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# YEMEN: THE 60-YEAR WAR

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## CONTENTS

- \* SUMMARY
- \* 1 INTRODUCTION
- \* 1 HISTORIC ANTECEDENTS
- \* 4 A TALE OF FAILED TRANSITIONS: 1962- 90
- \* 9 POPULISM IN THE NORTH REFLECTED IN SIX SA'DAH WARS
- \* 12 THE ARAB SPRING AND A NEW PUSH FOR NATIONAL UNITY
- \* 17 REPEATED ATTEMPTS TO ADDRESS YEMEN'S SYSTEMIC DIVISIONS
- \* 20 EXTERNAL FACTORS IN THE CONFLICT
- \* 25 CAN YEMEN'S PROBLEMS BE SOLVED?
- \* 27 CONCLUSION
- \* 29 RECOMMENDATIONS



## SUMMARY

The root causes of the ongoing civil conflict in Yemen lie in the failure of Yemeni society to address and resolve the popular anger and frustration arising from political marginalization, economic disenfranchisement, and the effects of an extractive, corrupt, rentier state. This systemic failure has produced a cycle of violence, political upheaval, and institutional collapse since the creation of the modern Yemeni state in the 1960s, of which the current conflict is only the latest eruption.

Over the course of the conflict, Yemenis have come together repeatedly in an effort to identify solutions to these problems, and the result has been a fairly consistent formula for change: government decentralization and greater local autonomy, a federalized state structure, greater representation in parliament for disenfranchised populations, improved access to basic services, health and education, and a more even playing field for economic participation. But none of these reform programs has been implemented successfully. Thus, success in ending Yemen's cycle of violence and its 60-year civil war will depend on the political will to follow through on implementation and the development of institutional capacity to carry it out.

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## INTRODUCTION

Yemen's political transition, which began with much hope and optimism in 2011, collapsed by the fall of 2014 when Houthi insurgents occupied Sana'a, the capital, with the support of forces loyal to former President Ali Abdullah Saleh. Intervention by a Saudi-led coalition of primarily Gulf Cooperation Council (GCC) member states in March 2015 turned the civil conflict into a broader war, attracting regional and international attention, although at its core this remains a civil war, not a proxy fight. Neither side in the conflict has been able to gain a significant military advantage in the ensuing years while persistent efforts by the international community, under UN leadership, have also been unsuccessful in brokering a sustained return to negotiations and a resumption of the political process.

Most analyses of the Yemen conflict since 2014-15 have focused on the issues and circumstances that led to the fighting in isolation from the larger problems that have long confronted Yemen. But, in my view, the current conflict is more accurately seen as a continuation of over 60 years of failed state formation leading to a cycle of violence, coups, assassinations, and open warfare. The shotgun unification of North and South Yemen in 1990 only served to add a new layer of complexity to the already fraught political, social, and economic environment. If this

perspective is correct, a resolution of the current conflict will only be a prelude to the next outbreak of violence. To avoid that outcome, Yemenis not only must agree on steps needed to build sustainable solutions to the country's problems but must also demand that their leaders implement them.

## HISTORIC ANTECEDENTS

Yemen bears all the hallmarks of a failed state as described by Daron Acemoglu and James Robinson in their landmark book, *Why Nations Fail*.<sup>1</sup> The country suffers from an extractive political and economic system. By definition, such systems are characterized by the concentration of power in the hands of a narrow elite and place few constraints on its exercise of power. As a general principle, Acemoglu and Robinson assert, extractive systems like Yemen's are vulnerable to violence, anarchy, and political upheaval and are unlikely to achieve growth or make major changes toward more inclusive institutions successfully.

But the origins of the current conflict in Yemen go beyond even the consequences of the rentier state described by Acemoglu and Robinson. In fact, the political crisis that emerged in mid-2014 and metastasized into the current war is only the latest eruption in a cycle of violence that has shaken Yemen repeatedly for nearly 60 years. Nor is it the

# MAP OF YEMEN



## TIMELINE

**1962:** Uprising against the Imamate in northern Yemen

**1978:** Beginning of Ali Abdullah Saleh's presidency of North Yemen and the Yemeni Socialist Party's rule in South Yemen

**1990:** Unification of North and South Yemen

**1994:** Civil war

**2004-10:** Six Sa'dah wars

**2011:** Arab Spring and anti-Saleh uprising (February)  
End of Saleh presidency (November)

**2013:** National Dialogue Conference

**2015:** Houthi insurgents occupy Sana'a

most violent or longest lasting of these conflicts.<sup>2</sup> There is no ten-year period in Yemen's history since the 1960s that has not witnessed violent conflict, coups, or civil insurrection. Beginning with the 1962 uprising against the Zaydi Shi'a theocracy, or Imamate, Yemenis have yet to find a means to build institutions of state and society that can address successfully the grievances of political and economic marginalization, and the alienation of populations disadvantaged by governing institutions and ethnic and sectarian discrimination. The unification of North and South Yemen in 1990 only added an extra layer of complexity to the country's problems.

The failure to build the institutional structures of a modern, cohesive state, however, does not reflect an inability to understand the nature of the problems or devise reasonable solutions. Yemenis have come together repeatedly in efforts to resolve their recurring challenges. Moreover, the efforts to find solutions have generally advocated similar reforms: decentralization and enhanced local autonomy, equal geographic representation in national government, federalism, and an equitable distribution of the country's natural resources. The most comprehensive effort followed the Arab Spring uprising against President Saleh's government in 2011. For over a year, more than 500 delegates labored to produce proposals to resolve persistent regional divisions within Yemen and the grievances of the Zaydi majority population of the northwestern

highlands. But, beyond that, the delegates to the most representative body of Yemenis ever assembled provided recommendations on a broad array of critical issues facing the country, including economics, governance, and the structure of military and security forces.

The failure of state formation in Yemen, then, is not a result of the inability of Yemenis to understand the challenges, devise solutions, or create a road map for a unified state at peace with itself. The failure, instead, rests with the inability of Yemenis to implement the agreements reached. In at least two instances, in 1994 and in 2014, signed agreements were followed within weeks by a new outbreak of conflict.

Yemen will not succeed in breaking this decades-long cycle of violence until there is a national consensus on the need to put in place the structures that enable implementation of agreed reforms: capable local governing institutions, equal access to basic social services including health and education, and an end to the extractive political and economic systems that allowed a small, largely northern tribal elite to dominate the country, exploit its resources for their own narrow interests, and block access to the political and economic arena to the vast majority of Yemeni citizens.

## A TALE OF FAILED TRANSITIONS: 1962-90

Rebellions in the 1960s against theocratic rule in the North and British occupation in the South ushered in decades of political and economic turmoil throughout Yemen. By the end of the 20th century, the modern Yemeni state emerged but was unsuccessful in addressing the failure of state formation that has plagued Yemen since the revolt against the Imamate.

### THE IMAMATE DEFEATED: TRIUMPH OF SHEIKHS

Northern Yemen was ruled for a millennium by a theocracy, the Imamate, which drew its social and political support from the Zaydi Shi'a tribes of the northwestern highlands. But the Imamate's economic survival rested on the exploitation of the relatively richer, predominantly Shafi'i Sunni midlands, including Taiz, Ibb, al-Baida, and the Red Sea coastal region, or Tihama.

By the early 1960s, an Arab nationalist movement, the self-styled "Free Yemenis," emerged in the midlands region and, in 1962, launched a full-scale rebellion against the Imamate, with the support of Egypt under President Gamal Abdel Nasser. That struggle persisted until the end of the decade, when the republican forces triumphed.<sup>3</sup> The demise of the Imamate and rise of the republic did not substantially change the political balance

in the country, however, as the traditional northern highlands tribal leaders retained positions of power and influence in the new political order.

But, in challenging the rule by the *sadah* or *sayyids*, a Shi'a religious leadership that claimed its legitimacy based on its direct descent from the Prophet Muhammad, the Free Yemenis developed an Arab nationalist counter-narrative that would have long-term implications for Yemen's internal cohesion. While it made political sense to paper over sectarian differences between Zaydi Shi'a and Shafi'i Sunni populations, the Free Yemenis introduced a new concept: "real" Yemenis were the descendants of the *Qahtanis* – southern Arabian tribes that were the original inhabitants of Yemen. By contrast, they asserted that the sayyids ruling Yemen were *Adnanis* – descendants of northern tribes that immigrated to southern Arabia following the arrival of Islam and became the rulers of Yemen. Over the course of the eight-year rebellion against the Imamate, this distinction (which Stephen Day notes is likely mythical<sup>4</sup>) became an important factor in building the broad, pro-republican consensus that won the war and established the Yemen Arab Republic (YAR).

The midlands population prospered in the first decade of republican rule. The Shafi'i business community developed local cooperative organizations and began managing its own affairs. Keeping their tax revenue available for local improvements, the region's political leaders invested in the infrastructure that allowed the economy to

grow. By the end of the civil war and the reintegration of the highlands elites into the national consensus, Stephen Day writes, an informal balance of power emerged between highlands elites and the lowlands merchant class. "In effect," Day notes, "informal power-sharing allowed highland elites to maintain political hegemony, while business elites from the western midland and coastal regions ran the economy."<sup>5</sup> This extended to the government as well, with an informal power-sharing arrangement that the president of the republic would represent the highlands elites while the prime minister would be a midlands figure.<sup>6</sup>

When Ali Abdullah Saleh became president in 1978 following the assassination of Ahmad al-Ghashmi, the rough balance between highlands and lowlands interests began to unravel. Saleh reintroduced the exploitative taxation system not seen since the rule of the Imamate. Citizens in the midlands region were once again taxed at a rate approximately double that paid by the highlands population.<sup>7</sup> At the same time, Saleh's policies favored the rise of highland tribal sheikhs, challenging the formerly dominant sayyids and their allies. The sheikhs, especially Abdullah al-Ahmar, the paramount sheikh of the Hashid tribal confederation, assumed leading roles in the republic's political circles. Building on their political dominance, the sheikhs, especially those of the Hashid and Bakil tribal confederations,

next entered into competition with the traditional midlands merchant class for economic control. Under Saleh, therefore, northwestern highlands tribal sheikhs were the principal beneficiaries of the extractive political and economic system that has plagued Yemen's development ever since. The discovery of oil in Marib Governorate in 1984 provided new opportunities for corrupt exploitation by the highlands elites and became a new source of grievance for the marginalized populations of the North and the midlands.

## **A UNITY ACCORD IN 1990 QUICKLY FOUNDERS**

North and South Yemen enjoyed a roller-coaster relationship from independence until their unity agreement in 1990. At various times, both Sana'a and Aden promoted unification as interest waxed and waned depending on the personalities of the leaders in the two states. The charter of the Yemeni Socialist Party (YSP), the ruling party in South Yemen after its formation in 1978, for instance, employs Marxist terminology, declaring that the revolutionary struggle in Yemen is "dialectically correlated in its unity"<sup>8</sup> to argue that unity between North and South is an essential component of Yemen's evolution. But the leaders of the People's Democratic Republic of Yemen (PDRY) were responsible for the June 1978 assassination of YAR President al-Ghashmi, and the two states fought a

brief border war between January and March 1979. Despite the persistent tensions, the two sides managed to develop a dialogue. PDRY President Ali Nasser Mohammed visited Sana'a in November 1981 and, after the two presidents met in Kuwait, Saleh traveled to Aden.

The discovery of oil in the border regions between the two states provided both sides with a financial incentive to strengthen their relations. In April 1990, Saleh and Ali Salem al-Beidh, secretary-general of the YSP, signed a unity agreement to merge the PDRY and YAR into a new, single entity, the Republic of Yemen (RoY). Aside from organizing the basic elements of a new governing structure, the two-page deal was remarkably short on detail. Under the terms of the agreement, over the course of a 30-month interim period a five-member Presidential Council would draft a constitution. Until then, the council would rule by decree.

In addition to the financial motivation from the discovery of oil, two other factors drove the South's agreement to the "shotgun marriage" with the North in 1990. First, the collapse of the former Soviet Union deprived the PDRY of its most significant political and economic partner. Second, the brutal 1986 intra-YSP conflict significantly weakened the PDRY government.<sup>9</sup>

Populations on both sides of the border greeted the announcement of unity with enthusiasm. But southern satisfaction with the new RoY quickly waned. Southern political leaders, who initially enjoyed a 50:50 power sharing arrangement with

the much more populous North based on the unity agreement, had envisioned that they would dominate the political structure of the newly-unified state. In particular, they expected to do well in parliamentary elections scheduled for 1992 (eventually conducted in 1993), and perhaps win a majority of seats based on their anticipated support among northern voters. But they were disappointed when they finished a poor third after Saleh's General People's Congress (GPC) and the newly former northern Islamist party, Islah. Rather than dominating the new political arrangement, the southerners saw their political influence rapidly dissipating.

Economically, conditions in the PDRY were far poorer than in the North at the time of unification, a product not only of state control of the economy but also because of the declining revenue stream from the Aden port. The PDRY leadership had counted on the port as the main economic engine that would finance southern development programs, but the closure of the Suez Canal from 1967-1975 forced international shipping to develop new trade routes and left Aden uncompetitive. Nevertheless, PDRY citizens did enjoy benefits unmatched in the South, including subsidized basic commodities as well as guaranteed employment in state enterprises. The South also compared well to the North on provision of basic services, particularly in health care and education.<sup>10</sup> Those advantages began to erode as the North introduced its crony capitalist

economic system and the highland tribal elites began to extend their economic domination to the South.

Thus, by the end of 1993, frustrated southerners were openly rejecting unity and advocating a return to an independent state. After a last attempt at a political resolution to the growing North-South confrontation failed (see below for a discussion of the negotiations that produced the "Document of Pledge and Accord"), southern leaders declared independence and the North launched military operations to retake the South.

The brief civil war in 1994 that followed the collapse of political negotiations failed to resolve the basic issues that led to the conflict. Although Saleh maintained power-sharing arrangements with the South, appointing Abed Rabbo Mansour Hadi as vice president in place of the exiled Ali Salim al-Beidh, Stephen Day observes that Saleh was "mainly interested in the appearance of power sharing, not genuine representation of southern interests in government."<sup>11</sup> The number of southerners in the Yemen cabinet dropped significantly as Saleh formed a coalition government with the Islah party and appointed Abdul

Aziz Abdul Ghani, an experienced, midlands GPC technocrat, as prime minister.

Those same core issues continue to plague North-South relations until the present time and form the basis of southern challenges not only to the Hadi government but more broadly to the idea of Yemeni unity. The social and economic consequences of the civil conflict were harsh for southern citizens. The Saleh government accelerated the expansion of the North's rentier political and economic system in the South. Aden itself was ransacked by victorious highland tribes, southern civil servants and military personnel were dismissed, and southerners charged that northerners plundered the South's energy, mineral, and fish resources. In sum, notes April Longley Alley, "two profoundly different narratives took shape" about the outcome of the conflict. "Under one version, the war laid to rest the notion of separation and solidified national unity. According to the other, the war laid to rest the notion of unity and ushered in a period of northern occupation of the South."<sup>12</sup>

By the middle of the following decade, southern anger over their treatment at northern hands began to boil over.



Town taken by North Yemen forces in Daleh, Yemen on May 13, 1994. Distribution of weapons to men of Murkula. (Laurent VAN DER STOCKT/Gamma-Rapho via Getty Images)

The outcome of the civil war, in particular the forced retirement of southern civilian and military officials, contributed to the rise of an organized opposition movement in the South.<sup>13</sup> Beginning in a series of peaceful protests in 2006, the movement, initially cast as a “local association for military retirees,” evolved into a large-scale, generally peaceful but occasionally violent protest movement, *al-Hirak*. Pursuing his well-worn strategy of divide and conquer (“dancing on the heads of snakes”), Saleh struggled to dilute the southern movement, offering some concessions to military retirees and advocating resolution of land disputes while continuing efforts to marginalize or eliminate political opposition.

The government's inability to defeat the Houthis, an armed Zaydi insurgency, in the northwest (see below) encouraged the *al-Hirak* movement to intensify its own campaign, and it clashed more aggressively with government forces. The demands of the *al-Hirak* movement focused on access to government jobs and benefits and more equitable resource sharing, especially in the energy sector, according to April Longley Alley. She cites the late mayor of Sana'a and advocate of decentralization, Abdul Qadir al-Hilal, stating “even within a single governorate, one district will complain of marginalization or discrimination when compared to another. However, in the South, this feeling of marginalization has taken on a political dimension because

of the absence of political opportunities and because it used to be an independent state." By the time of the Arab Spring in 2011, southern support for al-Hirak and new calls for separation from the North were again on the rise.<sup>15</sup>

## POPULISM IN THE NORTH REFLECTED IN SIX SA'DAH WARS

Many of the unresolved issues from the republican revolt of the 1960s and its aftermath, particularly in the years of Saleh's rule, helped to trigger the Houthi rebellion in six Sa'dah wars between June 2004 and February 2010. Like the post-unity South, northern Zaydi populations grew increasingly militant over the growth of extractive political and economic systems during the Saleh era and the failure of republican Yemen to provide equitable sharing of resources. Zaydi revivalism began to grow as a counter to this marginalization in the 1980s, predating the rise of the Houthi movement. Marieke Brandt noted in her comprehensive history of the Houthi movement that "the economic and political marginalization of the Sa'dah region, the uneven distribution of economic resources and political participation, and the religious discrimination against its Zaydi population provided fertile soil in which the Houthi movement could take root and blossom."<sup>16</sup>



A displaced Yemeni child from the Sa'adah region carries jerry cans at the Mazraq IDP camp in northern Yemen on December 10, 2009. (KHALED FAZAA/AFP/Getty Images)

Indeed, the scion of the Houthi clan, Badr al-Din al-Houthi, and his son Husayn, enjoyed strong reputations in Sa'dah as much for their deep commitment to community service as for their position as sayyids. It was that role in the community that made them natural leaders of the "Believing Youth" movement in the 1990s. By the early 2000s, Husayn had developed a broad platform articulated in a series of lectures encompassing anti-Americanism, anti-Zionism, Zaydi revivalism, and intense criticism of the Saleh regime for its economic neglect and underdevelopment of the North.

Brandt notes that, despite Husayn al-Houthi's complaint that the government was supporting Sunni and Salafist communities at the expense of the Zaydis, his appeal was not restricted to the Zaydi community, but was pan-Islamic in content.<sup>17</sup> Thus, the image of the al-Houthi family as the face of Zaydi Shi'ism confronting the threat of "Sunnization" in the Zaydi heartland, thereby embodying sectarian conflict, is at best an incomplete narrative of the Houthi movement even if it is not an entirely inaccurate one. "In the local context," Brandt writes, "the Zaydi revival was far more than a sectarian movement: under

Husayn's direction, it also embraced powerful social-revolutionary and political components."<sup>18</sup>

Nevertheless, the Saleh regime focused its attack on the Houthi rebellion by exploiting the Houthis' support for the reintroduction of several predominantly Shi'a religious observances, including Ashura, maintaining that the Houthis were not only advocates of Zaydi Shi'ism but in fact represented the quest for a return of the Imamate and the introduction of Iranian-style Twelver Shi'ism.

Sana'a's angle of attack on the Houthis re-opened a second, unresolved wound from the anti-Imamate rebellion of the 1960s. As noted previously, pro-republican forces in the 1960s created a narrative of Yemen's earliest history that distinguished between so-called "real Yemenis" – the Qahtani or original South Yemen tribes – versus later arrivals – the Adnani tribes from northern Arabia and especially the non-tribal sayyids, the "strangers in the house"<sup>19</sup> who established themselves in the northwestern highlands as religious scholars and tribal mediators. The distinction marginalized the sayyids, traditional rulers of Yemen's Imamate theocracy.



A Yemeni anti-government protester shows her hands, painted with the colors of the flag and the slogan 'Welcome revolutionaries,' during a demonstration in Sana'a on December 23, 2011 to reject an amnesty given to President Ali Abdullah Saleh in a deal that eases him out of office. (MOHAMMED HUWAIS/AFP/Getty Images)

Within the Zaydi population, where the Houthis did not enjoy universal support, criticism of their movement often reflected this anti-sayyid, Qahtani viewpoint that interpreted the Houthi movement as anti-democratic and backward looking.

The principal beneficiaries of this marginalization of the sayyids were the tribal sheikhs of the northwestern highlands and especially the newly-minted "revolution sheikhs"<sup>20</sup> who had fought on behalf of republican forces in the eight-year civil conflict and profited from the rise of Yemen's rentier political and economic system. "The sheikhs benefited disproportionately from the republican system," Brandt notes, "at [the] local level, in many respects they were the republic."<sup>21</sup> But the elevation of the sheikhs was not synonymous with the rise of the tribes.

Once again, Brandt notes that "the politics of patronage was a double-edged sword: rather than 'nurturing' the tribal system governmental patronage has driven a wedge between some influential sheikhs and their tribal home constituencies and has generated discontent and alienation among many ordinary tribal members."<sup>22</sup> In the conflict between sheikhs and sayyids, many of the tribes were pulled toward the Houthi movement by the failure of the sheikhs to use their new-found power and influence in the republican government to support the tribes.

Despite its enormous military advantage, Sana'a was unable to defeat the Houthi rebellion, and the fighting divided the northern population. "Instead of putting down the rebellion," Brandt writes, "the government's military campaigns triggered

destructive cycles of violence and counter-violence in Sa'dah's tribal environment, which, step-by-step, engulfed Yemen's North. During these battles, Sa'dah's citizenry became increasingly polarized along government-Houthi lines. From the second war, it became evident that a significant number of people joining the Houthis' ranks were no longer religiously or ideologically motivated but were drawn into the conflict for other reasons." By the outbreak of the Arab Spring in February 2011, the Houthis had built the most effective military force in the country and had taken control of all of Sa'dah Governorate as well as large portions of neighboring Amran and al-Jawf. Although the so-called "North of the North" was momentarily at peace, the popular anger and frustration directed towards the Saleh government had by no means decreased.

## THE ARAB SPRING AND A NEW PUSH FOR NATIONAL UNITY

By the end of 2010 and the beginning of 2011, President Saleh was basking in a vision of overwhelming political mastery. He portrayed his successful hosting of the GCC Cup soccer tournament in Aden in December 2010 as evidence that his control of the South was uncontested. In the far North, Saleh had convinced himself that he had mastered the Houthi threat and that the lull in fighting would be sustained. His domination of the National Assembly allowed him to push through legislation

guaranteeing that he and his son Ahmed Ali would keep their grip on power for the foreseeable future. He ignored earlier commitments to the political opposition that he would negotiate new rules for planned parliamentary elections deferred from 2009 and re-scheduled for mid-2011.

But Saleh's sense of confidence proved misplaced. When the streets erupted in February 2011, the government was caught by surprise. Inspired by youth revolutions in Tunisia and Egypt, young, urbanized Yemenis took to the streets to demand that Saleh step down. The protesters focused not only on the corruption and cronyism of the Saleh government but also on the political, economic, and social stagnation that beset the country and threatened to deprive young people, including educated youth, of any prospect for a secure future.

Marginalized populations, including southerners, the Houthis, tribal youth, and the Shafi'i population in the midlands joined in the protest demonstrations and demanded, beyond Saleh's ouster, that the transition seek to address the underlying conditions that had prevented Yemen's development as a modern state. An International Crisis Group analysis suggested that the popular protests promoted cooperation between northern and southern protesters and "broke through the barriers of fear."<sup>23</sup>

Meanwhile, Saleh's too clever by half political maneuvering had deeply angered the opposition. General Ali Mohsen, Saleh's heir apparent for decades until he promoted his son, Ahmed Ali, as his successor, no

longer stood firmly behind his old comrade-in-arms. Thus, Saleh was left without friends or negotiating partners as he scrambled to parry the street demonstrations and quell the uprising. Running out of options, he tabled a proposal to step down, triggering a negotiating process that would stretch out over many months, punctuated by sporadic street battles in Sana'a and other major cities as well as an assassination attempt that spared Saleh (albeit seriously wounding him) but killed and injured a number of his senior advisors, including Prime Minister Abdul Aziz Abdul Ghani.

In desperation, Saleh turned to the international community to help him retain his grip on power. Having frozen cooperation with the U.S. on counter-terrorism initiatives earlier in 2010, Saleh suddenly expressed a new willingness to work closely with U.S. counterparts in an effort to garner continued support. He similarly sought help from the GCC states, the other P-5 members of the UN Security Council, and even from the Organization of the African Union. In response, the diplomatic corps in Sana'a, particularly embassies of the Security Council P-5, the GCC, and the EU representative, joined together in a coordinated effort to help mediate among the Yemeni parties.<sup>24</sup> The UN subsequently joined the effort, appointing a special envoy, Jamal Benomar.

Saleh had initially agreed to step down but then maneuvered to reverse his commitment to leave office. Saudi King Abdullah eventually forced Saleh's hand when the Saudis became frustrated

with his constant twisting (as well as his personal attacks on GCC Secretary-General Abdul Latif al-Zayani, who the Saudis had designated to help negotiate the transition agreement). When King Abdullah called Saleh and told him that his time was up, Saleh was left with little choice but to comply. The signing ceremony took place in Riyadh in November.

Yemenis saw the protest movement and the end of the Saleh regime as a new opportunity to resolve the deeper political and economic crisis confronting the country. Not only the political opposition but also Saleh's own GPC supported the demand for a broad-based initiative to address Yemen's deep-seated problems. Thus, among its other elements, the transition document, the GCC Initiative and Implementing Mechanism, included a requirement to conduct within its two-year timeframe a National Dialogue Conference (NDC) to address the full range of political, economic, and social problems, including specifically southern and Houthi grievances. Launched in 2013, the NDC quickly organized itself into working groups and began addressing a broad agenda of issues. (See below for a discussion of the NDC recommendations.)

But despite the serious negotiations taking place within the NDC, the external environment was increasingly fraught. The government, evenly divided between Saleh's GPC and the opposition Joint Meeting Parties (JMP), proved incapable of fulfilling its responsibilities, reassuring Yemenis that the political transition could



Yemen's President Abed Rabbo Mansour Hadi (C) speaks during the closing ceremony of a National Dialogue Conference aimed at drafting a new constitution and establishing a federal state on January 25, 2014 in Sana'a. (MOHAMMED HUWAIS/AFP/Getty Images)

succeed or establishing control of the government and the military and security forces. As the transitional government slid more deeply into dysfunction, the economic and security conditions around the country, including Sana'a, steadily deteriorated.

Forces in opposition to the GCC Initiative, including Saleh loyalists (who were determined to regain power), the Houthis (who simultaneously participated in the process and impeded its work), and determined southern secessionists, undertook concerted efforts to undermine popular confidence in the transition. Saboteurs attacked critical infrastructure, especially electrical generation facilities in Marib, leaving the capital without power for days or weeks at a time. Roads were blocked and water supplies were cut off. Southerners remained deeply divided

about the benefit of participating in the transition process versus boycotting it and demanding independence. The Houthis reignited their conflict with Salafists in the North.<sup>25</sup>

## THE INTERREGNUM ENDS & THE SEVENTH SA'DAH WAR BEGINS

Against this backdrop, implementation of the political transition agreement through the summer of 2014 increasingly took a back seat to the rising tensions. Most concerning, the Houthis resumed their siege of the Salafist Dar al-Hadith madrassa in the town of Dammaj, forcing its evacuation and breaking a two-year-old ceasefire. Emboldened by their success at Dammaj, the Houthis continued their advance into

Amran Governorate, defeating forces loyal to arch-enemies Ali Mohsen and the Hashid tribal federation. Ali Abdullah Saleh, despite his earlier antagonistic relationship with the Houthis, joined his forces with theirs, seizing the opportunity to confront their common enemies: President Hadi, Ali Mohsen, the al-Ahmars,<sup>26</sup> and the Islah party.

By late summer, the Houthi/Saleh forces were able to take advantage of the weakness of the transitional government and the collapse of Yemen's security forces – fueled by the defection of pro-Saleh troops – to move aggressively into Sana'a. On entry into the capital, the Houthis built on a strong base of support, including not only pro-Houthi elements among the majority Zaydi Shi'a population but also the many citizens who were simply exhausted by the political stalemate and angered by the failure of the transitional government to address the central issues confronting Yemen, including deteriorating economic and security conditions.<sup>27</sup>

The Houthis claimed that they aimed to strike a blow against a corrupt political elite. Repeating their tactics from earlier conflicts with the Saleh government, they capitalized on populist sentiments to gain support, this time opposition to the government's decision to end oil subsidies. For his part, Saleh, who was responsible for many of the attacks on infrastructure and the general undermining of security in Sana'a, claimed that he could restore order and security if he were returned to power.

After a new round of negotiations under UN auspices produced a road map for resolving the conflict (see below for a discussion of the Peace and National Partnership Agreement, or PNPA), the plan was quickly discarded by the Houthis and tensions in the capital rose again. In early 2015, Hadi angered the Houthis by promulgating the new constitution that had been prepared by the drafting committee and unveiling a new political map of Yemen that created six federal regions that the Houthis viewed as discriminatory.<sup>28</sup> Amid fresh fighting between their units and government security forces, the Houthis moved to dissolve parliament and the government and forced President Hadi to resign, appointing a revolutionary committee to replace the government. Hadi, who had been placed under "house arrest" by the Houthis, fled to Aden in February 2015 and ultimately to Saudi Arabia a month later.

From there, Hadi sent a letter to the UN Security Council requesting a Chapter VII resolution to block the Houthi advance into southern Yemen. The Council soon complied and issued UN Security Council Resolution (UNSCR) 2216, which remains the operative expression of international community views on the conflict until now. (UNSCR 2451, passed in December 2018, maintains in place the key provisions of 2216, but adds support for the agreements worked out in UN Special Envoy Martin Griffiths' negotiations with the parties in Stockholm.) Among other things, the resolution recognizes the Hadi government as the legitimate government of Yemen and demands a return to the political transition.

The Saudi-led coalition launched operations shortly before the resolution in response to a request for support from Hadi.

The Houthi-Saleh forces, now united primarily by their opposition to the Saudi-led coalition's intervention, quickly moved south, claiming that they intended to confront al-Qaeda, but more likely in an effort to consolidate political control over the entire country. Their movement into the more heavily Shafi'i midlands and South sparked a new civil conflict that has persisted, with outside support, for over four years, as of the time of writing.<sup>29</sup>

Despite their initial success in seizing control of the capital and most of northwestern Yemen, home to the vast majority of Yemenis, the alliance between former President Saleh and the Houthis was never more than a marriage of convenience. Expectations from the very beginning were that the two sides would eventually confront one another over mutually exclusive goals and objectives. The balance of power between the two sides shifted in the Houthis' favor over the course of the conflict. The Houthis increased their military capability vis-à-vis the pro-Saleh forces, including establishing control over the remnants of the Republican Guard, the most potent military organization formerly under the command of Ahmed Ali Saleh. Infighting over the formation of a National Salvation Government in August 2016 further deepened the internal divisions within the alliance. A series of violent confrontations between the Saleh and Houthi forces peaked with Saleh's abrupt announcement in December 2017

that he was abandoning the alliance with the Houthis and would join his greatly diminished force with the Saudi-led coalition. His uprising was short-lived, however, and Saleh was murdered by the Houthis on December 4.

Although southerners largely viewed the conflict as primarily a northern internal fight, many in the South resisted the Houthi incursions and joined forces with the coalition and the Hadi government to expel them. At the same time, frustration over the collapse of the transition process sparked a new round of support for southern secession and the emergence of a new alliance, the Southern Transitional Council (STC), that advocated separation from the North. The United Arab Emirates (UAE) supported the STC, providing arms and training to build up their military capability and partnering with them on military operations, although not openly embracing their secessionist agenda. An STC move in January 2018 to expel Hadi government officials from Aden appeared to enjoy preliminary support from the UAE until Saudi Arabia forced a stand-down.<sup>30</sup>

The collapse of the Houthi-Saleh alliance gave fresh impetus to the Saudi-led coalition and revived hopes for a potentially decisive defeat of the Houthi forces in the stalemated military conflict. Coalition forces expanded control of the strategically important and relatively resource-rich Marib Governorate east of Sana'a, and a mix of militias, pro-government forces, and Emirati military units began moving slowly north along the Tihama, the Red Sea coast, towards Hodeida, the

main port supplying the 75% of Yemenis who live in the North. Successful capture of the port, some believed, would compel the Houthis to return to the negotiating table and participate in the UN-led political process under the guidance of the new UN special representative, Martin Griffiths. In December 2018, Griffiths successfully brought the parties together for the first time in Stockholm. His round of talks resulted in a preliminary agreement to withdraw forces from Hodeida and allow for third-party management of the port, along with a prisoner exchange and a humanitarian corridor to relieve Taiz. As of this writing, implementation of the deal is in doubt, and the coalition has accused the Houthis of serial violations of the agreement. In his report to the UN Security Council, although expressing some optimism about the

prospects for further negotiations, Griffiths did not announce any specific timetable for a new round of talks.

## REPEATED ATTEMPTS TO ADDRESS YEMEN'S SYSTEMIC DIVISIONS

As noted previously, Yemen's deep internal divisions have repeatedly led to eruptions of violence. At the same time, Yemenis have also repeatedly come together in an effort to find peaceful solutions to their differences. Common themes have linked all of the initiatives: recognizing the legitimate grievances of marginalized populations, promoting structural changes through constitutional reforms, ensuring regional political balances of power and



Waving the flag of the former South Yemen and holding banners, thousands rally in Yemen's main southern city of Aden, on May 21, 2014, demanding renewed independence for the region on the 20th anniversary of a secession bid that was crushed by northern troops. (AFP/Getty Images)

the equitable distribution of resources, and emphasizing the need for decentralization and greater local autonomy.

## **DOCUMENT OF PLEDGE AND ACCORD**

In 1994, as relations between the GPC and YSP leadership deteriorated, civil society activists from North and South Yemen formed an independent commission, the Yemeni National Dialogue of Popular Forces, to address perceived shortcomings in the original unity agreement. They succeeded in drafting an 18-point “Document of Pledge and Accord.” The agreement called for a new constitutional arrangement with a bicameral legislature and equal representation for the North and the South in the upper chamber. The proposal also recommended significant decentralization.<sup>31</sup> The plan would create local government bodies with direct election of provincial governors and district managers.<sup>32</sup> Both Ali Abdullah Saleh and Ali Salem al-Beidh signed the document in Amman, Jordan, but fighting soon broke out and the agreement was never implemented following the South’s defeat in the short civil conflict.

## **SA'DAH WAR MEDIATION**

There were also repeated efforts, both from within Yemen and by external actors, throughout the course of the six Sa'dah wars to mediate an end to the conflict. In the most serious effort, anxious to resolve

the conflict before scheduled elections in September 2006, President Saleh initiated a mediation at the end of the third Sa'dah war, led by a committee composed nearly entirely of sayyids. The committee negotiated a number of agreements with Abdul-Malek al-Houthi, providing amnesty and compensation for war victims in exchange for a Houthi declaration of adherence to the constitution. The government also announced that it would restore damaged public facilities in Sa'dah and invest in new infrastructure projects.

Nevertheless, another round of fighting followed shortly thereafter. Shortly after the sixth war was launched in 2009, the government issued a six-point list of demands for a ceasefire: 1) withdraw from all mountains, fortifications, and districts of Sa'dah; 2) remove all checkpoints; 3) cease all acts of banditry and destruction; 4) return all seized military and civilian equipment; 5) clarify the situation of six kidnapped foreigners believed to have been taken by the Houthis; and 6) refrain from intervening in the affairs of the local authorities. After initially rejecting the government's demands, the Houthis agreed to accept all but the fifth (later replaced by a requirement to end cross-border attacks into Saudi Arabia), but the two sides were unable to reach an agreement for a ceasefire until early 2010, when the promise of foreign assistance from the “Friends of Yemen” (FoY) group meeting in London triggered a unilateral ceasefire declaration by the government.<sup>33</sup> These matters stood until February 2011 and the onset of the Arab Spring anti-Saleh uprising.

## **NATIONAL DIALOGUE CONFERENCE**

Although the immediate trigger for the Arab Spring protests was the demand for President Saleh to resign, both the protesters and the political elites saw the uprising as an opportunity to seek again to resolve Yemen's more intractable challenges. Given the history of these efforts, there appeared to be a window of opportunity to do so. Not only had most of the core issues long been identified and accepted by the majority of political actors, a number of the solutions had been agreed in previous negotiations as well. But there were also important differences between the process launched under the terms of the GCC Initiative and Implementing Mechanism and its predecessors. For the first time, not only civil society but also women and youth were to be guaranteed a voice in the negotiations. Moreover, unlike the 1994 talks, which addressed only the issues between North and South, or the mediation efforts during the six Sa'dah wars that sought only to end the fighting in the North, the National Dialogue Conference (NDC) organized under the GCC Initiative was charged with providing comprehensive solutions to a broad range of issues.

In addition to addressing the southern and Sa'dah issues, the NDC organized working groups to provide recommendations on governance, development, military and security reorganization, reconciliation and transitional justice, and social and environmental issues, among others. After a

year of debate, the 500+ delegates to the NDC provided some 1,800 recommendations and formed a committee to revise the constitution in accordance with them. Most controversially, the NDC proposed the establishment of a federal state divided into six regions. While the delegates to the NDC favored the federation proposal in principle, the government's proposed map identifying the boundaries of the new federal units provoked a strongly negative reaction from the Houthis, and became one of the *casus belli* of the current conflict. Following the conclusion of the NDC, the government mounted a significant campaign in the country to advertise and explain its recommendations and to build popular support. At the same time, the constitutional drafting committee commenced work on revisions to the constitution. These were completed by late summer and referred back to the NDC.

## **PEACE AND NATIONAL PARTNERSHIP AGREEMENT**

The last effort by the Yemeni parties to negotiate a peaceful resolution of the growing conflict followed the Houthi's successful military campaign and entry into Sana'a in September 2014. In response to their demands, UN Special Representative Jamal Benomar negotiated an agreement among the various parties, the PNPA. The agreement was a victory for Yemen's marginalized populations; it stipulated that Hadi, in consultation with Ansarullah (the Houthis) and al-Hirak (the southern

movement), should appoint a new prime minister, Khaled al-Bahah, and set out criteria for new cabinet appointments. It also established a number of committees to supervise elements of the political transition and implementation of the NDC recommendations. Despite the fact that their representatives had signed the agreement, the Houthis refused to fulfill its terms and the initiative collapsed by the end of the year.

## EXTERNAL FACTORS IN THE CONFLICT

Although often characterized by outside observers as a proxy war between Saudi Arabia and Iran, the critical drivers of the Yemen civil conflict rest entirely within the country's own history. Undoubtedly, Yemen has drawn external actors into its conflicts through the years. Earlier in the 19th and 20th centuries, Britain and the Ottoman Empire competed for influence in Yemen and, together, drew the first boundary between North and South Yemen. In the 1960s, Egypt and Saudi Arabia backed competing forces in the conflict between the Imamate and republican elements. Since 2014, the Saudi-Iranian regional rivalry has exacerbated the current conflict and complicated efforts to find a solution. The UAE has also been a significant player in the current conflict, initially in support of the Saudis but increasingly pursuing objectives independent of Saudi policy. While there are some who maintain that Iranian intervention in the Yemen conflict was provoked by Saudi involvement, the

reverse is the more likely explanation: Saudi intervention in March 2015 was a direct result of the perceived threat to Saudi security posed by the growing Houthi-Iranian alliance in Yemen.

## SAUDI ARABIA AND THE UAE

Saudi Arabia's involvement in Yemen is long standing and extensive. It dates to the earliest period in modern Saudi history. The kingdom fought a war with the Yemeni Imamate in the 1930s that led to the transfer of three provinces — Jizan, Najran, and Asir (sometimes referred to by Yemenis as the three "lost" provinces) — to Saudi Arabia and established a border between the two countries. (Although the border was not finally demarcated until the Treaty of Jeddah was signed in 2000.)

Saudi Arabia's focus has generally been on ensuring the security of its southern border and preventing instability in Yemen from undermining Saudi interests. The Saudis supported the Zaydi Shi'a Imamate primarily because they saw the republican revolution backed by Egypt as a potential threat to their domestic interests. Despite their support for the Imamate, the Saudis reconciled with the YAR once the civil war ended in 1970. They collaborated with the Yemeni authorities and built their own patronage system, particularly for northern tribes under the leadership of the paramount sheikh of the Hashid tribal confederation, Sheikh Abdullah al-Ahmar, which largely supported the Saleh regime. Historically, millions of Yemeni workers

have crossed the border to find jobs in Saudi Arabia, providing remittances to their families that were critical to their economic survival. Most controversially, the Saudis supported southern secessionists in the 1994 civil war, presumably because they saw a united Yemen as a threat to Saudi security, in part due to President Saleh's brief alliance with Saddam Hussein, which was a direct threat to the security of all of the Gulf monarchies. The Saudis were also briefly involved in the sixth Sa'dah war provoked by a Houthi cross-border raid that killed a Saudi border guard in 2009.

During the Arab Spring uprising, the Saudis were constructively engaged in helping to mediate among the Yemeni parties and assisting in the drafting of the GCC Initiative and Implementing Mechanism. King Abdullah's personal intervention was key to convincing President Saleh to sign the agreement in November 2011. Afterwards, direct Saudi engagement in Yemen's political transition was reduced until the second half of 2014 when the Houthis, with Iranian encouragement, again threatened Saudi security along its southern border. Saudi military intervention in the Yemen conflict reflected concerns about Iranian intervention and the possibility that a Houthi-dominated Yemen would become a platform for Iranian destabilizing activities.

Like Saudi Arabia, the UAE played an important role in helping to facilitate the GCC Initiative and Implementing Mechanism, but its active participation diminished after Saleh stepped down from power. In 2015, the UAE joined the Saudi-led coalition largely as a symbol of its support for the Saudis and in recognition of the threat that Saudi Arabia faced from a hostile Houthi presence on its border

associated with Iranian provocations. Over the course of the conflict, however, the UAE's role in Yemen, especially in support of the STC, has grown more controversial. Possible Emirati support for the STC in its attempt to force Hadi government officials out of Aden in early 2018, comments by senior Emirati officials suggesting that the UAE military presence in Yemen may be extended indefinitely, and its military deployment to the island of Socotra later in the spring have raised questions about Emirati intentions and whether UAE policy remains consistent with Saudi goals and objectives.<sup>34</sup>

## IRAN

Unlike Saudi Arabia, there is no history of Iranian involvement in Yemen in the modern era. Although President Saleh routinely alleged during the six Sa'dah wars that Iran was actively supporting the Houthis, there was little evidence to support his claims. (Indeed, Saudi frustration over Saleh's exaggeration of the Iranian role in the Sa'dah wars was likely one of the factors that influenced their decision to support the political transition in 2011.<sup>35</sup>) Nor did Iran participate in the international community's effort to facilitate the political negotiations leading to Saleh's departure in 2011. But, belying claims that Iran's support to the Houthis was a reaction to Saudi intervention, Iranian training and assistance began to expand in 2012, when the majority of Yemenis were fully committed to the implementation of the GCC Initiative.<sup>36</sup> Later on, Saleh also actively sought Iranian support in his efforts to regain control, dispatching trusted emissaries to Tehran to meet with the Iranians during this time period.<sup>37</sup>

In the fall of 2014, when the Houthis had established de facto control of Sana'a, Iranian support expanded along with an increase in specific threats by the Houthis to attack Saudi Arabia. Iran's support for the Houthis became more overt following the Saudi-led coalition's intervention in March 2015 as Iran claimed that its intentions were to support the Yemeni people as they resisted outside aggression. Over the course of the conflict, an international coalition of warships patrolling in the Red Sea has intercepted a number of Iranian arms shipments intended for the Houthis.<sup>38</sup> Iran has been accused of providing more sophisticated weapons, extended-range Scuds, and anti-ship missiles to the Houthis. Although the Iranians deny the allegations, substantial evidence exists to support the claims.<sup>39</sup> Despite repeated interventions by the UN special representative, and Iran's professions of support for a political resolution to the Yemen conflict, as of this writing, there is no evidence of Iranian support for UN-led negotiations or other efforts to end the current conflict, although EU representatives in contact with Iranian authorities claim that the Iranian position may be evolving into greater support for a negotiated resolution.

## **RUSSIA AND THE US**

The Soviet Union historically tried to balance its relations between North and South Yemen. The closer relationship, of course, was with the South. The actual level of assistance to the PDRY is unclear. One assessment suggested it was about \$30 million a year, so not a massive amount of aid, and it was part in loans and part in grants. Military assistance started in 1968 and the two sides signed an Economic

and Technical Assistance Agreement in 1969. At its peak, there appeared to be about 2,500 Russian military advisers in the PDRY. East Germans and Cubans also provided support: The East Germans aided the development of PDRY security services and the Cubans provided medical assistance as well as subsidized sugar. The Soviets also did a lot on the education side and even at the time the author was ambassador, some 20 years after the end of the Soviet Union and the PDRY, there were a number of Russian-speaking Yemenis scattered around (and Russian spouses as well).<sup>40</sup>

The Soviet military used Aden, particularly operating out of the airbase at Khormakser and conducting ship visits to the port. PDRY-Soviet relations reached their peak in 1978-80, when a pro-Moscow president, Abd al-Fattah Ismail, ruled in Aden. The Russians signed a Treaty of Friendship and Cooperation in November 1979. In 1980, Ismail was overthrown by the more moderate Ali Nasser Mohammed, who was reportedly more interested in rebuilding relations with the West, although he wanted to preserve relations with Moscow as well.

At the same time, the Soviets were also interested in maintaining their ties with North Yemen, especially as an entree to relations with Saudi Arabia. The Soviets aided the development of Hodeida port and provided military assistance as well, delivering MiG-21 aircraft to the YAR when the Saudis and U.S. balked at building Yemeni military capabilities.

Despite their long history of engagement in Yemen, the Russians were initially reluctant to become involved in the international mediation effort in 2011, preferring to observe from a

distance. But their position changed when President Saleh opened the door for their engagement. To Saleh's surprise, rather than presenting a counter-balance to the U.S. and the West, which were pressing for a political transition, the Russians joined the larger international effort and were full partners in the transition. Since the outbreak of the conflict, however, the Russians have once again avoided playing an active role in efforts to bring it to an end.

In contrast to the Russians, U.S. involvement in Yemen was generally a subset of U.S. relations with Saudi Arabia until 2001, when concerns about the rise of al-Qaeda in the Arabian Peninsula became the driving force in U.S.-Yemeni relations. In the 1960s, President John F. Kennedy directed that the U.S. support Saudi backing of the Imamate in its resistance to the Egyptian-backed republican forces. Subsequently, the U.S. viewed North Yemen as a bulwark preventing Communist expansion from the PDRY into the Arabian Peninsula and threatening Saudi stability. The PDRY broke relations with the U.S. in October 1969 and did not re-establish them until April 1990, just weeks before the announcement of the YAR-PDRY unification agreement. The U.S. and

Saudi Arabia jointly formed a military assistance mission for North Yemen, including the eventual sale of F-5 fighter aircraft. When the author was in charge of U.S.-Saudi politico-military relations at Embassy Riyadh, he visited Sana'a and observed South Korean trainers working with Yemeni Air Force pilots on F-5s in the morning and Cuban trainers working with them on MiG-21s in the afternoon. But the Saudi-Yemeni military relationship was never an easy one, and the Saudi colonel in charge of the kingdom's military assistance office was convinced the Yemenis intended to kill him.

## **THE GROWTH OF A WAR ECONOMY**

War profiteering has been a persistent factor in Yemen's cyclical conflicts. Smuggling, corruption from bloated military budgets, and arms trafficking were common features throughout the six Sa'dah wars. Marieke Brandt noted the impact of the rise of the war economy in the early 2000s: "Many stakeholders profited from the war and, over time, the conflict became a permanent tool for generating personal wealth.



Yemeni President Ali Adbullah Saleh visits the Hermitage Museum in Saint Petersburg at the start of his visit to Russia on April 5, 2004. (ALEXANDER NIKOLAYEV/AFP/Getty Images)

By perpetuating the war and artificially controlling its intensity, they could provide themselves with an almost infinite source of income.”

The significance of the war economy over the course of the current conflict has grown exponentially. The legitimate Yemen economy ground to a near halt. Yemen's GDP declined by nearly 42% between 2015 and 2017 while the 25% of Yemenis who received government payments – both civil service employees and those dependent on social welfare payments – went unpaid for more than a year and private sector unemployment reached 50%.<sup>41</sup> Nevertheless, evidence of economic activity based heavily on smuggling and the black market persists. Yemeni markets, at least in major urban centers, remain well-supplied with basic necessities. Even perishables like fruit and yoghurt and luxury items like consumer electronics are readily available for those who can afford the price. The growth of a thriving war economy, according to Peter Salisbury, has once again created perverse incentives to prolong the conflict and obstruct the peace process.<sup>42</sup> Much of the smuggling comes from overland trade, particularly crossing into Yemen from Oman, but even Saudi crossing points are involved. Various militias man as many as 15-25 checkpoints charging fees that add 10-15% to the cost of goods once they reach the market. Control of Yemen's seaports is also a profit center.

Salisbury notes that customs fees and taxes provide the bulk of the income for the Houthis, who may collect as much as \$30 million a month from their now-contested control of the port at Hodeida.<sup>43</sup> Control of Yemen's marginal oil and gas production and export facilities, now largely held by various tribal elements and local militias, remains a major objective for the various factions, including the Hadi government.

## CAN YEMEN'S PROBLEMS BE SOLVED?

Yemen has suffered from violent conflict repeatedly over the past decades driven in large part by fundamental divisions and identity issues within Yemeni society, a sense of marginalization, and deep-rooted inequality engendered by an extractive, rentier political and economic system. At the same time, as we have seen, there have been repeated attempts to define the root causes of the conflict and resolve them.

Undoubtedly, the most comprehensive attempt to end the cycle of violent conflict grew out of the Arab Spring revolt against the Saleh government and the resultant GCC Initiative-mandated NDC. While there has been criticism of the conference and it has been cast as a failure by many observers, the fact is that the NDC itself did not fail. The conferees, the most representative body to



A member of the Shiite Houthi security forces arranges money donated by Houthi supporters to the rebel-controlled Central Bank of Yemen on September 27, 2016. (MOHAMMED HUWAIS/AFP/Getty Images)

ever come together in Yemen, agreed on hundreds of recommendations meant to resolve many of the most pressing political, economic, and social issues challenging the country. In its broadest sweep, the NDC reiterated recommendations drawn from previous dialogues that promoted decentralization and greater local autonomy, a federalized state structure, and greater representation in parliament for the disaffected South.

While the NDC's recommendations may be faulted for their ambition, many, if not most, of them are fundamentally sound. Yet, despite the well-intentioned efforts of hundreds of Yemeni political figures, civil society activists, and women and youth representatives, the conclusions reached through this process of negotiation have not succeeded in resolving differences or ending conflict. Instead, Yemen has repeated the historic pattern: despite intense efforts to "sell" the NDC results to the Yemeni people and follow through on the remaining elements of an agreed political transition, from the end of the NDC in April 2014 until the Houthi-Saleh coup in the fall of 2014 and the outbreak of a new round of fighting in March 2015, the political consensus behind the

conference results continued to fray and the impetus toward a new round of fighting continued to build. Once again, Yemeni leaders were unwilling to make the concessions required to implement the agreement, while the population at large remained disengaged and disinterested in pressing for it. Negotiations were dismissed and force of arms became the preferred tactic.

The effort by the UN to broker an end to the current cycle of violence and restore the political transition under the terms of the GCC Initiative and the NDC recommendations is a necessary first step in addressing Yemen's problems. UNSCR 2216 draws on many of the same elements that have been featured in previous agreements and ceasefires, including the terms of the 2010 ceasefire agreement that ended the sixth Sa'dah war. But, as we have seen, the failure of previous attempts at problem solving has not been the result of flaws in the agreements themselves. Instead, it reflects larger issues within Yemeni society that prevent implementation of the reforms that the agreements dictate and recognize as necessary to resolve Yemen's enduring conflict.

## RECOMMENDATIONS

As noted at the beginning of the chapter and in subsequent sections related to the history of political negotiations, the main reason that Yemenis have not been able to break out of the cycle of violence for over six decades is not because of an inability to identify solutions to their problems but because the political leadership has lacked the resolve to actually follow through on the agreements they have reached. Their failure is in implementation not in vision. The recommendations listed on pages 29-30 are suggestions for how the Yemenis, their Gulf neighbors, and the international community can reverse that history and help move Yemen on to a sustainable course of state-building. It should be clear that real change in Yemen is a decades-long challenge. But another failure to begin will mean that Yemenis will be doomed to repeat the current conflict again, with all of the attendant humanitarian consequences as well as the regional and international problems that will arise.

## CONSEQUENCES OF FAILURE

The proposed road map out of the 60-year-old Yemeni civil war is daunting. It requires not only that all Yemenis accept responsibility for adjusting their thinking but also that the elites that have benefitted the most from the current situation accept some political and economic constraints on their future actions. Moreover, it requires that the international community, both in the region and more broadly, commit to long-term engagement to support

Yemen's transition. In fairness, Acemoglu and Robinson argue that attempts at such radical transformations rarely succeed. But the price of failure is reflected clearly in Yemen's history since the early 1960s: a continuation of the cycles of violent conflict and deepening fissures in Yemen's society that threaten to become irreparable. Moreover, since 2015 the potential that new rounds of internal conflict in Yemen can spill over and destabilize the entire region, potentially provoking an inter-state conflict, has also become clear.

## CONCLUSION

I've tried to demonstrate in this chapter that an understanding of the current civil conflict in Yemen requires looking at the basic elements of Yemeni history going back to at least the upheavals of the 1960s — the uprising against the Imamate in the North and the revolt against the British in the South. The same elements appear as factors in each of the violent eruptions: political, social, and economic marginalization, sectional discrimination, denial of equal access to health care and education, corruption, and cronyism. Yet time and again, Yemenis have sat at the negotiating table in an effort to agree on the means to address and resolve these issues. In the Document of Pledge and Accord, the NDC recommendations, and even in the PNPA, the parties agreed to decentralization of government, equitable sharing of resources, more representative government, as well as fundamental social and economic reforms. But the agreements were never implemented and the parties soon returned to a new round of struggle and conflict. Thus, any serious effort to end six decades of state failure must be

based on an honest reckoning of the sources of past failures and a new commitment by the nation's leaders to allow the political process to succeed. The Yemeni people, as well, need to demand as much from their leaders. Success will not come easily. The institutions that could be expected to help guide the process are weak. But failure will ensure that the current civil conflict will merely serve as prelude to the next round of fighting and the round after that.

# RECOMMENDATIONS

## FOR YEMENIS:

- Complete the political transition under the GCC Initiative and Implementing Mechanism and hold elections for a new parliament and president.
- Re-examine the recommendations of the NDC and earlier political initiatives and develop a consensus strategy for implementing agreed recommendations.
- Focus on institutional capacity building, especially at the local and governorate levels. To end crony capitalism, promote transparency and accountability in government contracting and allocation of resources. Develop bottom-up democratic institutions including the direct election of local and governorate-level councils to encourage more broad-based participation in politics.
- To break the war economy, remove all import restrictions and ensure that no market shortages exist to be exploited by war profiteers.
- Redraw the federalist map to ensure that the federating units provide an equitable geographic distribution of resources.
- Develop a national infrastructure plan that provides a timeline for extending access for all Yemenis to essential water, power, and transportation utilities.
- Extend job creation and economic diversification programs to all regions of the country. Guarantee access to health care and education for all Yemenis. Promote programs, including the social fund for development and small business loans, to expand citizens' participation in the economy.

## FOR YEMEN'S NEIGHBORS:

Given the current state of disarray in the GCC, it's unclear whether that organization will remain a viable partner for Yemen moving forward. If not, the two dominant Gulf economies – Saudi Arabia and the UAE – should take the lead in promoting regional support for Yemen's recovery.

- GCC states should declare their support for Yemen's unity and respect for its sovereignty and territorial integrity.
- Provide rapidly disbursing regional development assistance to repair war-damaged infrastructure as well as undertake new infrastructure projects, including development of Aden port, to promote broad-based economic development.
- Extend preferential access for Yemeni workers to find employment in regional economies, generating a near-term capital injection into Yemen's economy.
- Eliminate tariff and non-tariff barriers to trade between Yemen and regional economies to help Yemen attract foreign direct investment and generate labor-intensive industrial development, providing jobs and business development opportunities at home.

#### **FOR THE BROADER INTERNATIONAL COMMUNITY:**

- Through the FoY, the international community should make clear that it is making a long-term, sustained commitment to assist Yemen's political and economic development.
- The UN should provide continued expert assistance to the reappraisal of NDC recommendations and to the completion of the remaining steps in the GCC Initiative and Implementing Mechanism.
- The International Foundation for Electoral Systems should assist in updating voter registration lists and preparing for new elections as a final step in completing Yemen's political transition.
- The World Bank and International Monetary Fund should develop programs to promote broad-based economic development, infrastructure planning, and the establishment of reliable institutions to promote transparency, accountability, and the fight against corruption.
- The FoY, through bilateral development assistance programs, should focus on institutional capacity building as well as ensuring that all Yemenis have access to effective health care and educational facilities.

# ENDNOTES

1. Daron Acemoglu and James Robinson, *Why Nations Fail: The Origins of Power, Prosperity and Poverty* (London: Crown Publishing Group, 2012).
2. The republican rebellion against the Imamate in north Yemen lasted from 1962-1970. The internal Yemeni Socialist Party dispute in the People's Democratic Republic of Yemen inflicted an estimated 10,000 casualties among the civilian population of Aden in approximately two weeks of street battles.
3. Despite their support for the winning side, involvement in the Yemen civil war had real consequences for Nasser's Egypt. Analysts have long considered that Egypt's extensive deployments in Yemen weakened its military capabilities, enabling Israel's complete destruction of the Egyptian army and air force in the 1967 war.
4. Stephen Day, *Regionalism and Rebellion in Yemen: A Troubled National Union*, (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2012), 65-70.
5. Ibid, 66.
6. Ibid, 66.
7. Ibid, Table 2.3: Regional Government Revenues (per capita) in the Northern YAR, 1985 and 1989, 71.
8. Paul Dresch, *A History of Modern Yemen* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2000), 149.
9. Echoes of the 1986 conflict continue to infect Yemeni politics and were a factor in undermining southern participation in the National Dialogue Conference. The intra-YSP conflict, which pitted Ali Nasser Mohammed and his allies against Ali Salim al-Beidh and his allies, had both geographic as well as ideological foundations. The Ali Nasser group, or "Zumra," which included Abed Rabbo Mansour Hadi, came mostly from Abyan and Shabwa governorates, while the Ali Salim group, or "Tughma," were primarily from Dhahle, Lahij, and Hadramawt. As president, Hadi tried desperately to bring his former colleagues, including Ali Nasser Mohammed, on board in support of the political transition, but only Mohammed Ali Ahmed, former governor of Abyan, joined the process and, at that, only half-heartedly. Ali Nasser stayed away despite Hadi's efforts. Meanwhile, Ali Salim al-Beidh attacked Hadi and the GCC Initiative from his safe haven in Beirut and broadcast pro-secessionist propaganda on the Hezbollah station, al-Manar.
10. April Longley Alley, "Breaking Point? Yemen's Southern Question" *International Crisis Group*, (October 2011), 2.
11. Day, *Regionalism and Rebellion in Yemen: A Troubled National Union*, 134.
12. Alley, "Breaking Point? Yemen's Southern Question," 1.
13. Day, *Regionalism and Rebellion in Yemen: A Troubled National Union*, 230.
14. Alley, "Breaking Point? Yemen's Southern Question," 6.
15. Ibid, 9.
16. Marieke Brandt, *Tribes and Politics in Yemen: A History of the Houthi Conflict* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2017), 135.
17. Ibid, 134.
18. Ibid, 348.
19. Ibid, 54.
20. Ibid, 55.
21. Ibid, 345.
22. Ibid, 346.
23. Alley, "Breaking Point? Yemen's Southern Question," 1.
24. Saleh tried to exploit divisions within the international community, attempting in particular to gain support from Russia and China in opposition to the West. But the diplomatic corps joined together, organizing a Group of 10 – US, UK, France, Russia, China, Saudi Arabia, UAE, Oman, Kuwait, and the EU – to maintain unity and present a solid front. Despite the subsequent collapse of the transition process, the cooperative approach taken by the

diplomatic community in Sana'a remains a model for international engagement in support of peaceful resolutions of internal disputes.

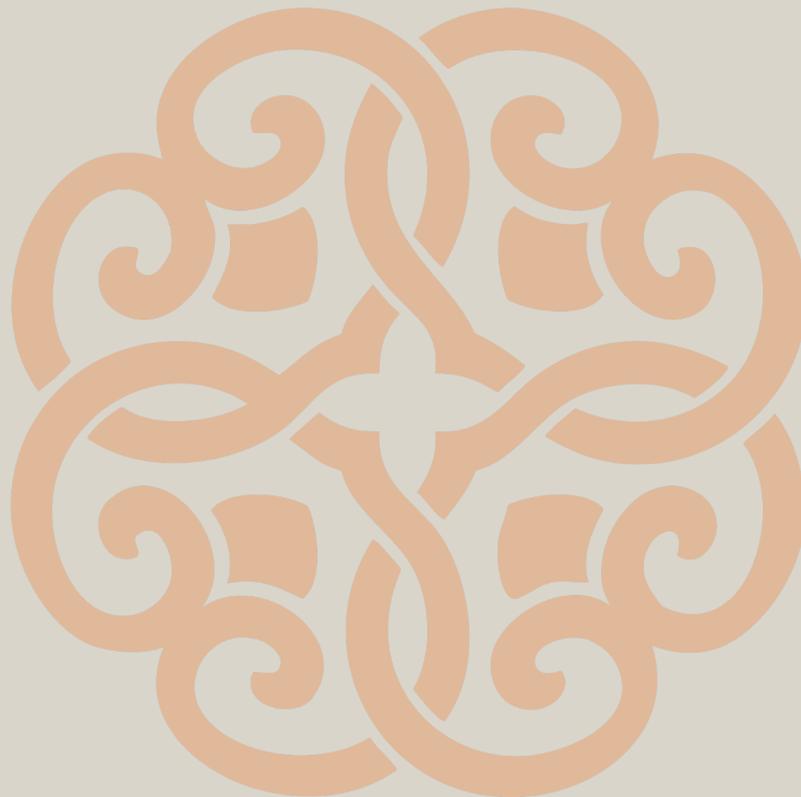
25. Ginny Hill, *Yemen Endures: Civil War, Saudi Adventurism and the Future of Arabia* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2017), 261.
26. During his lifetime, Sheikh Abdullah al-Ahmar had been both a major beneficiary and a prominent benefactor of Ali Abdullah Saleh's regime. Although he was one of the founders of the Islah party, Sheikh Abdullah maintained his support for Saleh through the 2006 presidential election. Following Sheikh Abdullah's death in late 2007, however, support for Saleh among the al-Ahmar sons declined. In particular, Hamid al-Ahmar, a prominent businessman and Islah party activist, became one of Saleh's most vocal critics and was widely assumed to harbor his own presidential ambitions. During the Arab Spring protests, Hamid was one of the main financiers of the protest movement. Pro-Saleh loyalists asserted that Hamid was a co-conspirator in the June 2011 assassination attempt that gravely wounded Saleh and many of his closest lieutenants although this was never established. In the subsequent fighting, Saleh's forces targeted al-Ahmar properties in Sana'a, destroying Hamid's home as well as that of his eldest brother and heir to the family position as paramount sheikhs of the Hashid tribal federation, Sheikh Sadiq al-Ahmar. Hamid currently lives in exile in Istanbul, Turkey.
27. Brandt, *Tribes and Politics in Yemen: A History of the Houthi Conflict*, 338.
28. Despite Hadi's pledge that the map would divide Yemen's natural resources equitably, the Houthis maintained that the Azal region, which included the Houthi's Sa'dah Governorate, lacked either natural resources or access to the sea.
29. April Longley Alley, "Collapse of the Houthi-Saleh Alliance and the Future of Yemen's War," Project on Middle East Political Science, Jan. 11, 2018.
30. Kelly F. Thornberry, "The UAE's Divisive Strategy in Yemen," *Terrorism Monitor* 16, no. 8 (April 2018).
31. Alley, "Breaking Point? Yemen's Southern Question," 4.
32. Day, *Regionalism and Rebellion in Yemen: A Troubled National Union*, 127.
33. Ibid, 318.
34. Abdulwahab Al-Qassab, "Strategic Considerations of the UAE Role in Yemen," The Arab Center, March 9, 2018, 2.
35. Hill, *Yemen Endures: Civil War, Saudi Adventurism and the Future of Arabia*, 238.
36. Author's information. Note the capture of the Iranian dhow, Jihan I, in December 2012 carrying 40 tons of arms and ammunition intended for the Houthis.
37. Author discussions with President Abed Rabbo Mansour Hadi.
38. C.J. Chivers and Eric Schmitt, "Arms Seized Off Coast of Yemen Appear to Have Been Made in Iran," *New York Times*, January 10, 2017.
39. Ahmad Majidyar, "Iranian Cleric Admits IRGC Provides Weapons to Houthis in Yemen," Iran Observed, Middle East Institute, April 20, 2017.
40. For example, the author took piano lessons from a Russian woman married to a Yemeni doctor who had trained in the Soviet Union. She was a much better teacher than the author was a music student.
41. *Humanitarian Needs Overview*, New York: UNOCHA, December 2017.
42. Peter Salisbury "Yemen: National Chaos, Local Order," *Chatham House*, December 2017, 24.
43. Ibid, 27.

**Cover Photo:** A Yemeni tribesman from the Popular Resistance Committees, supporting forces loyal to Yemen's Saudi-backed president, maneuvers a gun mounted on a pick-up truck during fighting against Shiite Houthi rebels and their allies on June 30, 2017 in the area of Sirwah, west of Marib city. **(ABDULLAH AL-QADRY/AFP/Getty Images)**

**Photo 2:** A picture taken on April 28, 2018 shows the funeral procession for slain Houthi leader Saleh al-Samad and his six bodyguards in the Yemeni capital, Sana'a, after he was killed by Saudi-led air strikes the week before. **(MOHAMMED HUWAIS/AFP/Getty Images)**

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## ABOUT THE AUTHOR

Amb. (ret.) Gerald Feierstein is senior vice president at the Middle East Institute. He retired from the U.S. Foreign Service in May 2016 after a 41-year career with the personal rank of Career Minister. As a diplomat he served in nine overseas postings, including three tours of duty in Pakistan, as well as assignments in Saudi Arabia, Oman, Lebanon, Jerusalem, and Tunisia. In 2010, President Obama appointed

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In addition to his career-long focus on the Near East and South Asia, Amb. Feierstein also played a prominent role in developing and implementing State Department policies and programs to counter violent extremism. As Deputy Coordinator and Principal Deputy Coordinator in the State Department's Counter-Terrorism Bureau, Amb. Feierstein led the development of initiatives to build regional networks to confront extremist groups as well as to counter terrorist financing and promote counter-terrorism messaging. He continued to focus on defeating terrorist groups through his subsequent tours as Deputy Chief of Mission in Pakistan and as Ambassador to Yemen.

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