hussein al-Houthi proved unsuccessful, leading to a series of escalations. However, anti-government demonstrations persisted and even extended to the Grand Mosque in Sana'a. Simultaneously, tensions mounted in the northern regions as increasingly impassioned protests took place. While the Houthis further asserted that their region had suffered from persistent discrimination and received inadequate public resources compared to other parts of Yemen, they directly challenged Saleh by accusing the Yemeni government of prioritizing the interests of the United States and Israel over those of Arab and Yemeni people. Saleh perceived such allegations as bordering on treasonous, particularly given the prevalent Yemeni anger over the U.S.-led invasion of Iraq in 2003 and the widespread disapproval of Yemen's cooperation with the United States to combat terror.⁷⁴ Faced with these circumstances, Saleh attempted to arrest Houthis, a move that ultimately failed and triggered the eruption of war.⁷⁵

The initial phase of protracted combat in Saada began on June 18, 2004, and persisted until September 10 of the same year. Following the government's attempt to apprehend Houthi, he, along with the BYF sought to remove government forces and

⁷² Knights, 17.

⁷³ W. Andrew Terrill, *The Conflicts in Yemen and U.S. National Security* (Carlisle Barracks, PA: Army War College, 2011), 17, <https://doi.org/10.21236/ADA536229>.

⁷⁴ Eleonora Ardemagni, "Yemen's Defence Structure: Hybridity and Patronage after the State," *Journal of Arabian Studies* 10, no. 1 (2020): 72–89, <https://doi.org/10.1080/21534764.2020.1791308>.

⁷⁵ Terrill, *The Conflicts in Yemen*, 18.

officials from Saada. In response to Houthi's acts of rebellion, the government augmented its military presence in the northern region, leading to continued clashes until the demise of Hussein al-Houthi in September 2004. Subsequently, the conflict has experienced periodic resurgences and intermittent hostilities, with the leadership of the rebel group transitioning to al-Houthi's brothers, most notably Abdul Malik al-Houthi. The clashes between government forces and Houthi supporters were characterized by fierce battles and sustained exchanges of gunfire. Both sides employed various military tactics and strategies to gain the upper hand. The fighting was not limited to a specific region but encompassed multiple areas where the Houthi movement had a significant presence, notably in the Saada province and surrounding territories. During the period of March–April 2005, another resurgence of intense clashes erupted between government forces and followers of the deceased cleric, Hussein al-Houthi. The violent confrontations that unfolded during this time resulted in more than 200 people losing their lives.⁷⁶

During the third conflict (November 30, 2005–February 23, 2006), the Houthis engaged in a guerrilla warfare strategy characterized by sporadic attacks, targeted killings, surprise assaults, and operations resembling terrorism within the city of Sana'a.⁷⁷

In 2007, Qatar played a role in brokering a ceasefire, followed by a more comprehensive peace agreement in 2008. Regrettably, these agreements eventually collapsed, resulting in a renewed military offensive launched by the government in Saada province on August 11, 2009.⁷⁸ The Houthi conflict entered a new phase when Saudi Arabia directly intervened militarily in the northern Yemeni fighting in November 2009. This intervention was prompted by an incident where some of the Houthis crossed into Saudi territory, resulting in the deaths of at least two border guards and the alleged seizure of multiple Saudi border villages.⁷⁹ Houthi spokespersons acknowledged the incursion into

⁷⁶ "Yemen Profile – Timeline," BBC News, November 6, 2019, <https://www.bbc.com/news/world-middle-east-14704951>.

⁷⁷ Knights, "The Houthi War Machine."

⁷⁸ Terrill, *The Conflicts in Yemen*, 18.

⁷⁹ W. Andrew Terrill, "Iranian Involvement in Yemen," *Orbis* 58, no. 3 (2014): 429–40, <https://doi.org/10.1016/j.orbis.2014.05.008>.

Saudi Arabia but claimed it was in response to Riyadh allowing the Yemeni military to utilize Saudi territory for their offensive against the Houthis. In retaliation, Saudi Arabia took decisive action by launching military strikes against the Houthis.⁸⁰

August 2009 witnessed the commencement of a new phase in the long-standing conflict between the Yemeni government and Houthis, as the Yemeni army launched a fresh offensive against the Houthi group.⁸¹ The offensive was known as the sixth war and was characterized by large-scale military operations, including airstrikes, ground offensives, and sieges targeting Houthi strongholds. The Yemeni army deployed substantial troops and weaponry to confront the Houthis and that was likely driven by a combination of factors, including a desire to assert its authority, address perceived security threats, and respond to the persistent Houthi insurgency.⁸² The conflict timeline shown in Figure 1 is divided into six phases by analysts and government officials. However, it is more accurately described as an ongoing and continuous conflict, with escalations occurring when the Government retaliates against Houthi ambushes and skirmishes. Surprisingly, the Government, not the Houthis, has declared the start of each phase. Although Iran has been accused of providing financial, military, and ideological assistance to the Houthis, such as weapons, training, advisers, media outlets, and religious guidance, the role of Iran and impact of this assistance is disputed and difficult to verify during that period. The former ambassador to Yemen Gerald Feierstein stated that the period after the 2011 uprising “Iranian support for the Houthis movement became clearer.”⁸³

⁸⁰ Terrill.

⁸¹ Robert F. Worth, “Yemen’s Instability Grows as One of 3 Insurgencies Flares Up,” *New York Times*, August 10, 2009, sec. World, <https://www.nytimes.com/2009/08/11/world/middleeast/11yemen.html>.

⁸² Victoria Clark, “Al-Qaeda, Plus Two Insurgencies,” in *Yemen: Dancing on the Heads of Snakes*, by Victoria Clark (New Haven, CT: Yale University Press, 2010), 250, <https://www.jstor.org/stable/j.ctt1npgmmh.14>.

⁸³ Gerald Feierstein, “Is There a Path Out of the Yemen Conflict?: Why It Matters,” *PRISM* 7, no. 1 (2017): 21.

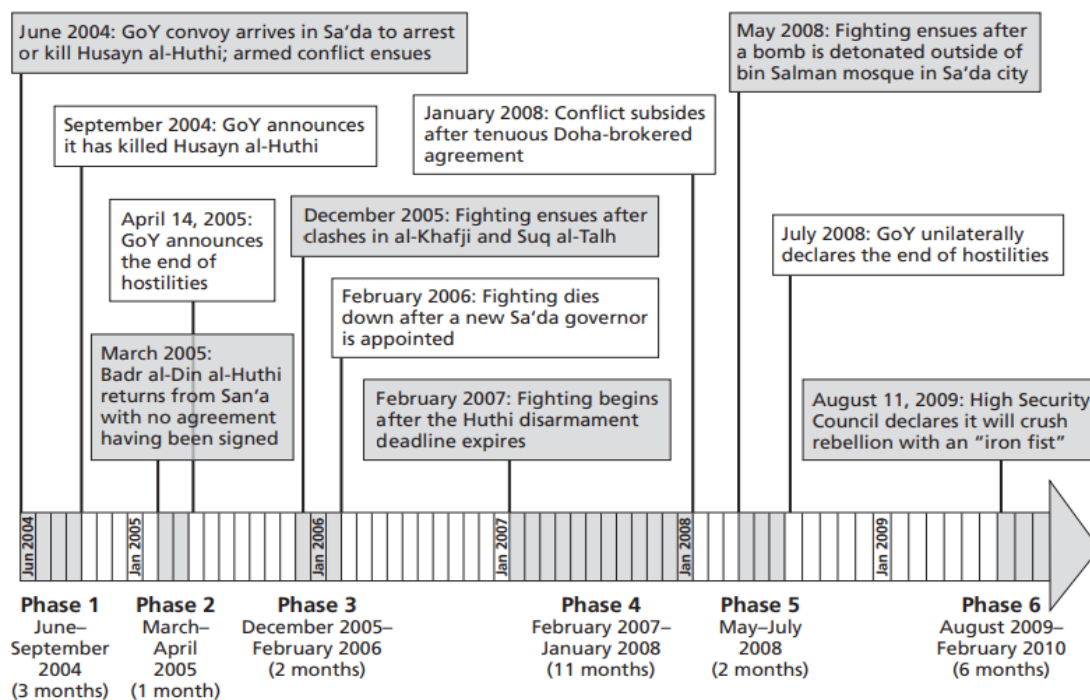


Figure 1. Timeline of the Six Saada Wars⁸⁴

D. YEMEN UPRISING 2011

The political tumult that transpired in 2014 and escalated during the subsequent year can be contextualized within the framework of the Yemeni uprisings in 2011 and the subsequent negotiated settlement. In the wake of the Arab Spring uprisings in Tunisia and Egypt, Yemen bore witness to an early and predominantly peaceful mobilization against the leadership of President Ali Abdullah Saleh. This movement was spearheaded by a cadre of young pro-democracy activists who championed the cause of political reform and the removal of President Saleh from office. Following the resignation of Egyptian President Hosni Mubarak in February, the Yemeni protests experienced a significant surge in momentum, with a multitude of activists converging at the university and numerous others taking to the streets throughout the nation, all articulating a unified call for substantive

⁸⁴ Source: Salmoni, Loidolt, and Wells, *Regime and Periphery in Northern Yemen*, 133.

political transformation in Yemen.⁸⁵ At first, the official political opposition known as the Joint Meetings Parties (JMP), consisting of six political parties with Hizb al-Islah, a Sunni Islamic party, being the most significant, adopted a cautious approach. However, in February 2011, the JMP gradually expressed support for the protests, and by February 20, 2011, it declared that it would no longer engage in dialogue with the regime if protesters were being subjected to violence.⁸⁶

The protests received backing from both the Houthis and the “Hirak” movement in the south part of Yemen. The Hirak, initially seeking to address the marginalization of former South Yemen during President Saleh’s rule, later united with the youths, the JMP, and the Houthis in 2011. Together, they formed a national movement advocating for political change and protesting President Saleh.⁸⁷ On March 18, 2011, a pivotal event unfolded as a peaceful demonstration in front of Sana’a University was brutally attacked by the regime, tragically resulting in the loss of more than 50 lives.⁸⁸ The severity of this incident sent shockwaves through the country and beyond, igniting widespread outrage and condemnation. This prompted a wave of defections from the ruling party, where individuals who had once supported the government decided to distance themselves from its oppressive tactics and policies. Notable among these defections was the crucial resignation of General Ali Muhsin, which led to a division within the Yemeni army. General Muhsin redeployed his military units to protect the protestors, leading to a direct confrontation between his forces and those loyal to President Saleh. As tensions escalated, concerns arose about the potential for a civil war, and international pressure intensified, urging President Saleh to step down.⁸⁹

⁸⁵ Vincent Durac, “Yemen’s Arab Spring – Democratic Opening or Regime Maintenance?,” *Mediterranean Politics* 17, no. 2 (2012): 161–78, <https://doi.org/10.1080/13629395.2012.694042>.

⁸⁶ Maria-Louise Clausen, “Understanding the Crisis in Yemen: Evaluating Competing Narratives,” *International Spectator* 50, no. 3 (2015): 17, <https://doi.org/10.1080/03932729.2015.1053707>.

⁸⁷ Clausen, 18.

⁸⁸ Clausen, 17–19.

⁸⁹ Clausen, 18.

The deteriorating political situation in Yemen saw a significant shift in the dynamics of the uprising, as longstanding alliances fractured, leading to power struggles among elite groups and enabling the Houthi Movement to assert control over key governorates. President Saleh faced another challenge when members of the Al-Ahmar family withdrew their support. For many years, Sheikh Abdullah al-Ahmar, a prominent figure in the Hashid tribal confederation, had been a key ally of the president. However, after his death in 2007, his sons assumed significant roles in Yemeni public life. Saleh's Republican Guards attacked Sadiq al-Ahmar's compound in Sana'a, accusing him of funding and orchestrating the youth protests. The week-long fighting resulted in the death of more than 100 people.⁹⁰ These clashes expanded the list of those opposing the regime to include the leadership of the Hashid tribal confederation. Consequently, the nature of the uprising shifted from being largely peaceful and youth-led to a power struggle between rival elite groups. In this transformation, the original concerns of the youth protesters were marginalized.⁹¹ Following the eruption of the youth revolution, the Houthi Movement forcefully took control of Saada Governorate, seizing it from the government's authority. They subsequently appointed a new governor through a consensus-based acclamation process. Additionally, in collaboration with loyal forces from the Muslim Brotherhood and the Yemeni Congregation for Reform, the Houthis assisted in occupying Aljouf Governorate, removing it from government control as well.⁹²

E. REGIONAL AND INTERNATIONAL INTERVENTIONS

The Gulf Cooperation Council (GCC) and the UN spearheaded the creation of a transition plan, which Saleh agreed to and signed in Riyadh in late November 2011. As per this plan, Saleh stepped down from his position and was succeeded by his vice-president, Abd Rabbuh Mansour Hadi, who assumed the presidency for a two-year term after being officially confirmed through a popular vote. As part of the agreement, Saleh and his family received immunity from domestic prosecution, and he retained his position as the leader of

⁹⁰ Durac, "Yemen's Arab Spring," 166–67.

⁹¹ Durac, "Yemen's Arab Spring."

⁹² Eissa, "Islamist Political Movements in Yemen," 46.

the former ruling party, the General People's Congress (GPC). Consequently, this prevented a civil war.⁹³

The Houthi Movement refused to accept the GCC initiative designed to resolve the conflict, viewing it as an American plot to undermine the Yemeni people's revolution and hinder its complete goals. They urged people to boycott the presidential elections suggested in the GCC initiative. However, they agreed to participate in a forthcoming national dialogue that was planned to occur shortly after.⁹⁴ External factors, particularly Saudi Arabia and the United States, have played significant roles in shaping Yemen's political landscape. While Saudi Arabia's influence remains dominant through the GCC initiative, the United States has also become increasingly involved in Yemeni affairs through its support to the Saudi efforts. Any thorough analysis of Yemen's political dynamics and future direction must consider the interplay of these multiple influences.⁹⁵

F. THE NATIONAL DIALOGUE CONFERENCE

The Yemeni National Dialogue Conference (NDC) was a significant political process that took place in Yemen from March 18, 2011, to January 25, 2014. It was initiated in response to the political crisis and social unrest that emerged during the 2011 Yemeni uprising, part of the larger Arab Spring movement. The NDC aimed to address the various political, social, and economic challenges facing Yemen and to create a more inclusive and democratic political system. It brought together representatives from different Yemeni factions, including political parties, civil society groups, women's organizations, youth groups, and other stakeholders. The participants were tasked with engaging in open and inclusive discussions to find solutions to the country's issues and to create a roadmap for the future of Yemen.⁹⁶ The crucial issue sought in the conference was to lay the foundation

⁹³ Clausen, "Understanding the Crisis in Yemen," 18.

⁹⁴ Eissa, "Islamist Political Movements in Yemen," 46.

⁹⁵ Durac, "Yemen's Arab Spring."

⁹⁶ Clausen, "Understanding the Crisis in Yemen," 19.

for a more democratic and inclusive political structure in Yemen.⁹⁷ Furthermore, the issue of the south was a complex and sensitive topic during the National Dialogue Conference, reflecting the deep-seated historical, political, and social divisions in the country. While the conference attempted to address these concerns and find a consensus on the way forward, the challenges of reconciling different viewpoints and interests remained significant.⁹⁸

The Houthi ostensibly engaged in the dialogue as part of the political process, the Houthi movement strategically used the opportunity to strengthen their military position and expand their influence in the region. As they participated in negotiations, they continued to build up their forces and gain control over key territories, especially in the northern parts of Yemen. For example, they were concurrently involved in a military campaign north of the capital city, Sana'a. This military campaign proved to be crucial in laying the groundwork for their eventual takeover of Sana'a.⁹⁹

G. HOUTHIS' INVASION OF SANA'A

The Houthis made their way into Sana'a, the capital of Yemen in September 2014, with the backing of public discontent over worsening living conditions and the absence of political changes. In 2014, the government under President Hadi implemented a policy decision to eliminate subsidies on fuel.¹⁰⁰ The Houthis specifically capitalized on the dissatisfaction caused by the recent policy that resulted in the Houthis effectively took control of the Yemeni capital.¹⁰¹ Houthis (Ansar Allah) captured the government headquarters and asserted their demand for a share in power, claiming victory.¹⁰² In the

⁹⁷ April Longley Alley, "Assessing (In) Security after the Arab Spring: The Case of Yemen," *PS: Political Science and Politics* 46, no. 4 (2013): 721.

⁹⁸ Charles Schmitz, "Political Sticking Points," in *Yemen's National Dialogue*, by Charles Schmitz (Washington, DC: Middle East Institute, 2014), 8–11, <https://www.jstor.org/stable/resrep17577.8>.

⁹⁹ Clausen, "Understanding the Crisis in Yemen," 19.

¹⁰⁰ Kali Robinson, "Yemen's Tragedy: War, Stalemate, and Suffering," Council on Foreign Relations Backgrounder, May 1, 2023, <https://www.cfr.org/backgrounder/yemen-crisis>.

¹⁰¹ Clausen, "Understanding the Crisis in Yemen," 16.

¹⁰² The Houthis adopted the name Ansar Allah in 2013, when they participated in the National Dialogue Conference that was held after the 2011 uprising that ousted President Ali Abdullah Saleh.

following October, the Houthis seized control of the strategic Red Sea port of Hodeida, a crucial gateway for imports and humanitarian aid.¹⁰³

Yet, the turmoil was briefly delayed through the signing of the Peace and National Partnership Agreement (PNPA) on September 21, 2014. This agreement, among various provisions, stipulated the removal of fuel subsidies in exchange for a ceasefire and the Houthi forces' withdrawal from Sana'a.¹⁰⁴ Following the signing of the PNPA, Ansar Allah has shown a degree of selectiveness in adhering to the agreement. While they assert their intention to advocate for greater inclusivity and transparency in the government formation process, they have also used the PNPA as a pretext to pursue territorial expansion. Unfortunately, this expansionist drive has hindered advancements in the political aspects promised by the PNPA. Despite the Houthis' endorsement of the PNPA's Annex, which addresses security concerns and calls for the disbandment of armed groups, they have retained their presence in the capital city.¹⁰⁵

By January 2015, the situation escalated further as the Houthis engaged in intense fighting and managed to take over the presidential palace in Sana'a. President Abd-Rabbu Mansour Hadi's residence was surrounded, forcing him to flee to the southern port city of Aden. As the situation continued to worsen, both the Yemeni government and President Hadi resigned in January 2015.¹⁰⁶ These events highlighted the failure of the political transition that had followed the 2011 uprising in stabilizing or reforming the political system in Yemen.¹⁰⁷

At the end of 2014, there were indications of a potential rise in Iran's connections with the Houthis. However, the extent of Iranian support provided to the Houthis has not

¹⁰³ "Yemen War: 5 Years since the Houthis' Sanaa Takeover," *Al Jazeera*, September 21, 2019, <https://www.aljazeera.com/news/2019/9/21/yemen-war-5-years-since-the-houthis-sanaa-takeover>.

¹⁰⁴ United Nations, "The Peace and National Partnership Agreement" (New York: UN Peacemaker, September 21, 2014), <https://peacemaker.un.org/yemen-national-partnership-2014>.

¹⁰⁵ Mareike Transfeld, "Houthis on the Rise in Yemen," Carnegie Endowment for International Peace, October 31, 2014, <https://carnegieendowment.org/sada/57087>.

¹⁰⁶ Transfeld.

¹⁰⁷ Clausen, "Understanding the Crisis in Yemen," 17.

been confirmed, according to the United Nations report issued in 2017.¹⁰⁸ The Houthis benefited from their alliance with former President Saleh by obtaining quality weapons that later enabled them to enter the capital, Sanaa. This alliance with Saleh held more significance for the Houthis than any presumed connection with Iran. Notably, a considerable portion of the Yemeni military's arsenal was lost during the war, with some weaponry under Houthi control, highlighting the importance of domestic dynamics in the conflict.¹⁰⁹

H. SAUDI AIRSTRIKES AND THE ROLE OF IRAN

In March 2015, a coalition led by Saudi Arabia—supported by the United States—initiated air strikes against the Houthis.¹¹⁰ As the Houthi forces made their way towards Aden in the south, Yemeni President Hadi sought refuge in Saudi Arabia. Months later, the coalition succeeded in driving out the Houthis and loyalists of former President Saleh from Aden in southern Yemen and Marib, located northeast of Sana'a.¹¹¹ Following Saudi Arabia, the UAE has been the second most prominent military contributor to the coalition, deploying around 10,000 ground troops, primarily in the southern region of Yemen. Nevertheless, in 2019, the UAE withdrew a significant portion of its troops due to conflicts with its coalition partners. During this time, the UAE supported the Southern Transitional Council (STC), which successfully seized control of Aden.¹¹²

Some argue that Iran has been supporting the Houthis since the early 2000s, providing them with financial, military, and political assistance. Others contend that Iran's involvement with the Houthis increased only after the Saudi-led intervention in 2015, as a way of countering Saudi influence and expanding its regional reach. According to Feirstein, Iran's involvement in supporting the Houthi movement in Yemen began to

¹⁰⁸ May Darwich, "The Saudi Intervention in Yemen: Struggling for Status," *Insight Turkey* 20, no. 2 (2018): 129–31.

¹⁰⁹ Darwich, "The Saudi Intervention in Yemen."

¹¹⁰ Robinson, "Yemen's Tragedy."

¹¹¹ Al Jazeera, "Yemen War."

¹¹² Robinson, "Yemen's Tragedy."

escalate in 2014 when the Houthi movement gained momentum in Sana'a. Iran was found to be smuggling weapons, including advanced ones like explosively formed penetrators (EFPs).¹¹³ Additionally, a dhow carrying military equipment with Islamic Revolutionary Guard Corps (IRGC) markings was intercepted by U.S. naval forces and the Yemeni Navy. After Yemen's political transition broke down in 2014, Iran's intervention intensified, with regular flights delivering supplies to the Houthi forces and the deployment of IRGC Quds Force and Hezbollah trainers to support them.¹¹⁴ The next chapter will discuss in details the Iran's support to Houthis.

I. THE HUMANITARIAN CRISIS

The Yemeni conflict initially held the hope of a swift resolution to restore stability and the legitimate government. However, this optimism quickly dissipated as the conflict dragged on, resulting in what has been described as a "protracted stalemate."¹¹⁵ The Coalition's heavy reliance on airpower in the conflict mirrored an asymmetric warfare scenario, neutralizing their advantage in sophisticated weaponry. The prolonged fighting, characterized by continuous airstrikes and ground battles, took a severe toll on the Yemeni population. The conflict led to a devastating humanitarian crisis, with civilians suffering the most. For example, an alarming statistic reveals that more than 13 million Yemenis are presently at risk of succumbing to starvation.¹¹⁶ Civilian casualties resulted from airstrikes hitting residential areas, markets, and other civilian infrastructure. Hospitals, schools, and basic services were also targeted, exacerbating the already dire humanitarian conditions.¹¹⁷

The conflict in Yemen has evolved into a full-scale civil war with involvement from state and sub-state actors. The stalemate in the conflict has complicated peace prospects,

¹¹³ Feierstein, "Is There a Path Out of the Yemen Conflict?," 18–29.

¹¹⁴ Feierstein, 18–29.

¹¹⁵ Feierstein, 19.

¹¹⁶ "Yemen Remains 'Worst Humanitarian Crisis': UN Office," Anadolu Agency, December 1, 2021, <https://www.aa.com.tr/en/middle-east/yemen-remains-worst-humanitarian-crisis-un-office/2106553>.

¹¹⁷ Anadolu Agency.

while the humanitarian situation has worsened, inflicting immense suffering on the Yemeni population.¹¹⁸

¹¹⁸ Feierstein, “Is There a Path Out of the Yemen Conflict?,” 20–26.

III. SAUDI-IRANIAN COMPETITION IN YEMEN

The roots of the current Iran-Saudi Arabia rivalry can be traced back to the Iranian revolution of 1979 when Shia religious authorities replaced a pro-Western leader. This alarmed Saudi Arabia and caused them to strengthen their relations with other Sunni governments, including the formation of the GCC. Tensions escalated during the 1980s as Saudi Arabia supported Iraq's Saddam Hussein who had invaded Iran in 1980, resulting in an eight-year war. Additionally, a tragic incident at the 1987 annual pilgrimage to Mecca, where hundreds of Iranian pilgrims were killed, further strained relations, resulting in the suspension of diplomatic ties between the two countries for three years.¹¹⁹

Saudi Arabia adopted the Wahhabi School of thought, widening the gap between the Shia and Sunni traditions.¹²⁰ It is important to note that the Saudi-Iranian competition is not attributed to a mere difference between Sunnis and Shia. The other part of the story is that Saudi Arabia is pro-United States and welcomes American presence in the area as added security for the Saudi regime. Iran, on the other hand, is afraid of regime change at the hands of American administrations, so they prefer to push American forces out of the area, which increases insecurity for Saudi Arabia. In summary, the pro-U.S. orientation of Saudi Arabia and the anti-U.S. orientation of Iran is at the heart of this rivalry.¹²¹ As Iran has grown in influence through strategic alliances with state and sub-state actors, Saudi Arabia has grown more fearful of Iran, which is another factor in their regional rivalry.

The Saudi-Iranian competition has been exacerbated by significant regional events, such as the U.S.-led invasion of Iraq in 2003, the conflicts in Lebanon (2006), The Arab spring in 2011, Syria (2011–2018), and Yemen (2015). Despite avoiding direct military confrontation, both countries have strategically formed alliances through economic

¹¹⁹ Thom Poole, "Iran and Saudi Arabia's Great Rivalry Explained," *BBC News*, January 4, 2016, <https://www.bbc.com/news/world-middle-east-35221569>.

¹²⁰ Muhammad Ihsan Qadir and Muhammad Saifur Rehman, "Saudi-Iranian Rivalry in the Middle East: Implications for Pakistan," *Pakistan Horizon* 69, no. 4 (2016): 62.

¹²¹ W. Andrew Terrill, *The Saudi-Iranian Rivalry and the Future of Middle East Security* (Carlisle, PA: Army War College, 2011), <https://permanent.fdlp.gov/gpo16589/pub1094.pdf>.

incentives and political maneuvering. Their actions have created two distinct camps in the region, defined by religious and ideological differences. Additionally, they have engaged in proxy wars against each other, adding to the tension and complexity of the situation.¹²² Figure 2 illustrates the distribution of Sunni Muslims in the middle east, showing that Sunni Muslims are majority in the middle east.



Figure 2. Distribution of Sunni Muslims in the Middle East¹²³

A. SAUDI-IRANIAN RIVALRY IN IRAQ

The fall of Saddam Hussein in 2003 indeed had far-reaching consequences that reshaped the dynamics of the Middle East. It can be considered a watershed event, as it marked a significant departure from the longstanding Sunni rule in Iraq and led to the establishment of a Shia-led government with close ties to Iran.¹²⁴ Prior to the fall of Saddam Hussein, Iraq was governed by a Sunni-dominated regime that had historical tensions with Iran, a predominantly Shia country. However, after the U.S.-led invasion and

¹²² Qadir and Rehman, “Saudi-Iranian Rivalry in the Middle East,” 57.

¹²³ Source: Central Intelligence Agency, “World Map – Muslim Distribution,” June 1995, https://maps.lib.utexas.edu/maps/world_maps/muslim_distribution.jpg.

¹²⁴ Qadir and Rehman, “Saudi-Iranian Rivalry in the Middle East,” 57.

the subsequent toppling of Saddam Hussein’s government, a new power structure emerged in Iraq, favoring the Shia population. This shift in power created a favorable environment for Iran to exert its influence in its neighboring country. Iran’s support for certain Iraqi Shia militant groups was part of its strategy to gain leverage in the new political landscape and counter U.S. presence in the country. This support allegedly included funding, arming, and training certain Shia militias, which targeted U.S. forces to create instability and resistance against the U.S.-led occupation.¹²⁵

For Saudi Arabia, a predominantly Sunni nation and a regional rival of Iran, the rise of a pro-Iranian Shia government in Iraq was a cause for concern. It disrupted the established order and challenged Saudi Arabia’s influence in the region.¹²⁶ The blocking coalition against Iran lost a big state—Iraq—in 2003, leaving Saudi Arabia and GCC countries exposed, which makes reliance on U.S. security (and now Israel) more important, something that makes the Iranian regime feel insecure.

In 2014, when the ISIS group captured significant territories in Iraq, Iran-backed armed groups played a crucial role in defeating them. At the same time, the United States supported the Iraqi armed forces in achieving the shared objective of defeating ISIS. This meant that despite their strained relationship, Iran and the United States found themselves fighting on the same side in Iraq.¹²⁷ Although this was a temporary marriage of convenience, and the relationship has gone back to being hostile after the fall of ISIS in 2017, Saudi Arabia viewed this development with concern, not only due to the need to address the extremist threat but also because it involved the consolidation of Iran’s influence in Iraq, which Saudi Arabia saw as a potential challenge to its own security.

¹²⁵ Fahad J. Almutairi et al., “The Role of the Gulf Cooperation Council (GCC) Countries in Countering the Iranian Threats for Promoting Their Common Security in Maritime Domain,” *Journal of Humanities and Social Sciences* 5, no. 8 (June 30, 2021): 85–86.

¹²⁶ Imran Khan, “Analysis: How Saudi Arabia and Iran Became Rivals,” *Al Jazeera*, June 4, 2020, <https://www.aljazeera.com/features/2020/6/4/analysis-how-saudi-arabia-and-iran-became-rivals>.

¹²⁷ Khan.

B. THE SAUDI-IRANIAN RIVALRY DURING THE ARAB SPRING

During the Arab Spring in 2011, the rivalry between Saudi Arabia and Iran manifested in different conflicts. In Bahrain, Saudi Arabia supported the Sunni monarchy against a Shia-led opposition movement allegedly backed by Iran. In Syria, Iran supported President Bashar al-Assad's government, while Saudi Arabia backed the opposition forces aiming to overthrow him. These events heightened tensions between the two countries, leading to a perception of a regional "Cold War," which some feared could be even more troubling and divisive than the United States and the Union of Soviet Socialist Republics (U.S.-USSR) Cold War after World War II due to its sectarian nature, regional proxy conflicts, high-stakes energy considerations, lack of established communication channels, multiplicity of actors, humanitarian consequences, and risks of escalation.¹²⁸ While it didn't reach the same level of global confrontation as the U.S.-USSR Cold War, its impact on the Middle East and its potential to disrupt global stability should not be underestimated.

C. SAUDI-IRANIAN RIVALRY IN LEBANON

Lebanon has been a battleground for Saudi Arabia and Iran to exert influence indirectly through their proxies.¹²⁹ The evidence of this rivalry is visible in the persistent political gridlock, sectarian tensions, and instances of violence that have plagued the country. Lebanon experienced a prolonged presidential vacuum from 2014 to 2016, lasting over two years. During this time, Saudi Arabia and Iran supported different presidential candidates, contributing to the political stalemate. Michel Aoun, a Hezbollah ally with Iranian backing, eventually became president in October 2016.¹³⁰ Moreover, Lebanon's political landscape is deeply divided along sectarian lines, with various factions backed by regional powers, including Saudi Arabia and Iran. Hariri's Future Movement is historically

¹²⁸ "Timeline: Iran and Saudi Arabia, from Rivalry to Rapprochement," *Al Jazeera*, March 10, 2023, <https://www.aljazeera.com/news/2023/3/10/iran-and-saudi-arabia-from-rivalry-to-mending-ties-a-timeline>.

¹²⁹ Lina Khatib, "Saudi-Iranian Rivalry over Lebanon Is Far from Over," *Middle East Eye*, February 14, 2019, <https://www.middleeasteye.net/opinion/saudi-iranian-rivalry-over-lebanon-far-over>.

¹³⁰ Thanassis Cambanis, "Michel Aoun Rises to Lebanese Presidency, Ending Power Vacuum," *New York Times*, November 1, 2016, <https://www.nytimes.com/2016/11/01/world/middleeast/michel-aoun-lebanon-president.html>.

aligned with Saudi Arabia, while Hezbollah maintains close ties with Iran.¹³¹ Parliamentary seats in Lebanon are based on the nation's major religious communities. The speaker of Parliament is mandated to be a Shiite Muslim, the prime minister must be a Sunni Muslim, and the presidency is reserved for a Maronite Christian.¹³² Moreover, the process of forming governments in Lebanon has often been marred by delays and disputes, with Saudi- and Iranian-backed factions vying for influence. For example, In November 2017, Saad al-Hariri, who was serving as the Prime Minister of Lebanon, unexpectedly announced his resignation while he was in Riyadh, Saudi Arabia.¹³³

On the other hand, Hezbollah, backed by Iran, has been able to maintain significant influence within Lebanon's political system, often obstructing decisions that do not align with its interests.¹³⁴ This has led to accusations of Lebanon being under Iranian control by Saudi Arabia and its allies. Saudi Arabia has at times used its financial clout to influence Lebanese politics and support Sunni leaders and groups that align with its interests. The withholding of financial aid and investments has been used as a leverage tool in the rivalry.¹³⁵

D. SAUDI-IRANIAN RIVALRY IN SYRIA

The rivalry between Saudi Arabia and Iran intensified more with the outbreak of the Syrian civil war in 2011. Iran supported President Bashar al-Assad by providing military support and financial aid to counter the Sunni rebels.¹³⁶ On the other hand, Saudi Arabia, a Sunni-majority country, backed the rebel groups initially and later joined a coalition led by the United States to combat ISIS starting in 2014.¹³⁷

¹³¹ Terrill, *The Saudi-Iranian Rivalry*, 38–44.

¹³² Kali Robinson, "What Lebanon's Election Results Mean for Ending Its Crisis," *In Briefs* (blog), May 19, 2022, <https://www.cfr.org/in-brief/what-lebanons-election-results-mean-ending-its-crisis>.

¹³³ Khatib, "Saudi-Iranian Rivalry over Lebanon Is Far from Over."

¹³⁴ Terrill, *The Saudi-Iranian Rivalry*, 38–44.

¹³⁵ Maya Carlin, "Lebanon Becomes Latest Casualty of Saudi Arabia-Iran Rivalry," Center for Security Policy, November 5, 2021, <https://centerforsecuritypolicy.org/lebanon-becomes-latest-casualty-of-saudi-arabia-iran-rivalry/>.

¹³⁶ Terrill, *The Saudi-Iranian Rivalry*, 26–33.

¹³⁷ Al Jazeera, "Timeline."

Iran is reportedly spending considerable sums annually to support President Assad's Alawite-dominated government in Syria. This support includes providing military advisers, subsidized weapons, technical experts, and oil transfers.¹³⁸ Moreover, Syria is being used as a corridor to pass support to Hezbollah, which is believed to have deployed fighters in Syria in support of the Syrian president.¹³⁹ Additionally, Iranian, and Iraqi militia members claim to be protecting Shia holy sites and are actively engaged in the Syrian conflict alongside Syrian troops.¹⁴⁰ Riyadh embraced a regime change agenda and began providing armed support to the Syrian opposition in 2012, with billions of dollars invested in the effort.¹⁴¹ However, Saudi Arabia's involvement in Syria became challenging due to overlapping conflicts and priorities. While the Saudis aimed to counter Iranian influence and support the Syrian opposition, they were also engaged in other regional conflicts, such as the Yemeni civil war. Balancing these conflicts and maintaining a coherent strategy proved difficult for Saudi Arabia.¹⁴²

In contrast to the opposition's external backers, Iran demonstrated unwavering commitment and organizational prowess in supporting Assad.¹⁴³ Iran has been a close ally of Syria for over three decades and is concerned about the developments in Syria. Both countries have maintained good relations since the establishment of the Islamic Republic. Iran has provided support to Syria in the past, especially during the Iran-Iraq War. Both nations share a distrust of the United States.¹⁴⁴ Iranian-backed forces, including the Quds force commanders, have been present in Syria since 2012, and their support expanded significantly in 2013, particularly with substantial backing from Hezbollah. Iran further

¹³⁸ Terrill, *The Saudi-Iranian Rivalry*, 26–33.

¹³⁹ Marisa Sullivan, *Hezbollah in Syria* (Washington, DC: Institute for the Study of War, 2014), 9–26, https://www.understandingwar.org/sites/default/files/Hezbollah_Sullivan_FINAL.pdf.

¹⁴⁰ "Syria Crisis: Where Key Countries Stand," *BBC News*, October 30, 2015, <https://www.bbc.com/news/world-middle-east-23849587>.

¹⁴¹ Julien Barnes-Dacey and Ribale Sleiman-Haidar, "Saudi-Iranian Rivalry and the Impact on the Syrian Conflict," *LSE Middle East Centre Blog* (blog), June 22, 2018, <https://blogs.lse.ac.uk/mec/2018/06/22/saudi-iranian-rivalry-and-the-impact-on-the-syrian-conflict/>.

¹⁴² Barnes-Dacey and Sleiman-Haidar.

¹⁴³ Barnes-Dacey and Sleiman-Haidar.

¹⁴⁴ Terrill, *The Saudi-Iranian Rivalry*, 2–62.

mobilized fighters from various regions, including Afghanis and Iraqis, creating what could be termed a Shia jihad.¹⁴⁵

The differing forms of support provided by Saudi Arabia and Iran during the Syrian war have undoubtedly exacerbated their long-standing rivalry. Iran's consistent and comprehensive backing of the Assad regime, including military support, financial aid, and the mobilization of Shia militias from various regions, has solidified its influence in Syria and bolstered its strategic link to Hezbollah.¹⁴⁶ This has been a significant source of concern for Saudi Arabia and its allies, as it extends Iran's reach across the region and enhances its position as a dominant player in Middle Eastern geopolitics. While Saudi Arabia didn't officially fund al-Qaeda-linked groups, it is implied that they turned a blind eye to clerics and private donors who were supporting radical groups in Syria.¹⁴⁷ This, in turn, contributed to increased competition among Assad's opponents, deepened sectarian divides, and allowed Islamist, Salafist, and jihadist groups to gain prominence in the Syrian conflict.¹⁴⁸

E. SAUDI-IRANIAN RIVALRY IN YEMEN

In Yemen, the Saudi-Iranian rivalry escalated when Houthi seized control of the capital, Sana'a. President Hadi sought refuge in Saudi Arabia, which led to Saudi Arabia forming a military coalition to intervene in Yemen's civil war.¹⁴⁹ Saudi Arabia has accused Iran of providing military and financial support to the Houthis in Yemen.¹⁵⁰ The Saudi

¹⁴⁵ Sune Engel Rasmussen and Zahra Nader, "Iran Covertly Recruits Afghan Shias to Fight in Syria," *The Guardian*, June 30, 2016, sec. World news, <https://www.theguardian.com/world/2016/jun/30/iran-covertly-recruits-afghan-soldiers-to-fight-in-syria>.

¹⁴⁶ "Syria and Hezbollah Bolster Forces in Qusayr," *Al Jazeera*, May 29, 2013, <https://www.aljazeera.com/news/2013/5/29/syria-and-hezbollah-bolster-forces-in-qusayr>.

¹⁴⁷ Adam Joyce, "The Battle for Syria: International Rivalry in the New Middle East," *Middle East Policy* 25, no. 2 (2018): 40–82, <https://doi.org/10.1111/mepo.12352>.

¹⁴⁸ Joyce, 40–82.

¹⁴⁹ Jeremy M. Sharp, *Yemen: Civil War and Regional Intervention*, CRS Report No. R43960 (Washington, DC: Congressional Research Service, 2021), 1, <https://crsreports.congress.gov/product/pdf/R/R43960>.

¹⁵⁰ "Saudi and Arab Allies Bomb Houthi Positions in Yemen," *Al Jazeera*, accessed February 19, 2023, <https://www.aljazeera.com/news/2015/3/26/saudi-and-arab-allies-bomb-houthi-positions-in-yemen>.

government and other regional allies have expressed concerns that Iran's backing of the Shia group in Yemen is aimed at expanding its influence in the region and gaining a foothold on Saudi Arabia's southern border.¹⁵¹

Iran, on the other hand, has denied providing direct military assistance to the Houthis. The Iranian Foreign Minister urgently called for an immediate cessation of the military campaign, while Iranian state media labeled the airstrikes as "an aggression supported by the United States."¹⁵² However, Iran's support for the Houthi movement became more evident after 2015.

The Saudi-led military intervention in Yemen has often been viewed as a proxy conflict between Saudi Arabia and Iran, with the Houthis being depicted as Iran's allies in the region. This ongoing conflict has intensified the already strained relations between the two nations, as both sides point fingers at each other, alleging interference in Yemen's affairs.¹⁵³ Furthermore, as noted by many scholars, the involvement of external powers, particularly Saudi Arabia and Iran, has further complicated the conflict in Yemen and led to a devastating humanitarian crisis as the ongoing fighting and airstrikes have resulted in civilian casualties, widespread displacement, and a severe shortage of necessities such as food, water, and medical supplies.¹⁵⁴

F. IRANIAN SPONSORSHIP FOR HOUTHIS

There have been allegations and evidence suggesting that Iran has provided various forms of support to the Houthis. This assistance includes military aid, weapons, training, and financial support. However, the extent of Iran's involvement and control over the Houthi movement has been a subject of debate and analysis among experts and policy makers. For example, May Darwich argues that prior to 2014, there is no concrete evidence

¹⁵¹ Sharp, *Yemen*.

¹⁵² Al Jazeera, "Saudi and Arab Allies Bomb Houthi Positions in Yemen."

¹⁵³ Darwich, "The Saudi Intervention in Yemen," 126–29.

¹⁵⁴ Sharp, *Yemen*, 1–3.

to suggest any Iranian interference in Yemen. Furthermore, the Houthi movement emerged as a truly indigenous and defiant force, transcending sectarian divisions within Yemen.¹⁵⁵

Before Yemen's political transition disruption in early 2015, there were indications of Iran's involvement in smuggling weapons, including highly sophisticated ones, to the Houthis. In early 2012, Yemeni authorities intercepted a shipment of fabrication equipment intended for EFPs, similar to the improvised explosive devices (IEDs) used against American forces in Iraq a decade earlier.¹⁵⁶ This shipment was destined for a Yemeni businessman closely associated with the Houthi group, as reported by a high-ranking Yemeni security official.¹⁵⁷ Moreover, the U.S. and Yemeni authorities captured an Iranian dhow loaded with 40 tons of military equipment linked to IRGC.¹⁵⁸

The revelation of Iran's consistent provision of support to Houthi movement in Yemen, including regular flights delivering provisions, highlights the complex dynamics of external assistance and indigenous resource acquisition in the Houthi movement's rise to power. In April 2015, former Secretary of State John Kerry revealed in an interview with PBS NewsHour that Iran had been regularly dispatching numerous flights to Yemen each week, delivering provisions to support the Houthis.¹⁵⁹ Although determining the exact extent to which Iranian assistance has contributed to the Houthi movement's achievements is a challenging task, a notable share of the Houthis' resources has originated within their own territory. They have acquired a considerable portion of their weaponry through various means, including incorporating Yemeni military factions through negotiation or pressure, seizing supplies from national army reserves, establishing partnerships with tribal militias, and procuring items through illicit channels.¹⁶⁰

¹⁵⁵ Darwich, "The Saudi Intervention in Yemen," 129.

¹⁵⁶ Feierstein, "Is There a Path Out of the Yemen Conflict?," 21.

¹⁵⁷ Feierstein, 21.

¹⁵⁸ Feierstein, 21.

¹⁵⁹ Feierstein, 21.

¹⁶⁰ Thomas Juneau, "How Iran Helped Houthis Expand Their Reach," War on the Rocks, August 23, 2021, <https://warontherocks.com/2021/08/how-iran-helped-houthis-expand-their-reach/>.

Iran's assistance has undeniably been a significant factor in boosting the Houthis' strength, as they have supplied the group not only with a growing quantity of basic weaponry but also with more sophisticated and deadly arms.¹⁶¹ As highlighted by the UN Panel of Experts on Yemen, Iran offers the Houthis advanced components, which the group combines with locally sourced or manufactured elements.¹⁶² With guidance from advisors linked to Hezbollah and the Islamic Revolutionary Guard Corps, the Houthis skillfully construct operational weapons.¹⁶³ This strategy has enabled them to deploy both short-and long-range drones, as well as a growing variety of missiles with the capability to target distant areas within Saudi Arabia.¹⁶⁴ Also, during 2019, the Houthis and their international backers significantly escalated their use of drones and missiles to target Saudi Arabia's energy and water facilities, as well as commercial airports.¹⁶⁵ As noted by Sharp, there has been a substantial surge in the Houthis' capabilities in recent years, especially concerning ballistic missiles and drone technology.¹⁶⁶ For example, the Houthis carried out numerous strikes using unmanned aerial vehicles (UAVs) and missiles on Saudi Arabian regional airports "Jizan, Najran, and Abha," resulting in flight suspensions, runway damage, and civilian casualties.¹⁶⁷ Furthermore, the Houthis are utilizing components readily accessible in the global market to create innovative designs for their UAVs as shown in Figure 3.¹⁶⁸

¹⁶¹ Juneau.

¹⁶² Ahmed Himmiche et al., *Letter Dated 25 January 2019 from the Panel of Experts on Yemen Addressed to the President of the Security Council*, 2019, 83–89, <https://digitallibrary.un.org/record/1664359?ln=en>.

¹⁶³ Himmiche et al., 83–88.

¹⁶⁴ Con Coughlin, "New Evidence Reveals Extent of Iranian Support for Houthi Terrorists," Gatestone Institute, February 18, 2022, <https://www.gatestoneinstitute.org/18236/iran-support-houthi-terrorists>. See also the "Letter Dated 25 January 2019 from the Panel of Experts on Yemen Addressed to the President of the Security Council" (Security Council, January 25, 2019), <https://documents-dds-ny.un.org/doc/UNDOC/GEN/N19/006/48/PDF/N1900648.pdf?OpenElement>.

¹⁶⁵ Sharp, *Yemen*, 4–5.

¹⁶⁶ Sharp, 5.

¹⁶⁷ Sharp, 5.

¹⁶⁸ Sharp, 5.



Figure 3. Sammad-3 Long-range UAV¹⁶⁹

Some analysts believe the recent iterations of UAVs possess the capability to reach strategic locations deep within Saudi Arabia. A case in point is the Samad-3 variant, which, when launched from Saada, Yemen, can cover around 1,000 kilometers, effectively targeting significant sites like the Khurais oil field and the Saudi Aramco facility in Abqaiq.¹⁷⁰

A recent report by the panel of experts on Yemen shows that the method of delivering arms to the Houthis remained largely consistent. Most weapons and related items were illicitly transported via traditional sailing boats in the Arabian Sea, originating from Iran.¹⁷¹ Furthermore, The Gulf of Oman has emerged as a troubling focal point for the illicit trade in weaponry, marked by notable challenges in ascertaining the origins and destinations of unlawful arms shipments. These difficulties stem from the lack of proper documentation, absence of serial numbers, and the absence of GPS tracking on such

¹⁶⁹ Source: Sharp, 5.

¹⁷⁰ Seth G. Jones et al., *The Iranian and Houthi War against Saudi Arabia* (Washington, DC: Center for Strategic and International Studies, 2021), <https://www.csis.org/analysis/iranian-and-houthi-war-against-saudi-arabia>.

¹⁷¹ Debi Prasad Dash et al., *Letter Dated 21 February 2023 from the Panel of Experts on Yemen Addressed to the President of the Security Council, S/2023/130* (New York: UN Security Council, 2023), 17–28, <https://digitallibrary.un.org/record/4004108?ln=en>.

contraband. Despite these obstacles, discernible patterns have emerged through maritime interdiction efforts, with a substantial number of smuggling vessels, known as dhows, being intercepted along routes connecting Iran and Yemen. Furthermore, stateless fishing vessels, often operated by Yemeni crews, are frequently implicated in these trafficking endeavors.¹⁷²

The concerning escalation in arms trafficking activities has been underscored by recent incidents. In November 2022, “70 tons of ammonium perchlorate” and “100 tons of urea fertilizer” were seized by the American Navy.¹⁷³ Then, in December 2022, the U.S. Navy seized a cache with more than “1 million rounds of ammunition, nearly 7,000 proximity fuses for rockets, and 4,600+ pounds of rocket propellant.” In mid-January 2023, a French warship apprehended another fishing vessel, yielding more than “3,000 assault rifles, 20 anti-tank missiles, and 500,000 rounds of ammunition.”¹⁷⁴ These incidents serve as stark exemplars of the intricate and perilous nature of weapon trafficking operations in the region, posing substantial threats to both regional stability and Yemen security.

The committee’s report states that the investigation has been continuing into other reported cases related to the smuggling of chemicals being smuggled from Djibouti to Houthi-controlled areas.¹⁷⁵ Additionally, the Panel is examining the smuggling of launch containers for anti-tank guided missiles. These containers were hidden within a commercial truck and transported across the land border with Oman.¹⁷⁶

G. SAUDI-LED COALITION IN 2015

Saudi Arabia, supported by a coalition of regional allies, intervened in March 2015, launching airstrikes and military operations to restore the internationally recognized

¹⁷² Dash et al., 17–28.

¹⁷³ Leonardo Jacopo Maria Mazzucco, “Countering Smuggling in the Arabian Sea: Multinational Approach Delivering Results,” *Arab Gulf States Institute in Washington* (blog), March 1, 2023, <https://agsiw.org/countering-smuggling-in-the-arabian-sea-multinational-approach-delivering-results/>.

¹⁷⁴ Mazzucco.

¹⁷⁵ Dash et al., *Letter Dated 21 February 2023*, 17–28.

¹⁷⁶ Dash et al., 3.

Yemeni government and push back the Houthi advancement.¹⁷⁷ The coalition is primarily composed of Arab states, with the UAE being a key partner, to back their military campaign in Yemen. The United States pledged logistical assistance to support the Saudi-led intervention, which included sharing limited intelligence information.¹⁷⁸ The United States agreed to Saudi Arabia's military intervention in Yemen to prevent the Houthis from fully occupying the country. The aim was also to stabilize the region around Aden, allowing the government to resume its activities in the southern part of Yemen. This move was seen as a step towards eventually restoring the Yemeni government to Sana'a and implementing the Gulf initiative.¹⁷⁹

Saudi Arabia declared the purpose of the intervention as stated by the Saudi ambassador to the United States, Adel al-Jubair: "to defend and support the legitimate government of Yemen and prevent the radical Houthi movement from taking over the country,"¹⁸⁰ but some other scholars have different opinions. For example, Asher Orkaby believes that the Saudi-led intervention in Yemen has transitioned from targeting Houthi military objectives to a broader strategy of dismantling Yemen's economic infrastructure, utilizing airstrikes and blockades to weaken the Houthi movement and influence public sentiment, while severely limiting humanitarian aid and access to medical treatment for Yemeni civilians.¹⁸¹ This strategy is intended to create internal pressure on the Houthis and weaken their hold on power. Also, May Darwich thinks that Saudi Arabia's intervention in Yemen was not solely driven by material interests but rather stemmed from a non-material need to assert its status as a regional power and safeguard its security concerns, presenting the conflict as a Sunni-led effort to counter the perceived Iranian-backed Houthis and the expansion of Shiism in the Gulf.¹⁸² The Houthis have been

¹⁷⁷ Al Jazeera, "Saudi and Arab Allies Bomb Houthi Positions in Yemen."

¹⁷⁸ Feierstein, "Is There a Path Out of the Yemen Conflict?," 19.

¹⁷⁹ Feierstein, 19.

¹⁸⁰ "Saudi and Arab Allies Bomb Houthi Positions in Yemen."

¹⁸¹ Asher Orkaby, "Yemen's Humanitarian Nightmare: The Real Roots of the Conflict," *Foreign Affairs* 96, no. 6 (2017): 97.

¹⁸² Darwich, "The Saudi Intervention in Yemen," 127.

portrayed as proxies of Iran, thereby raising concerns in Riyadh about the potential encirclement and the expansion of Shiism in the Gulf. This fear of encroachment has been a driving force behind Saudi Arabia's actions in Yemen.¹⁸³



Figure 4. Areas of Control in Yemen¹⁸⁴

The Saudi military and its coalition partners have been conducting an ongoing air war against the Houthis and their supporters since 2015. This air campaign has drawn international condemnation at times for increasing civilian fatalities. Most recently, on August 2019, the Saudi-led coalition carried out air attacks on a Houthi-run detention facility, killing 200 individuals.¹⁸⁵ The coalition articulated that they targeted a valid military target, which was both a jail and a depot for Houthi “UAVs.”¹⁸⁶

Although the Coalition was initially optimistic in achieving their defined military goals, the situation in Yemen slowly evolved into a prolonged and relentless “stalemate.”

¹⁸³ Darwich, 129.

¹⁸⁴ Source: Darwich, 129.

¹⁸⁵ Human Rights Watch, “Yemen: Events of 2019,” in *World Report 2020* (New York: Human Rights Watch, 2019), <https://www.hrw.org/world-report/2020/country-chapters/yemen>.

¹⁸⁶ Sharp, *Yemen*, 3.

The collaborative efforts of the Government and the Saudi-led Coalition enabled them to secure considerable parts of the southern and eastern territories. Conversely, the Houthi factions retained a strong presence in the northern territories, maintaining their grip on the capital.¹⁸⁷

Saudi Arabia's involvement in the Yemeni conflict has significantly exacerbated the longstanding rivalry between Saudi Arabia and Iran. Despite their early confidence driven by military superiority, the Saudi-led coalition faced formidable resistance from the Houthis, who demonstrated remarkable endurance and strategic acumen. This protracted conflict has showcased the enduring divisions within Yemeni society, suggesting that even if a resolution is reached, these divisions will persist.¹⁸⁸

Additionally, Saudi Arabia's military campaign and support for anti-Houthi factions, including the STC, have contributed to the complexities of the Yemeni conflict. The STC, comprised predominantly of anti-Houthi fighters, seeks independence for the southern regions of Yemen and opposes what they perceive as northern forces' incursions. The coalition's backing of the STC has added another layer to the conflict, exacerbating tensions within Yemen and deepening the Saudi-Iranian rivalry, with Iran using the conflict to expand its influence in the region by supporting the Houthis.¹⁸⁹

In 2015, after the Houthis were expelled from Aden and its surrounding areas by the Saudi-led coalition, Aden assumed the role of the de facto capital under President Hadi's leadership. However, the actual presence of the Yemeni government in Aden remained limited, encompassing only a few structures such as the presidential palace and the Central Bank. The city itself grappled with security challenges, leading to a situation where the UAE and its allies supporting southern movement gradually took on influential roles as the main power brokers in Aden over time.¹⁹⁰

¹⁸⁷ Feierstein, "Is There a Path Out of the Yemen Conflict?" 19–20.

¹⁸⁸ Feierstein, 19.

¹⁸⁹ Feierstein, 25.

¹⁹⁰ Sharp, *Yemen*, 7.

In summary, the Saudi-Iranian competition in Yemen has deep historical roots and is intertwined with broader regional dynamics. The competition between the two countries in Yemen has not only intensified the ongoing conflict but has also had devastating humanitarian consequences for the Yemeni people. The situation remains fluid, and a lasting resolution to the conflict remains elusive, with the competition between Saudi Arabia and Iran continuing to shape the course of events in the country and the wider Middle East.

IV. FAILED PEACE INITIATIVES: AN ANALYSIS

As Yemen plunged deeper into turmoil, the Houthi takeover of the capital city Sana'a in September 2014 triggered a chain of events that not only disrupted the stability of Yemen but also posted significant regional security implications. Resolution 2216 serves as an international response to the escalating conflict, outlining measures to restore Yemen's legitimate government and condemning the Houthis' actions as a threat to regional peace and stability. The resolution underscores the importance of upholding the principles of sovereignty, territorial integrity, and non-interference in the affairs of Yemen, while highlighting the pressing need for a peaceful and negotiated settlement to the crisis.¹⁹¹ Here are key points:

On April 14, 2015, the UNSC passed Resolution 2216, receiving support from 14 member states, while Russia abstained from the vote. This resolution served to denounce the actions of the Houthis movement, who had orchestrated the overthrow of the legitimately elected Yemeni President, Abd Rabbu Mansur Hadi, subsequently gaining control over the capital city, Sana'a, and other regions within Yemen. Resolution 2216, in unequivocal terms, called upon the Houthi faction to withdraw from all territories they had forcibly occupied, relinquish the weaponry appropriated from the national government, desist from activities that subverted the legitimate authority, and engage constructively in the United Nations-led peace negotiation process.

In addition to these directives, the resolution further imposed a meticulously targeted arms embargo on the Houthis and their affiliated groups. Simultaneously, it authorized the imposition of sanctions, encompassing asset freezes and travel bans, against key Houthi leaders and a former president who had lent support to their cause. Furthermore, the United Nations Security Council (UNSC) affirmed its backing for the GCC initiative and the outcomes of the National Dialogue Conference, recognizing them as fundamental components for a political resolution within Yemen. Significantly, Resolution 2216 also

¹⁹¹ UN Security Council, "Resolution 2216 (2015)," S/RES/2216 (2015), April 14, 2015, <http://unscr.com/en/resolutions/doc/2216>.

underscored the imperative to ensure the unhindered provision of humanitarian aid to the beleaguered population of Yemen. It emphasized the paramount need to safeguard the well-being and rights of civilians and to work towards reinstating security and stability within the nation.

UNSC Resolution 2216 plays a pivotal role in furnishing the foundational context for this chapter, as it delineates the international endeavors aimed at mitigating the Yemeni conflict. It serves as a critical framework for analyzing the prominent peace consultations that transpired with the overarching objective of fostering peace and stability within Yemen.

A. GENEVA I PEACE TALKS

The Geneva I peace talks were the first major attempt to address the Yemeni conflict through diplomatic negotiations. The Special Envoy to Yemen Ismail Ould Cheikh Ahmed put forth numerous efforts to mediate agreements for halting hostilities or temporary humanitarian breaks to establish a conducive environment for the resumption of negotiations. He successfully facilitated the parties' consent to the initial Geneva discussions held between June 15 and June 19, a four-day humanitarian pause starting on July 11, and a seven-day humanitarian pause commencing alongside the second Geneva consultations on December 15.¹⁹²

The talks were attended by representatives of the Yemeni government led by President Abd-Rabbu Mansour Hadi after the Houthis took over Sana'a in September 2014. The Houthi delegation was headed by Hamza al-Houthi, a senior member of the political wing of the movement. Among the participants were the GPC, the previous ruling party under former President Ali Abdullah Saleh, which had aligned itself with the Houthis against Hadi.¹⁹³ The consultations in Geneva concluded without an agreement, but the

¹⁹² Ahmed Himmiche et al., *Letter Dated 22 January 2016 from the Panel of Experts on Yemen Established Pursuant to Security Council Resolution 2140 (2014) Addressed to the President of the Security Council*, S/2018/192 (New York: UN Security Council, 2016), 13, <https://digitallibrary.un.org/record/1478876>.

¹⁹³ Ismail Ould Cheikh Ahmed, *Security Council Briefing on the Situation in Yemen, Special Envoy of the Secretary General for Yemen*. (New York: United Nations, October 15, 2015), https://osesgy.unmissions.org/sites/default/files/20151015_eng.pdf.

United Nations remained hopeful that a ceasefire could be reached soon. The UN Special Envoy to Yemen, Ismail Ould Cheikh Ahmed, acknowledged that there was no formal agreement but saw positive signs, as both sides seemed to agree on the necessity of a ceasefire.¹⁹⁴

The mutual mistrust between the Houthi and the government, and the absence of a mechanism to build trust or enforce agreements, were the main reasons for why no agreement could be reached in that consultation. The first day of the talks was delayed by several hours due to logistical issues and disagreements over the agenda and format of the discussions. For example, the government's agreement for consultations was conditional, requiring that the government representatives from Riyadh engage with the Houthis as an armed faction. In contrast, Houthis insisted on participating as a political entity, alongside other political parties involved in the PNPA negotiations and hinged on the Special Envoy accepting this arrangement.¹⁹⁵ The parties were reluctant to sit in the same room and preferred to communicate through mediators.¹⁹⁶ The government's delegation told the Special Envoy that their participation was provided by Houthis' acceptance of Resolution 2216 as the only basis for any dialogue and that it should be fully implemented before any other issues could be discussed. Also, the government demanded that the Houthis withdraw from all areas they had captured since 2014, including Sana'a, Aden, Taiz, and Marib; and that they hand over their heavy weapons and ballistic missiles to a third party before sitting around the table.¹⁹⁷

The UN Special Envoy tried to bridge the gap between the parties by proposing several confidence-building measures, such as releasing prisoners and detainees, allowing

¹⁹⁴ Agence France-Presse, "'No Agreement' as Yemen Peace Talks End in Geneva," Defense News, June 19, 2015, <https://www.defensenews.com/home/2015/06/19/no-agreement-as-yemen-peace-talks-end-in-geneva/>.

¹⁹⁵ Himmiche et al., *Letter Dated 22 January 2016*, 13–18.

¹⁹⁶ Ould Cheikh Ahmed, "Security Council Briefing."

¹⁹⁷ Ould Cheikh Ahmed.

humanitarian access to besieged areas and establishing local ceasefires.¹⁹⁸ However, these proposals were either rejected or ignored by both sides, who accused each other of violating previous agreements and escalating the violence on the ground.¹⁹⁹ He also warned that the continuation of the war would only bring more suffering and destruction to the Yemeni people and threaten the regional and international security.²⁰⁰ He ended up expressing his disappointment and frustration over the lack of progress and urged the parties to show more flexibility and compromise. However, his appeals fell on deaf ears, as both sides resumed their military operations and political rhetoric, further undermining the prospects of peace in Yemen.²⁰¹

Insufficient empirical substantiation exists to definitively attribute the breakdown of the negotiations to direct regional interference; however, it is plausible to assert that the tacit endorsement and backing received by both negotiating parties indirectly exacerbated the failure of the current round of talks. This exacerbation can be attributed to the heightened confidence exhibited by the parties in their capacity to persist with confrontational approaches.

B. GENEVA II PEACE TALKS

Following the Geneva I round of talks, the Special Envoy engaged in discussions with delegates representing Ansar Allah and the GPC in Oman. This dialogue transpired after the initial round of negotiations held in Geneva, which culminated in a consensus pertaining to the stipulations delineated in United Nations Security Council Resolution 2216. Consequently, this consensus prompted a modification in the negotiation format, transitioning towards direct talks featuring a delegation appointed by the president and a counterpart from Sana'a, representing the interests of Abdulmalik al-Houthi and associates

¹⁹⁸ See Office of the Special Envoy of the Secretary-General for Yemen, "Briefing to the Security Council by Special Envoy of the Secretary-General for Yemen, Ismail Ould Cheikh Ahmed, 15 April 2016," OSESGY – Office of the Special Envoy of the Secretary-General for Yemen, April 16, 2016, <https://osesgy.unmissions.org/briefing-security-council-special-envoy-secretary-general-yemen-ismail-ould-cheikh-ahmed-15-april>.

¹⁹⁹ Himmiche et al., *Letter Dated 22 January 2016*.

²⁰⁰ Ould Cheikh Ahmed, "Security Council Briefing."

²⁰¹ Himmiche et al., *Letter Dated 22 January 2016*, 21.

of former president Ali Abdullah Saleh, the head of GPC.²⁰² This side discussion in Oman paved the way to conduct the second round of talks that took place in Geneva from December 15 to December 20. The objective was to establish a basis for comprehensive peace talks that would include measures to build trust and confidence.

In the second round, the parties agreed to work together toward confidence-building and a negotiation framework that included: a prisoner release mechanism, a co-ordination, and de-escalation committee, lifting blockades for humanitarian access, and a framework based on UN resolutions 2216. Participants agreed to continue the committee's work, meet for a second round, involve women more, and adjourn until January 2016 for consultations. The Special Envoy would work on confidence-building for a lasting ceasefire and planned the next round for January 14, 2016.²⁰³

Although the parties agreed on a framework for confidence-building and a ceasefire to reach a final agreement to end the war, the lack of trust between the two parties caused the failure of these talks.²⁰⁴ As peace talks were ongoing, the conflict escalated further as the coalition's efforts against the Houthi forces advanced in Hajjah and Jawf. Meanwhile, the Houthis launched ballistic missiles towards Ma'rib and Saudi Arabia.²⁰⁵

In his brief to the UNSC, the Special Envoy stated that the Houthis had reportedly accepted UNSC Resolution 2216, yet the reality on the ground was different from what the Houthis said, evidently, a dissonance emerged between their professed commitments and their on-the-ground actions, suggesting a lack of alignment between their stated intentions and their observed behavior.²⁰⁶ Former president Saleh had made public his support for

²⁰² Himmiche et al., 14.

²⁰³ Office of the Special Envoy of the Secretary-General for Yemen, "Yemen Peace Talks, Switzerland, December 2015," OSESGY – Office of the Special Envoy of the Secretary-General for Yemen, February 12, 2016, <https://osesgy.unmissions.org/yemen-peace-talks-switzerland-december-2015>.

²⁰⁴ Nick Cumming-Bruce, "Yemen Agrees to Cease-Fire with Rebels as Peace Talks Begin," *New York Times*, December 15, 2015, sec. World, <https://www.nytimes.com/2015/12/16/world/middleeast/yemen-cease-fire.html>.

²⁰⁵ Saeed Al-Batati, "Fighting in Yemen after Cease-Fire Threatens Negotiations," *New York Times*, December 18, 2015, sec. World, <https://www.nytimes.com/2015/12/19/world/middleeast/fighting-in-yemen-after-cease-fire-threatens-negotiations.html>.

²⁰⁶ Ould Cheikh Ahmed, "Security Council Briefing."

the Houthis in the fight. He indicated that conversations would not include the government, but rather Saudi Arabia, and that they would take place only after hostilities ended. Similarly, on January 2, 2016, Saudi Arabia confirmed independently that the ceasefire sought by the government had been terminated. The alliance of Houthi and Saleh troops made this decision in response to “repeated and explicit attacks on Saudi territory via the firing of ballistic missiles at Saudi cities and the deliberate targeting of Saudi border installations.”²⁰⁷

The fundamental issue faced by both factions was that neither party could genuinely assure the fulfillment of the agreement in the long run. Given this awareness, both sides opted to persist in the conflict. Despite that the United Nations, represented by the Special Envoy, played the role of mediator to facilitate the agreement, the failure to provide sufficient guarantees to both parties, in addition to sending a UN mission to monitor the implementation of the agreement, caused them to not adhere to the agreed-upon terms, the most important of which is the breach of the ceasefire agreement. Moreover, the involved parties encountered difficulties in adhering to humanitarian pauses and local ceasefires, particularly within the context of Ta’izz, primarily attributable to the absence of robust trust-building mechanisms.²⁰⁸ These measures should have encompassed provisions for independent monitoring and reporting systems.

As noted by the Panel of experts on Yemen, a shared responsibility for impeding the “cessation of hostilities” and the recommencement of the political process rests upon all parties engaged in the Yemeni conflict.²⁰⁹ The obstruction arises from a critical failure to uphold the principle of good intention in their actions. Their collective inability to engage sincerely and demonstrate genuine commitment to the peace process has contributed to the ongoing obstacles in achieving a cessation of hostilities and initiating a meaningful political dialogue.

²⁰⁷ Himmiche et al., *Letter Dated 22 January 2016*, 14.

²⁰⁸ Himmiche et al., 15.

²⁰⁹ Himmiche et al., 15.

C. KUWAIT PEACE TALK

The Kuwait peace talks occurred during a critical juncture in the ongoing Yemeni conflict, which had escalated into a multifaceted humanitarian and political crisis. The negotiations took place between April 21, 2016, and August 6, 2016, with the Kuwaiti capital, Kuwait City, serving as the venue. The talks were facilitated by the United Nations Special Envoy for Yemen at the time, Ismail Ould Cheikh Ahmed.²¹⁰ The negotiations brought together representatives from the internationally recognized Yemeni government, and the Houthi group. Delegations from both sides were supported by their respective political allies and regional actors. Additionally, international stakeholders, including the United Nations and the GCC countries, namely Saudi Arabia, played a crucial role in providing diplomatic support and encouraging dialogue.²¹¹

The Kuwait peace talks aimed to comprehensively address the complex facets of the Yemeni conflict. Central to this agenda was the imperative of establishing a comprehensive ceasefire to curb hostilities and mitigate civilian casualties, involving meticulous work by negotiators to devise effective monitoring and enforcement mechanisms.²¹² Discussions concurrently focused on shaping a viable political transition to redress stakeholder concerns, aiming for an inclusive government formation. Additionally, the negotiations sought unobstructed humanitarian access to conflict-affected areas, enabling aid delivery to civilians caught in the crossfire. Local and international committees were formed to ensure the implementation of the agreement to reduce hostilities. The necessity of robust security arrangements to prevent renewed violence post-resolution remained pivotal, reflecting the intricate challenges the talks aimed to

²¹⁰ Ahmed Himmiche et al., *Letter Dated 27 January 2017 from the Panel of Experts on Yemen Addressed to the President of the Security Council*, S/2017/81 (New York: UN Security Council, 2017), 13, <https://reliefweb.int/report/yemen/letter-dated-27-january-2017-panel-experts-yemen-addressed-president-security-council>.

²¹¹ See Office of the Special Envoy of the Secretary-General for Yemen, “Briefing to the Security Council by Special Envoy of the Secretary-General for Yemen, Ismail Ould Cheikh Ahmed, 15 April 2016.”

²¹² Himmiche et al., *Letter Dated 27 January 2017*, 13.

navigate.²¹³ Despite intensive negotiations and multiple rounds of discussions, the Yemeni government and Houthis failed to reach a conclusive agreement on key issues. Consequently, the talks concluded without a formal peace accord.²¹⁴

The Kuwait talks failed because of the mistrust between the parties and Houthis' steadfast resistance to the proposed initiative, which aimed to execute the provisions of Resolution 2216 by effecting their withdrawal from the capital Sana'a, surrendering weaponry, and facilitating the establishment of a national unity government.²¹⁵ Despite the interaction shown by the parties to the talks with the UN Special Envoy's proposal, mistrust was a concern for the Houthis, who insisted on forming a partnership government first before withdrawing and handing over weapons, which contradicts the text of Resolution 2216 and led to the withdrawal of the government delegation from the negotiations.²¹⁶

The absence of real pressure on the Houthis from the international community, represented by the Security Council, contributed to the Houthis continuing to take unilateral measures that led to the collapse of the negotiations. For example, in July 2016 the Houthis announced the formation of a political council with former President Saleh, a measure that undermines the peace process, contradicts Security Council Resolution 2216 and is an explicit rejection of the UN proposal.²¹⁷ In addition, the international community was divided regarding pressure on the Houthis to implement UN resolutions and abide by the UN Envoy's proposal to implement the resolution. For example, Russia did not condemn the position of the Houthis due to non-compliance with the UN resolutions, but,

²¹³ See Office of the Special Envoy of the Secretary-General for Yemen, "Briefing to the Security Council by Special Envoy of the Secretary-General for Yemen, Ismail Ould Cheikh Ahmed, 15 April 2016."

²¹⁴ Himmiche et al., *Letter Dated 27 January 2017*, 13–14.

²¹⁵ "Yemen," August 2016 Monthly Forecast, July 29, 2016, https://www.securitycouncilreport.org/monthly-forecast/2016-08/yemen_23.php.

²¹⁶ "Yemen Government Leaves Kuwait Talks after Houthis Reject U.N. Plan," *Reuters*, August 1, 2016, <https://www.reuters.com/article/us-yemen-security-talks-idUSKCN10C2JT>.

²¹⁷ Security Council Report, "Yemen: Consultations on the Limited Progress of Peace Talks," *What's in Blue* (blog), August 2, 2016, <https://www.securitycouncilreport.org/whatsinblue/2016/08/consultations-on-the-deteriorating-situation-in-yemen.php>.

as reported by the panel, was working to create a “balance” among the members of the Council regarding the Houthis.²¹⁸

As noted by the Panel of Experts on Yemen, mistrust has undermined the parties’ commitment to de-escalation and cessation of hostilities. For example, the Houthis’ refusal to participate in sending personnel to a “de-escalation cell” despite an agreement in this regard in one of the Saudi cities adjacent to the Yemeni border.²¹⁹ In addition, the committee noted that the continuation of hostilities by the parties to the talks was a tactical act to impose certain conditions and “suspend” the talks as the Houthis bombed Saudi territory with a number of missiles; similarly, the coalition carried out a number of aerial bombardments.²²⁰ Also, the change in the balance of power in favor of the Houthis, represented by former President Saleh’s alliance with the Houthis, contributed to the increase in hostilities and the lack of commitment to de-escalation. According to the report of the Panel of Experts on Yemen, most of the strength of the Yemeni army joined the alliance of Saleh and the Houthis, and the Houthis were able to control approximately 68% of the state’s weapons arsenal during the 2015–2016 conflict period.²²¹

The smuggling of light and medium weapons and the arrival of technology for the manufacture of modern weapons to the Houthis contributed to the failure of any attempts to reach a peace agreement. For example, the report of the Panel of Experts on Yemen stated that several boats carrying ammunition and weapons originating in Iran to Somalia were captured, and it was reported that they would be smuggled to Yemen.²²² Figure 5 illustrates the points of departure and interception of the boats.

²¹⁸ Security Council Report.

²¹⁹ Himmiche et al., *Letter Dated 27 January 2017*, 13.

²²⁰ Himmiche et al., 13.

²²¹ Himmiche et al., 34.

²²² Himmiche et al., 26–34.



Figure 5. Ports of Departure and Intercepting Points²²³

Moreover, the committee monitored a network of arms smuggling from the Omani border to lands close to the Houthis' control and the flourishing of the black market for arms trade; the committee noted that network is linked to former President Saleh and the Houthis.²²⁴ Figure 6 shows the road of smuggling used from Oman to Yemen.

²²³ Source: Himmiche et al., 30–31.

²²⁴ Himmiche et al., 26–34.



Figure 6. Smuggling Lines from Oman to Yemen²²⁵

It is worth noting that the parties were using military actions as a form of leverage within the negotiations. The breaches served as tools for pressuring the opposing side into making concessions or altering the terms of the negotiations to their advantage. This strategic manipulation of breaches reflects the deeply entrenched distrust between the parties and their inclination to exploit the fragility of the ceasefire for tactical gains. Furthermore, the Houthi rocket launches against Saudi Arabian territory underline the regional dimensions of the conflict. The involvement of external actors and the escalation of violence beyond Yemen's borders reveal the interconnectedness of regional geopolitical interests. The Saudi-led coalition's military response further highlights the transnational nature of the conflict. These actions underline that the negotiations were influenced not only by the internal dynamics of Yemen but also by the broader regional power struggles, contributing to the complexity of the peace talks. The mediation process faced challenges in preventing, managing, and addressing these breaches effectively. The actions of external stakeholders, such as the UN and the Saudi-led coalition, in response to these breaches

²²⁵ Source: Himmiche et al., 33.

demonstrated the complexity of orchestrating a coherent and unified approach toward enforcing ceasefire agreements.

D. STOCKHOLM PEACE TALK

The period between the Kuwait peace talks was characterized by ongoing conflict, failed ceasefire attempts, and a deepening humanitarian crisis in Yemen.²²⁶ The Stockholm Agreement represented a glimmer of hope on the path towards peace, as it not only introduced a ceasefire in the strategic port city of Hudaydah but also paved the way for humanitarian initiatives and prisoner exchanges.²²⁷ However, the road to a lasting resolution remained fraught with complexities and challenges, underscoring the persistent struggles and dynamics that have defined the Yemeni conflict.

The Stockholm Agreement, commonly known as the Hudaydah Agreement, received backing from UNSC Resolutions 2451 (2018) and 2452 (2019). The “immediate ceasefire,” “mutual troop redeployment” (not withdrawal), UN-led “Redeployment Coordination Committee” (RCC), “fortification removal,” halting “military reinforcements,” port-focused demining, and enhanced “UN presence” were key components of the agreement.²²⁸ It was a deal the Yemeni government and Houthis were able to negotiate after more than eight years of war.²²⁹

The ceasefire in Hudaydah was brokered by the United Nations in December 2018 and was aimed at ending the fighting between the Yemeni government force and the Houthis in the strategic port city of Hudaydah. The agreement called for the withdrawal of both sides from the city and the establishment of an UN-managed buffer zone around the port, through which much of Yemen’s food and aid imports pass.²³⁰ Nevertheless, because of the subsequent implementation challenges, expectations for its success did not endure

²²⁶ Himmiche et al., *Letter Dated 25 January 2019*, 2–15.

²²⁷ Himmiche et al., 15.

²²⁸ Palik, “Watchdogs of Pause.”

²²⁹ Palik.

²³⁰ Himmiche et al., *Letter Dated 25 January 2019*, 16.

long. While evaluating progress on the deal, it holds true that executing peace accords is considerably more challenging than negotiating them.²³¹

In September 2018, the Yemeni government, supported by the Saudi-led coalition, initiated a military campaign with the aim of reclaiming control over the city of Hudaydah.²³² This escalation prompted the UN and the broader international community to advocate for the cessation of the government's military operation and the initiation of dialogue as means of resolving the conflict. The prevailing concern among the international community was that the assumption of control by government forces over the city and its vital port facilities in Hudaydah would exacerbate the already dire humanitarian crisis. Ultimately, despite concerted efforts, the agreed-upon terms of the cessation were not implemented, primarily due to the Houthi faction's failure to withdraw from the port.²³³ Reports indicated that the transfer of control was, instead, facilitated to individuals affiliated with the Houthis, in contrast to numerous concessions offered by the Yemeni government as a demonstration of goodwill, intended to assist mediators in achieving a breakthrough during the negotiations.²³⁴

Hudaydah holds strategic significance as a critical conduit for the Houthi movement, and relinquishing control over it would potentially undermine their operational capabilities.²³⁵ The report of panel of experts on Yemen indicated that the port has evolved into a focal point for the clandestine transport of Iranian weaponry, concurrently serving as a revenue source through levies, financial gains, and the funding of their offensive endeavors.²³⁶ A substantial portion of the Houthis' financial sustenance has been derived from fees associated with the importation of goods and their transit via the Hudaydah

²³¹ Palik, "Watchdogs of Pause."

²³² Al Jazeera, "Saudi and Arab Allies Bomb Houthi Positions in Yemen."

²³³ "Houthi Rebels Refuse to Withdraw from Yemen's Hodeida," *The New Arab*, December 7, 2018, <https://www.newarab.com/news/houthi-rebels-refuse-withdraw-yemens-hodeida>.

²³⁴ Ibrahim Galal Fakirah, "The Hodeida Agreement That Never Was: Design, Implementation, and Implications on Conflict and Peace in Yemen," *Proceedings of the Annual Meeting* 114 (2020): 271–76, <https://doi.org/10.1017/amp.2021.48>.

²³⁵ Sharp, *Yemen*.

²³⁶ Himmiche et al., *Letter Dated 25 January 2019*, 108–9.

port.²³⁷ Notably, among the arsenal funneled through this channel are advanced Iranian missiles, subsequently deployed in cross-border assaults against Saudi Arabia.²³⁸ Figure 7 illustrates the Houthis' financial gain from the Hudaydah port.

<i>Month</i>	<i>MT*</i>	<i>Liter (L)</i>	<i>Total Recovered</i>		<i>War effort recovered</i>	
			48.19YER/L	US\$**	5 YER/L	US\$
Monthly average	180,000	243,000,000	11,710,170,000	26,022,600	1,215,000,000	2,700,000
Total	2,160,000	2,916,000,000	140,522,040,000	312,271,200	14,580,000,000	32,400,000

* Metric tonne (MT) for fuel 1MT has a volume around 1350 liter

**Market exchange rate in late 2018: US\$ 1 = YER 450 (the amount would have been twice when the exchange rate was YER250 for US\$ 1).

Figure 7. Houthis' Financial Sustenance from Hudaydah's Port²³⁹

Walter posits that in order to achieve a comprehensive peace agreement, the conflicting parties must be willing to relinquish control over seized territories, vital economic sectors, and autonomous armed factions.²⁴⁰ In this context, the Houthi faction, in contrast to the stipulations outlined in UNSC Resolution 2216, declined to withdraw from Hudaydah and its key ports, and furthermore, exhibited a reluctance to abide by the ceasefire. Rather than compelling the Houthis to vacate Hudaydah as mandated by Resolution 2216, the United Nations facilitated a two-stage relocation process for both government and Houthi military forces within a 21-day timeframe, a measure ostensibly intended to stabilize the situation.²⁴¹ However, it is noteworthy that a year elapsed, during which the Redeployment Coordination Committee's efforts to oversee the withdrawal and redeployment of combined military units and Houthi militias failed to meet the prescribed 21-day deadline.²⁴²

²³⁷ Himmiche et al., 109.

²³⁸ Sharp, *Yemen*.

²³⁹ Source: Himmiche et al., *Letter Dated 25 January 2019*, 109.

²⁴⁰ Walter, "The Critical Barrier to Civil War Settlement."

²⁴¹ Palik, "Watchdogs of Pause," 445–60.

²⁴² Palik, 445–60.

The Houthis' rejection of the United Nations' proposal to facilitate a planned humanitarian cease-fire represented an obstacle in the efforts to resolve the Yemeni conflict.²⁴³ While the Houthis had previously indicated a willingness to embrace peace following their military withdrawal from certain hostilities, it is essential to recognize that this maneuver was not necessarily indicative of a desire to bring about a conclusive end to the conflict. Instead, it served the purpose of buying time and positioning themselves strategically across multiple theaters of conflict.²⁴⁴ This strategic pattern has recurrently characterized the trajectory of the Yemeni conflict over the past eight years.²⁴⁵ From a rational standpoint, Houthis engaged in a cost-benefit analysis before committing to sign or adhere to peace agreements. In this strategic calculus, rebel groups may opt not to implement such agreements when they perceive the potential for more favorable outcomes outside the framework of the accord. These assessments often hinge on their evaluation of the likelihood of achieving victory and their strategic leveraging of time as a crucial factor in their pursuit of triumph.²⁴⁶

A contributing factor to the failure of this peace accord can be attributed to the sustained support and incentivization provided by Iran to the Houthi faction. Scholarly research underscores the pivotal role played by cross-border alliances and inter-state rivalries in facilitating support for insurgent groups.²⁴⁷ Iran is working to prolong the conflict in Yemen through unlimited support for the Houthis, as stated by the U.S. Envoy to Yemen, Tim Lenderking.²⁴⁸ For example, Iran supplied Houthis with ballistic missile components, cruise missiles, and unmanned systems, enabling them to launch attacks

²⁴³ Palik, "Watchdogs of Pause."

²⁴⁴ Dakshinie Ruwanthika Gunaratne et al., *Letter Dated 27 January 2020 from the Panel of Experts on Yemen Addressed to the President of the Security Council*, S/2020/70 (New York: UN Security Council, 2020), 6–11, <https://digitallibrary.un.org/record/3850088?ln=en>.

²⁴⁵ Sharp, *Yemen*.

²⁴⁶ Walter, "The Critical Barrier to Civil War Settlement."

²⁴⁷ Salehyan, Gleditsch, and Cunningham, "Explaining External Support for Insurgent Groups."

²⁴⁸ "Iran Giving Houthis 'Significant' and 'Lethal' Support: U.S. Envoy," Al Jazeera, April 21, 2021, <https://www.aljazeera.com/news/2021/4/21/iran-giving-houthis-significant-and-lethal-support-us-envoy>.

targeting Riyadh, Abu Dhabi, and Dubai.²⁴⁹ Furthermore, the United Nations disclosed that Iran has been progressively involved in providing arms and military equipment to Yemen, commencing with “small arms to Yemen in 2014,” “ballistic missiles by 2017,” and “air and waterborne drones by 2018.”²⁵⁰

Despite Iran’s official position in support of the Hodaydah agreement under the auspices of the United Nations and its claim that its support for the Houthis is limited to advisory and ideological aspects, the facts on the ground confirm Iran’s involvement in smuggling weapons to the Houthis and its violation of United Nations resolutions related to banning the trade and smuggling of arms to Yemen.²⁵¹ For example, in 2018, Iran received and recognized Ibrahim al-Dailami, appointed by the Houthis, as ambassador of Yemen.²⁵² Furthermore, the report of the Committee of Experts on Yemen submitted to the Security Council stated that many of the weapons used by the Houthis are identical to Iranian-manufactured weapons.²⁵³ A closer look at the dynamics of the civil war in Yemen shows how the external support that the Houthis receives, moved the war from the national level by targeting the government and began targeting neighboring countries, especially Saudi Arabia, which means that the Houthis can launch an international war, benefiting from external support. Many reports indicate that the Houthis, after years of war, have acquired advanced weapons compared to what they had before, in addition to their capability in terms of drone technology and ballistic missiles.²⁵⁴ In essence, Iran’s support for the Houthis has created an environment where the incentives for pursuing peace are diminished, while the incentives for continued conflict are bolstered. This dynamic contributes significantly to the failure of peace talks in Yemen by fostering mistrust, sustaining the conflict, and complicating diplomatic efforts aimed at resolving the crisis.

²⁴⁹ Office Director of National Intelligence, *Annual Threat Assessment of the U.S. Intelligence Community* (Washington, DC: Office Director of National Intelligence, 2021), <https://www.dni.gov/files/ODNI/documents/assessments/ATA-2021-Unclassified-Report.pdf>.

²⁵⁰ Gunaratne et al., *Letter Dated 27 January 2020*, 25.

²⁵¹ Gunaratne et al., 17.

²⁵² Gunaratne et al., 17.

²⁵³ Gunaratne et al., 25.

²⁵⁴ Sharp, *Yemen*.

The involvement of the United Nations as both a mediator and a facilitator in the context of the Hudaydah Agreement, regrettably, did not serve as an absolute assurance for the successful progression of the settlement process or the subsequent adherence to the accord's stipulated terms.²⁵⁵ One illustrative instance lies in the absence of comprehensive security assurances by the United Nations, which would have mitigated the security concerns and the challenge of establishing credible commitments among the belligerent parties.²⁵⁶ This deficiency in the provision of safeguards can be ascribed to four main factors.

Firstly, a critical limitation emerged in the United Nations' incapacity to employ coercive measures for the enforcement of the agreement. In this context, the United Nations Special Envoy assumed a primarily facilitative role, focusing on crisis management rather than acting as a substantive mediator with the capacity to compel the parties' compliance.²⁵⁷

Secondly, it is crucial to note that the accord did not materialize from a genuine mutual inclination of the two involved parties. Instead, it stemmed from external pressures exerted upon the coalition and the Yemeni government.²⁵⁸ These pressures included media campaigns and concerted efforts to influence both local and international organizations, aimed at advancing the peace process and averting a further deterioration of the humanitarian crisis. External pressures that lead to the initiation of a peace accord without genuine mutual inclination can weaken the foundations of the agreement. This, in turn, can compromise the effectiveness of UN safeguards in ensuring the agreement's implementation, monitoring ceasefires, and promoting lasting peace. To be effective, peace agreements should ideally emerge from a sincere commitment by the involved parties, with external actors playing a supportive rather than a coercive role.

²⁵⁵ Palik, "Watchdogs of Pause."

²⁵⁶ Walter, "The Critical Barrier to Civil War Settlement."

²⁵⁷ Fakirah, "The Hodeida Agreement That Never Was."

²⁵⁸ Palik, "Watchdogs of Pause."

Thirdly, a noteworthy issue pertains to the presence of significant ambiguities within the agreement concerning implementation mechanisms and the delineation of alternative entities to assume control during the withdrawal phases. These ambiguities rendered the agreement susceptible to diverse interpretations, while the United Nations failed to furnish any form of implementation guarantees, thereby exacerbating the trust deficit between the two principal parties involved.²⁵⁹

Fourthly, a notable contributing factor to the agreement's implementation failure pertains to the absence of United Nations peacekeeping forces. This deficiency persisted despite the issuance of Security Council resolutions aimed at endorsing the accord's execution. Furthermore, prior resolutions such as 2201 and 2216 from 2015 explicitly called for the Houthi militants to withdraw from seized territories, relinquish heavy weaponry, and engage in unconditional peace talks. Regrettably, these resolutions were not accompanied by robust enforcement measures undertaken by the United Nations.²⁶⁰ Instead, the United Nations established a committee tasked with supporting the implementation of the Stockholm agreement.²⁶¹ Unfortunately, this committee encountered challenges in effectively monitoring ceasefire violations and remained susceptible to threats posed by the Houthi faction, thereby undermining its capacity to fulfill its mandate.²⁶²

²⁵⁹ Peter Salisbury, "Five Steps to Save Yemen's Stockholm Agreement," International Crisis Group, January 15, 2019, <https://www.crisisgroup.org/middle-east-north-africa/gulf-and-arabian-peninsula/yemen/five-steps-save-yemens-stockholm-agreement>.

²⁶⁰ UN Security Council, "Resolution 2216 (2015)."

²⁶¹ See "Redeployment Coordination Committee (RCC)," UNMHA – UN Mission to Support the Hudaydah Agreement, September 3, 2014, <https://unmha.unmissions.org/redeployment-coordination-committee-rcc>.

²⁶² Palik, "Watchdogs of Pause."

V. CONCLUSION: HOW TO END THE CONFLICT IN YEMEN?

The conflict in Yemen, spanning from 2004 to 2014, is a protracted crisis rooted in historical grievances, religious ideology, socio-economic disparities, and a complex web of domestic, regional, and international factors. Central to this conflict is the Houthi movement, which draws inspiration from Zaydi Shia Islam, a deeply entrenched religious sect in Yemen. The evolution of the Houthi movement from a political party, Al-Haqq, into a military uprising was driven by various factors. These include the neglect of underdeveloped regions in Yemen, the consolidation of power through patronage networks by the toppled President Ali Abdullah Saleh, and the resurgence of Zaydi identity in response to Wahhabi encroachment.

The Houthi takeover of Sana'a in 2014 and the following conflict have their roots in the Yemeni uprising of 2011. The failure of the NDC provided an opportunity for the Houthi movement to consolidate power strategically, culminating in their capture of Sana'a in 2014, forcing President Hadi to flee and derailing the political transition process. Despite efforts to broker ceasefires and peace agreements, violence persists to this day. Saudi Arabia's direct military intervention in 2015 further complicated the dynamics, as did Iran's support for the Houthi movement through financial, military, and political backing. The involvement of external actors has resulted in a protracted stalemate in Yemen, exacerbated by the Southern Transitional Council's quest for independence, which has further deepened divisions within the country.

The humanitarian consequences of the Yemeni conflict have been severe, with civilian casualties, mass displacement, and critical shortages of essential supplies. A diplomatic resolution to the conflict remains elusive due to the complex interplay of regional dynamics driven by the Saudi-Iranian rivalry.

The analysis of the various peace consultations in Yemen, including the Geneva I, Geneva II, Kuwait, and Stockholm peace talks, provides insight into the persistent challenges that have impeded the solution of the Yemeni conflict. Despite the dedicated

involvement of the international community and the UN Special Envoy for Yemen, a comprehensive and enduring peace agreement remains elusive.

In the introduction, I explored four hypotheses about civil war termination. The first hypothesis expects the enduring persistence of the Yemeni civil war can be primarily attributed to the profound mutual mistrust characterizing the relationship between the Houthis and the Yemeni government. The second hypothesis argues that the deployment of peacekeeping forces is imperative for the enforcement of a peace agreement, with their role being essential in mitigating the credible commitment issue. The third hypothesis maintains the prevailing distrust among the involved parties has been further compounded by the engagement of external actors, notably Saudi Arabia and Iran, who have extended their support to opposing factions within the conflict. The fourth hypothesis holds that the incorporation of power-sharing mechanisms into a peace accord is essential. Such arrangements not only offer a means of redressing the root causes of the conflict but also establish a framework for the inclusion of diverse factions within the governmental structure.

While my analysis lends partial support to all these hypotheses, it is noteworthy that the paramount factor underpinning the hypotheses lies in the context of addressing the credible commitment problem. A recurring theme throughout these peace talks was the profound mistrust between the primary parties involved in the conflict, namely the Yemeni government and the Houthis. This deep-seated mistrust was underpinned by fundamental differences in their positions. The Yemeni government insisted on the full implementation of Resolution 2216, including the Houthi withdrawal from captured territories and disarmament, as a prerequisite for negotiations. Conversely, the Houthi movement sought a power-sharing arrangement before committing to such actions, leading to an impasse in the negotiations.

Another critical factor contributing to the failure of these peace talks was the absence of effective mechanisms for trust-building and enforcement. The parties' inability to adhere to humanitarian ceasefires, facilitate prisoner releases, or establish local ceasefires underscored the lack of robust trust-building measures. Furthermore, the limited

international pressure on the Houthis to comply with UN resolutions and engage in genuine negotiations further eroded the efficacy of the peace process.

The analysis of the Stockholm peace talks similarly provide support for all four hypotheses with an emphasis on the credible commitment problem hypothesis. While the agreement held promise with its initiation of a ceasefire in the strategic port city of Hudaydah, it ultimately failed to address the underlying issues that have sustained the conflict for an extended period. Like previous peace talks, the central factor contributing to the failure of the Stockholm agreement was the mistrust entrenched between the Yemeni government and the Houthis. The hesitancy of the Houthi movement to withdraw from Hudaydah and relinquish control of vital ports revealed a strategic calculus aimed at maximizing gains and maintaining a positional advantage. This approach, driven by a cost-benefit analysis, illustrated the Houthis' willingness to exploit the peace negotiations to buy time and consolidate their position rather than genuinely seek a comprehensive resolution to the conflict.

Another pivotal factor in the failure of the Stockholm agreement was the continuous external support extended to the Houthi faction, predominantly by Iran. Iran's provision of advanced weaponry to the Houthis and its sustained involvement in the conflict further complicated the peace process. This external support bolstered the Houthis' confidence and reduced their incentives to engage in peace negotiations, as they perceived an opportunity to continue their military operations and expand their regional influence. Iran's role in prolonging the conflict underscored the interconnected nature of regional geopolitical interests within the Yemeni crisis.

The role of the United Nations as a mediator and facilitator faced notable limitations within the context of the Stockholm agreement. The absence of coercive measures to enforce the agreement, coupled with the lack of comprehensive security assurances and ambiguities in implementation mechanisms, collectively contributed to the fragility of the accord. Additionally, the absence of United Nations peacekeeping forces on the ground in Yemen weakened the organization's capacity to effectively monitor ceasefire violations and ensure the faithful implementation of the agreement.

A. THE PATH FORWARD: RECOMMENDATIONS TO END THE YEMENI CIVIL WAR

There is not a “quick fix” to achieving a sustainable peace in Yemen. Historically, civil wars end either through decisive military victory or negotiated settlements. While a negotiated settlement is preferable due to its potential to reduce bloodshed, it often requires a military stalemate and outside peacekeeping commitments. Based on the analysis provided, below are policy recommendations that support conflict resolution.

1. Extending Support to the Yemeni Government

The primary objective of the Stockholm Agreement was to halt the advance of government forces, which were backed by a coalition, with the aim of gaining control over the strategic port and city of Hudaydah, while also compelling the expulsion of Houthi forces. Although government forces had made significant headway in their bid to control Hudaydah, their progress was halted due to international pressure, ultimately culminating in the Stockholm Agreement. Subsequently, the Houthi forces failed to adhere to the provisions of the agreement by not withdrawing from the port of Hudaydah. This non-compliance was arguably attributed to the absence of a sufficiently compelling incentive for their withdrawal. Consequently, the Stockholm Agreement can be perceived as a strategic victory for the Houthi faction, precipitating a protracted impasse within the negotiation process.

To navigate this persistent dilemma, the international community, under the leadership of the United States, should consider augmenting both military and political support for the Yemeni legitimate government. Empowering the government to assume control of the port and city of Hudaydah is envisaged as an instrumental means of exerting pressure on the Houthi forces, compelling them to engage in constructive dialogue and eventually endorse a peace agreement facilitated by the United Nations. Such a strategic move would communicate to the Houthi faction that their control over other territories may

be jeopardized should they fail to comply with the terms of an UN-sponsored peace accord.²⁶³

2. Trust-Building Mechanisms

The credible commitments problem has been a pervasive issue throughout the Yemeni conflict. The deep-seated mistrust between the primary parties, the Yemeni government, and the Houthis, has impeded progress in negotiations. Addressing this issue requires innovative approaches to building trust and confidence between the parties through third-party guarantors and confidence-building measures. These include the establishment and adherence to ceasefire agreements to reduce hostilities, the facilitation of prisoner exchanges to demonstrate goodwill, and ensuring unrestricted access for humanitarian organizations to deliver aid. Additionally, sustained, and inclusive dialogue and negotiations provide a platform for parties to voice their grievances and work toward mutually acceptable solutions. Collaborative efforts focused on economic development, infrastructure improvement, and resource management can demonstrate shared interests in the nation's welfare. The involvement of neutral third-party actors, like international mediators or peacekeeping forces, can facilitate negotiations and provide oversight. Confidence-building measures, such as communication channels, information sharing, and localized security arrangements, help reduce misunderstandings and tensions. Reconciliation programs addressing historical grievances and promoting social cohesion further contribute to trust-building efforts in Yemen. Collectively, these measures can help restore trust among conflicting parties and pave the way toward a sustainable peace.

3. International Mediation and Peacekeeping

While international actors, including the United Nations and regional organizations, have been actively engaged in mediating peace talks, their effectiveness has been limited by various factors. It is recommended to strengthen the role of international mediators, such as the United Nations and regional organizations, in facilitating peace

²⁶³ Michael Knights, Kenneth M. Pollack, and Barbara F. Walter, "A Real Plan to End the War in Yemen," *Foreign Affairs*, May 2, 2019, <https://www.foreignaffairs.com/articles/yemen/2019-05-02/real-plan-end-war-yemen>.

talks. This involves enhancing their capacity to mediate effectively and enforcing peace agreements. The United Nations should consider deploying United Nations peacekeeping forces to monitor ceasefires and agreements on the ground, such action provides greater accountability and deterrence for ceasefire violations.

4. Innovative Power-Sharing Models

Power-sharing agreements have been a central point of contention in the peace negotiations. The Yemeni government and the Houthis have held divergent views on the sequencing of such arrangements. The United Nations should explore innovative power-sharing models that address the legitimate concerns of all parties involved. Power-sharing arrangements that encompass economic power sharing, which involves the equitable distribution of economic resources and benefits; security institutions power sharing, which integrates different factions or groups into security forces to build trust and reduce violence risks; and political institutions power sharing, aiming to include various political factions or ethnic groups in governance structures to ensure representation and reduce the risk of exclusion. By implementing such multifaceted power-sharing mechanisms, the goal is to create a comprehensive framework that addresses the grievances and aspirations of different conflict parties, ultimately fostering trust and facilitating a sustainable peace settlement. The specific design and implementation of these arrangements depend on the unique circumstances of each conflict. The sequencing of power-sharing arrangements has been a key point of contention. Gradual, inclusive, and negotiated transition plans can help ensure a stable government while considering the interests of different factions.

5. Humanitarian Assistance and Relief

The United Nations and regional organizations should intensify humanitarian efforts to alleviate the suffering of the Yemeni people. They should ensure the provision of essential supplies, medical assistance, and access to basic services, especially in conflict-affected areas. The involved parties' commitment to humanitarian relief can help build goodwill among the warring parties and create a more conducive environment for peace talks.

6. Engagement of Civil Society and Local Actors

The United Nations should encourage the active participation of civil society organizations, local communities, and grassroots initiatives in any future peace processes for fostering a robust and enduring peace-building framework. These diverse groups contribute unique perspectives, expert insights, and legitimacy to the negotiation table, enriching the dialogue with their specialized knowledge in areas like human rights, reconciliation, and conflict resolution. Moreover, their deep-rooted understanding of the conflict's local impact fosters grassroots support, ensuring that peace agreements resonate with and are upheld by the affected populations. These stakeholders also play crucial roles in monitoring and accountability, cultural mediation, and post-conflict development, ultimately working toward long-term peace sustainability. Their collective involvement helps address the underlying causes of conflict, promoting inclusivity and ownership among those most affected, thereby enhancing the prospects for a lasting and meaningful peace.

The Yemeni conflict, with its ever-changing dynamics, complex actors, and regional implications call for serious measures to resolve the crisis and mitigate its human and social toll. The Yemeni conflict is deeply intertwined with regional geopolitics, with Saudi Arabia and Iran often viewed as key external factors supporting opposing sides. The improvement of relations between these two regional powers has the potential to reshape the dynamics of the Yemeni conflict, which has raged on for years with devastating consequences. Today, Yemen has a window of opportunity to bring the combatants together for a peace settlement that requires the support of the international community.

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