A Self-Defeating War: Regional Powers and Local Actors in Yemen

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Introduction

In 2011, large-scale anti-government protests occurred in Yemen's capital Sana'a. In November 2011, as a result of fear of political disintegration and civil war in the country, the Gulf Cooperation Council (GCC), backed by the UN, struck a deal that saw the resignation of President Ali Abdullah Saleh (Rashad, 2011). The GCC initiative under the guidance of Saudi Arabia installed Abd-Rabbu Mansour Hadi, former vice president as Yemen's new leader, a move that many hoped would bring stability to the country (Rashad, 2011). However, things started to deteriorate, and the initiative has brought deeper problems and internal conflicts to the surface.

The GCC roadmap and the National Dialogue Conference (NDC) has failed to lead to stability and has triggered a power struggle within the elite (Transfeld, 2014). On the other hand, the inability of Hadi’s management in order to fill the power vacuum has also made the Houthis more able to move forward and gain territory.

On December 6, 2018, the UN-sponsored peace talks aimed to take place with the participation of the Yemeni government and the Houthi rebels. The second round of peace talks on December 12, concluded with a ceasefire agreement in Hodeidah, which is the crucial port for the humanitarian aid into Yemen. Nevertheless, it has been claimed that both sides have broken the ceasefire on numerous occasions (Farrukh and Barnett, 2019).

Since 2015, as many as 57,000 people have been killed or died as reported by the partners of the UN (GHO, 2019). Yemen is defined as the world’s largest humanitarian crisis, with 24 million in need of assistance and more than half of the population is food-insecure (UN News, 2018).

Along with the humanitarian crisis, this report examines the historical background of the north-south hostility, the activities of actors on the ground, and interventions of regional actors. It also aims to analyse how the GCC initiative and the NDC failed to resolve the country’s internal conflicts and could not bring a meaningful transition for Yemen. The paper argues that a more comprehensive perspective is needed by exploring the roles of every significant actor in the region, unlike the general tendency, which portrays the Yemen war as an Iran-Gulf proxy war. In this regard, it tries to investigate how regional and international actors escalate the conflict and how they seem to be potential spoilers of the peace process.

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**Yemen Who Controls What**

Source: TRT World Research Centre

- **Houthi control since Feb 2015**
- **Hadi Government aligned forces presence**
- **Al Qaeda presence**
- **Sparsely populated areas**
- **Oil fields and pipelines**
Regional Powers and Local Actors in Yemen

A Self-Defeating War:

By 1990, Yemen was a divided country to the South and the North. Zaydis in North Yemen with the name of Mutawakkilite Kingdom was ended by the establishment of the Yemen Arab Republic (YAR) in 1962 (Gandy, 1998). In the South, the People’s Democratic Republic of Yemen (PDRY) gained independence from the British rule in 1967, and embarked on a radical revolution with the establishment of the Yemeni Socialist Party (YSP) (Carapico and Rone, 1994). The two parts had both similarities and differences. While the YAR was a religious Islamic society with the armed tribal confederations, PDRY was a relatively more secular; but both were prone to political repression and violence (Carapico and Rone, 1994). The capitalist economy was developed in the South, whilst the northern part with a semi-feudal agrarian society had difficulty in the adaptation to the conditions of PDRY (Carapico, 1993). The critical thing regarding the fundamental changes in the country was the discovery of a large amount of oil in South Yemen in 1984. At that time, most people assumed that this would revolutionize the economy of this backward country (Miller, 1984). However, contrary to expectations, the oil in the hands of elite groups and patronage system has created a huge disparity in wealth of the whole country (Dresch, 2000).

22 May 1990 was a historic day in Yemen marked the beginning of the process of unification with the new government headed by Ali Abdullah Saleh (Hudson, 1995). However, because of many unresolved issues and several skirmishes between two parts, Saleh waged war against the southern forces in 1994. The worst part after the conflict was the increasing grievances of the secessionist southern groups against the Saleh regime, which will eventually create a political crisis in Yemen.

As the poorest country in the Arabian Peninsula and closely connected to the security of the region, Yemen has long been subject to external intervention, particularly by Saudi Arabia (Roberts and Hokayem, 2017). In addition to this, the patronage system which has been crucial to the longevity of the Saleh regime made the country exposed to corruption, the decline in the oil revenues, unemployment and increasing food shortages (Burke, 2012). All these negative conditions, combined with the demands of the people during the Arab uprisings in 2011, have dragged the country to the brink of the civil war.

Historical Background of the North-South Polarisation

By 1990, Yemen was a divided country to the South and the North. Zaydis in North Yemen with the name of Mutawakkilite Kingdom was ended by the establishment of the Yemen Arab Republic (YAR) in 1962 (Gandy, 1998). In the South, the People’s Democratic Republic of Yemen (PDRY) gained independence from the British rule in 1967, and embarked on a radical revolution with the establishment of the Yemeni Socialist Party (YSP) (Carapico and Rone, 1994). The two parts had both similarities and differences. While the YAR was a religious Islamic society with the armed tribal confederations, PDRY was a relatively more secular; but both were prone to political repression and violence (Carapico and Rone, 1994). The capitalist economy was developed in the South, whilst the northern part with a semi-feudal agrarian society had difficulty in the adaptation to the conditions of PDRY (Carapico, 1993). The critical thing regarding the fundamental changes in the country was the discovery of a large amount of oil in South Yemen in 1984. At that time, most people assumed that this would revolutionize the economy of this backward country (Miller, 1984). However, contrary to expectations, the oil in the hands of elite groups and patronage system has created a huge disparity in wealth of the whole country (Dresch, 2000).

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The Failure of the GCC Initiative and the National Dialogue Conference

In 2011, when protests reached crisis levels, the GCC led an initiative that brought together different political power brokers of the country in order to end the crisis between the opposition groups and the government (Al-Madhaji, 2016). The negotiations took place under the guidance of Saudi Arabia, and resulted in an agreement that became known as the “GCC initiative” which ostensibly aimed to establish a peaceful transitional process in Yemen (Zyck, 2014). However, the negotiations brought the new problems and triggered the actions of the opposition groups against the government.

After his 33 year rule, the resignation of Ali Abdullah Saleh was seen as a huge success in the political history of Yemen (Transfeld, 2014). However, the achievements of the initiative were actually short term because of the flawed points in the framework of the agreement. Saleh continued to head of his party, the General People’s Congress, the most powerful political party in the country. In this regard, his resignation was mostly symbolic since the regime’s structure remained the same and legal guarantees granted Saleh's inner circle immunity from the prosecution (Al-Madhaji, 2016). Therefore, many Yemenis disregarded the GCC initiative because of the fact that it did not bring a real change as a response to the public’s demands. Besides, the agreement paved the way for the elite bargaining, and it gave some concessions to the power centres and the traditional forces (Transfeld, 2014). Following the transition process, politics in Yemen have been moving toward tri-polar elite constellation: interim President Hadi together with Islah party and leaders of the opposition party, YSP; forces loyal to Saleh family; and the powerful tribal Al-Ahmar family with the leadership of General Ali Mohsin al-Ahmar (Transfeld, 2014). He is the top Yemeni general who has a strong authority over the Yemen army.

One of the other problems of the GCC initiative was related to the lack of an independent monitor mechanism (Al-Madhaji, 2016). Therefore, the UN’s support for the Hadi government with various UNSC resolutions 2051, 2140 and 2216 was not enough for the government to establish effective trust-building mechanisms (Ahmed and el-Rahwani, 2018). This problem arose from the unsubstantial and misleading instructions of the UN resolutions, especially Resolution 2216. Nevertheless, with substantial support from the United Nations Special Envoy for Yemen, Jamal Benomar, President Hadi began to restructure the military and other institutions in 2012. For instance, he removed Saleh loyalists and family members from their positions in the security apparatus (Transfeld, 2014). The groups who have been removed from the government were marginalised and began to move against the President (Transfeld, 2014). During this period, political instability has increased and the economy has further deteriorated.

On March 18, 2013, the National Dialogue Conference was held in Sana’a, and it has been seen as the core of the transition process in Yemen crisis by the international community and the regional actors (Al-Madhaji, 2016). In the beginning, the main purpose was to provide a forum that wide-range participation take place from the Houthis, groups from the South and the main parties to establish a national consensus (Gaston, 2014). In this regard, the conference has accomplished broad participation with the grassroots movements; the youth, working groups along with the conflicting parties (Transfeld, 2014). However, the NDC was not capable to meet the demands of al-Hirak, today known as the Southern Transitional Council. The group, which already had problems with the Saleh government, was again subjected to marginalisation and alienation from the process. These circumstances have triggered their secessionist politics, which they fought for it since the 1994 civil war. This significant unresolved issue was seen as an obstacle to the development of the conference. The main factions of al-Hirak withdrew its delegates from the dialogue process, and different parties became further polarised at the end (Al-Madhaji, 2016).
The Houthis

In their early period, the 1990s, the Houthis aimed to protect the religious and cultural traditions of Zaydi people, under the leadership of Hussein Badreddin al Houthi, from Salafi/Wahhabi influence, which gained prominence across the border in Saudi Arabia in the 1980s (International Crisis Group, 2014). The turning point, which shifted the group to more political revivalism, was the US invasion of Iraq in 2003; subsequent to the invasion, the group claimed to adopt the slogan: “God is great, death to the US, death to Israel, curse the Jews, and victory for Islam.” (Independent, 2018). Emulating their ancient religious leader Zayd bin Ali, who fought against a corrupt regime, the Houthis also sought to confront what they saw as the corrupted government of Saleh (Riedel, 2017).

In 2003, then President Saleh launched a series of military campaigns against the Houthis. Between 2004 and 2010, Yemen witnessed numerous conflicts between the Houthis and the government, particularly in Saada province, the Houthis’ main stronghold in the north (Roberts and Hokayem, 2017). During these military campaigns, Saudi Arabia was the main supporter of the Saleh regime (Darwich, 2018). Government forces killed Hussein al-Houthi in 2004, however, the movement was able to defeat the Yemeni army and its Saudi backers, resulting in humiliation for Riyadh (International Crisis Group, 2014). In 2009, the Houthis directly clashed with Saudi Arabia during Operation Scorched Earth, which was the first military operation the Saudis conducted since 1991 (Darwich, 2018). Government forces killed Hussein al-Houthi in 2004, however, the movement was able to defeat the Yemeni army and its Saudi backers, resulting in humiliation for Riyadh (International Crisis Group, 2014). In 2009, the Houthis directly clashed with Saudi Arabia during Operation Scorched Earth, which was the first military operation the Saudis conducted since 1991 (Darwich, 2018). However, despite all these victories against the Yemeni government, the actual event that changed the Houthis’ direction was the Arab uprisings of 2011. As opposed to the general narrative claiming Iran’s huge support to the Houthis or their stance for freedom and justice by its followers, the movement’s post-2011 expansion is in reality more complicated (International Crisis Group, 2014).

There are many different reasons behind the Houthis’ territorial gains and political support. First, they took advantage of the power vacuum after the resignation of Saleh. In the beginning, they gained political support because they were providing security and justice in areas where the state was not able to do (International Crisis Group, 2014). Their anti-regime sentiments and expressions against the corruption and favouritism of the old regime made them more powerful. However, they moved in concert with their previous enemy, Saleh regime and its loyal forces. The alliance between them was seen as a marriage of convenience, which united by what they opposed, Saudi-led coalition and its allies. The Houthis’ taking over the capital Sana’a was actually with the help of Saleh’s GPC and affiliated army units (Salisbury, 2015). However, the group did not hesitate to kill him in December 2017 when Saleh was seeking peace with Saudi Arabia. His death allowed the Houthis to expand their freedom of action and capture more territories. However, they added another enemy to their list: Forces loyal to Saleh.

The Houthis have taken control of large part of the country including strategically important places such as, Taiz, Hodeidah and the capital Sana’a, and continue fighting with the Saudi-backed Hadi government forces. The Houthis’ seizure of major cities took place as a result of their increasing military capacity and asymmetric warfare strategy. They have taken advantage of support provided by Iran and Hezbollah since the Arab uprisings (Knights, 2018). Their previous guerrilla warfare tactics enabled them to advance vis-à-vis the Saudi coalition which has extensive military power. Since 2015, the group has launched a range of advanced weapons systems with direct assistance from Tehran (Knights, 2018). For instance: the Houthis fired Burkan 2-H missile at Riyadh in April 2018, and they targeted southern areas of Saudi Arabia by using Qasif-1 drones which Iran has been claimed to send it to the Houthis (Al Jazeera, 2018).
Regionalisation of the Conflict: The Saudi-led Intervention

Saudi Arabia has always been cautious about Yemen with which it shares 1,100 miles of border, presenting a major security challenge for Riyadh (Roberts and Hokayem, 2017). The Kingdom has been involved directly or indirectly in the affairs of the Yemeni government in order to preserve its interests at every available occasion (Lyman, 2018). During the long conflicts between the Yemeni government and the Houthi rebels between 2004 and 2010, Saudi Arabia was the biggest supporter of the Saleh regime (Darwich, 2018). The Houthis’ allegedly close ties with Tehran has alarmed Riyadh, and it has started to take joint action with the United States against the Houthis.

After the Houthis seized the capital Sana’a in September 2014, President Hadi requested foreign military assistance from the GCC on 24 March 2015, and he fled to Riyadh (Ferro and Ruys, 2018). On 26 March 2015, Saudi-led coalition with several GCC and Arab countries launched the Operation Decisive Storm to ‘protect the people of Yemen and its legitimate government from a takeover by the Houthis.’

At that time, Saudi Arabia has aimed to restore the Hadi government and to bring stability in Yemen. However, the intervention has transformed the domestic conflict to a regional war. The coalition has mostly focused on the airstrikes against the Houthis and other rebel groups, though, the airstrikes have targeted dozens of civilians including children more than the militias. The UN human rights office reported that more than 16,000 civilians have been killed or injured since the war began; the vast majority of them by airstrikes (Washington Post, 2018).

The coalition intensely relies on the support of the US and some European countries to expand military capacity. The US's military support generally consists of aerial targeting assistance, mid-flight aerial refuelling for Saudi and UAE aircraft, and also providing intelligence and training support (Dalton et al., 2018). While the coalition forces are moving forward with the military support from Washington, harsh criticisms inside the US Congress against Trump’s support in the Yemen war are increasing.

US Politicians against the Yemen War

The US midterm elections in November 2018 witnessed the victory of Democrats in Congress who are critical of the Trump Administration’s support for the Saudi-led coalition in Yemen (Montgomery, 2018). Washington’s military involvement has also raised the AUMF (Authorization for Use of Military Force) problem, which has been the subject of debate in the US for a long time. The bill permits military strikes against any nations connected to the 9/11 attackers, however, since it has been stretched beyond that purpose, it makes any military activity in Yemen illegal as per US domestic legislation (Kopp, 2019). All these criticisms have increased especially after the killing of Saudi journalist Jamal Khashoggi in the Saudi Consulate in Istanbul (Baron, 2018). In December 2018, the US Senate voted to stop Washington’s assistance to the Saudi-led coalition in Yemen, delivering a blow to the Trump Administration (Middle East Eye, 2018). Nowadayas, US senators, Mike Lee and Bernie Sanders have come together with the US lawmakers to reintroduce the bill to stop Trump’s support to the Saudi-led coalition war efforts in Yemen (Middle East Eye, 2019). Given that US support to the Saudi-led coalition is critical, their pressure on Riyadh and Abu Dhabi and withdrawal of military assistance is also crucial about ending the disastrous war in Yemen.

Regional Powers and Local Actors in Yemen

A Self-Defeating War: Together with Riyadh, Abu Dhabi has been a very crucial actor in the course of the war in Yemen since the coalition's intervention in 2015. The UAE's military escalation started with low participation in the peacekeeping missions in the 1990s in East Africa and Kosovo, and they continued to be involved, for instance, in the NATO-led International Security Assistance Forces (ISAF) operation in Afghanistan since 2008 (Roberts and Hokayem, 2017). Even if such participation was somewhat small, it has initiated a new security strategy for the UAE from 2000 onwards. The country modernized its air force by acquiring F-16s from the US, and it displayed this military advancement during the 2011 NATO-led operation in Libya, and also against Daesh targets in Iraq and Syria starting 2014 (Roberts and Hokayem, 2017).

The most important and far-reaching military involvement of the UAE is the war in Yemen. The role of the UAE has increased day by day in terms of management and resources, particularly for ground operations. Today, Aden, the biggest port city, is at the centre of UAE's military operations because of its strategic importance for regional security, involving Bab el-Mandeb and the Horn of Africa (Ardemagni, 2016). For this reason, Abu Dhabi has been trying to expand its sphere of influence and strategic and military base in the region. For instance, the Emirates signed a security partnership agreement with Eritrea to use Eritrean land, water and airspace for military operations in Yemen (Mello and Knights, 2016).

As a small nation with very ambitious policies, UAE has focused more on the south of Yemen by training security forces in order to maintain its geopolitical goals. The Emirates generally uses its counter-terrorism efforts against AQAP and the Houthis to legitimize its military operations in the south (Fenton-Harvey, 2018). In addition to counter-terrorism measures, UAE Special Forces are extensively committed to the training of locals by working with regional security forces and tribal militias (Ardemagni, 2016). In these operations, Abu Dhabi and Washington are taking joint actions against AQAP; the group has been targeted by the counter-terrorism operations of the US for a long time through air strikes that have killed many civilians (Dewan, 2017). Moreover, the presence of AQAP led the tribal leaders in Shabwa to form an alliance against the group, the operations of Shabwani Elite forces backed by the UAE-US created a quagmire for the southern tribes of Yemen (Dewan, 2017). These conflicts once again reveal the complexity of the situation in Yemen.

Even though Riyadh and Abu Dhabi are partners in the anti-Houthi coalition, their interests in some regions of Yemen since 2016 have started to diverge, particularly in the south. While Riyadh was supporting al-Islah, seen as Yemen’s branch of the Muslim Brotherhood, Abu Dhabi backed Southern rebel groups including al-Hiraak secessionist movement, which is a part of Southern Transitional Council today, as a counter force against Islah affiliated groups (Ardemagni, 2016). The hostility to the Muslim Brotherhood has positioned the United Arab Emirates in a different place from Saudi Arabia. Despite the meeting that the UAE crown prince hosted the leaders of al-Islah party in November 2018, they are likely to continue fighting in opposed camps on the ground (Middle East Eye, 2018). On the other hand, Saudi Arabia is not very involved in the southern part of Yemen, mainly because Riyadh is more interested in the north due to more direct security concerns.

The long-term objectives of Abu Dhabi are seen as an obstacle for Yemeni unity since the UAE continues to support for the Southern secessionist rebel groups and forces loyal to former president Saleh. It appears as if the UAE is seeking a divided Yemen with a friendly southern state that would ensure their interests are preserved (Fenton-Harvey, 2018). The strategic geographical position of Yemen encompassing the Red Sea, Horn of Africa and Bab el-Mandeb strait makes the country more important for Abu Dhabi regarding its aim to control trade routes through the port of Aden and to exploit Yemen's natural resources in order to establish itself as a regional hegemon (Fenton-Harvey, 2018). For instance, in Yemen’s UNESCO-protected Socotra Island which known as ‘Jewel of Arabia’, the UAE has deployed its troops and sent tanks, armoured vehicles and heavy equipment (McKernan and Towers, 2018). Its location makes Socotra very significant, the area around the island is where major maritime routes crisscross. The UAE’s attempts to annex the island had led to disputes between the Hadi government, Abu Dhabi and Riyadh. Furthermore, it has provoked demonstrates by residents of Socotra who called the on UAE forces to leave the island (Middle East Monitor, 2018).

The United Arab Emirates’ (UAE) Ambitious Designs
From the very beginning of the conflict, the Yemen war has been seen as a part of the Iran-Saudi rivalry. International media, experts and politicians routinely express the view that Tehran has provided significant support to the Houthis (Bazzi, 2018). For Riyadh, the Houthis are Iran’s proxies, and they have killed many Yemeni people with the support of Iran (Al-Jubeir, 2016). It is not clear to what extent Iran has supported the group, either by offering combat assistance or via military training. However, some Iranian and Yemeni officials had acknowledged the support at that time, saying that a few hundred soldiers from IRGC-Quds Force were going to Yemen to train Houthi fighters (Bayoumy and Ghobari, 2014). According to a UN report, Iran’s support to “Ansar Allah” actually dates back to the early years of the militia’s insurgency. Tehran has been shipping weapons to Houthi rebels since at least 2009, the year the Houthis attacked Saudi Arabia (Landry, 2015). After the Houthis’ takeover of the capital in September 2014, Iranian airplanes started landing in Sanaa, purportedly conveying weaponry and instructors (Roberts and Hokayem, 2017).

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There is no doubt that Tehran saw the opportunity by supporting the Houthis to counter Riyadh, a significant US ally in the Gulf region. Not surprisingly, Iran has been using Yemen as a card against Saudi Arabia to humiliate the Kingdom in the eyes of the international community. While Tehran continues to back the Houthis to a certain degree, they have also shown their support for peace talks between the Yemeni government and the Houthis within the auspices of Martin Griffiths, the UN envoy to Yemen. In this context, the Iranian Foreign Ministry Spokesman Bahram Qassemi said: “Iran, within the framework of its responsible approach towards regional crises, played a constructive role in facilitating the Yemeni-Yemeni talks in Sweden” (Tehran Times, 2018). The UAE portrays itself as a source of stability in Yemen by supporting peace talks and initiating extensive humanitarian relief; however, its ultimate goal is to maintain their expansion in Yemen by the time they build a strong authority in the country, which is already established to a certain degree. Hence, the partnership of Saudi Arabia and the UAE in the coalition seems to be on paper, since the Emirates’ position is actually countering the objectives of its coalition partners in Yemen. For this reason, even if the war ends in Yemen, it seems very difficult for the country to stabilize as long as Abu Dhabi has the desire to divide the country in order to project its power beyond its borders. Besides, Abu Dhabi’s further initiatives in South Yemen will have an impact on regional balance of power that they will eventually pitch against Riyadh’s objectives.

Former prime minister of Yemen, Ahmed Obeid bin Daghr, has described the troop deployment by Abu Dhabi as ‘an assault on Yemeni sovereignty’ (Press TV, 2018). However, Abu Dhabi has told a different story and claimed that the Emirates Red Crescent is performing a key role in promoting development and rebuilding local infrastructure in Socotra (Gulf News, 2018).

On the one hand, while carrying out the wide-range operations behind the scenes, the Emirates highlights its humanitarian assistance to the people of Yemen to contribute to their public narrative. They highlight that they are the second largest humanitarian donor in the country after Saudi Arabia, pledging $500 million to help 13 million Yemeni people (Albawaba, 2019). However, humanitarian assistance will not be effective for the long term as long as conflicts continue between the warring parties. In fact, the UAE covers its hidden agenda in the eyes of the international community by using the humanitarian aid card. Moreover, Saudi Arabia and the UAE have been accused of human rights abuses in Yemen. According to an investigation published by Associated Press news agency, UAE officers are blamed to torture Yemeni detainees in 18 secret prisons (Al Jazeera, 2018).

On the other hand, Tehran’s military, logistic and training support to the members of Ansar Allah was revealed by investigations of different platforms. Houthis enhanced their ballistic missile campaign against the Saudi coalition by using missiles and UAVs which produced by Iran’s Aircraft Manufacturing Industrial Company (HESA) (Conflict Armament Research, 2017). According to CAR, contrary to what Houthi rebels claimed that UAVs are their design and construction, they used Iran manufactured missiles and drones like Qasef-1 type UAV (Conflict Armament Research, 2017). Whether the war in Yemen ends or continue depends on the decision of belligerents. In any case, Iran is likely to continue supporting the Houthis behind the scenes, and portray themselves as a potential peace broker between the warring parties at the same time.
Southern Transitional Council

The defeat of the southern secessionist groups in the 1994 civil war brought with it many problems, which remain relevant until today. The mass dismissal of southern military officials and civil servants, confiscation of property, and transfer of wealth from the oil-rich southern province of Hadramawt to the north created huge disparity, and anger against the Saleh regime has grown (Day, 2012). In 2007, the al-Hirak movement, or the Southern movement, emerged as a powerful actor against the regime as a result of this anger and inequality.

At the beginning of May, 2017, mass protests took place in Aden calling for an independent South Yemen by southern officials who had been sacked by Hadi (The New Arab, 2017). On May 11, 2017, Aden's former governor, Aidrous al-Zubaidi announced the creation of a 26-member Southern Transition Council (STC) (Forster, 2017).

After formation, the STC aimed to continue its alliance with the Saudi-led coalition, however, the alliance did not respond favourably due to concerns that the STC would weaken the Hadi government (Forster, 2017). On the other hand, Abu Dhabi’s position was different from its coalition partners because of their interests in the southern part of the country. Al-Zubaidi has become the UAE’s ‘man in the south’, and the southern forces began to receive military, financial and training supports from the Emirates (Edroos, 2017). Last year in January, Southern Resistance Forces (SRF), the military wing of the STC, declared a state of emergency in Aden in order to overthrow the Hadi government (Al Jazeera, 2018).

Since the STC was excluded from the UN-backed peace talks in Sweden, Zubaidi stated that if the UN does not intend to include the STC to peace negotiations, the southern people will defend their own land (Trew, 2018).

The Presence of the Al-Qaeda in the Arabian Peninsula (AQAP)

The presence of Al-Qaeda in Yemen, dates back to the beginning of the 2000s; however, in January 2009, Yemeni branches of the group merged with Saudi branches of Al-Qaeda to form AQAP (Kendall, 2018). On two occasions over the past decade, AQAP has taken advantage of a security vacuum as the result of the war and instability. During the unrest in Yemen, in 2011 and 2012, the group declared small Islamic emirates in parts of Abyan and Shabwa, the south-eastern part of the country (Kendall, 2018). They benefited from the chaos after the Saudi-led coalition intervention in March 2015, increasing their foothold by carving out a de facto state in Hadramawt province in 2015-16 (Zimmerman, 2017). Their rising power caught the attention of Saudi Arabia and the UAE, and in April 2016, Emirati Special Forces pushed the group to withdraw from the region. The importance of AQAP was obvious in that time, for instance, when the Saudi foreign minister Adel Al-Jubeir stated that the priority in Yemen is no longer to wage a war against the Houthis but to fight Al-Qaeda (Al Arabiya, 2016). In the last year, the activities of AQAP have declined dramatically as indicated in their frequency of operations and release of formal statements (Kendall, 2018).

For many Yemenis, though, Al-Qaeda is of secondary concern and less dangerous to state stability (Roberts and Hokayem, 2017). However, since fighting against AQAP is a top priority of Washington, the US legitimizes their support to Saudi-led coalition through this justification despite the depleted capabilities of the group.

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The War Economy and the Spoilers of the Peace Process

According to Stephan J. Stedman, in internal conflicts, the principal risk for the peace making process come from the ‘spoilers’, who can be leaders, groups or parties (Stedman, 1997). These spoilers believe that peace threatens their interests and power and use violence to undermine peace negotiations in order to preserve their position (Stedman, 1997). Especially in civil wars, war profiteers are also potential candidates to spoil a possible peace process.

Corruption is not a new development in Yemen. The economic structure before the war was largely based on a patronage system built by the Saleh regime on the back of rents derived from oil exports and managed by a small elite group from the military, tribal families, politicians, and the private sector (Hill et al., 2013). In 2018, global anti-corruption watchdog, Transparency International, ranked Yemen 176 out of 180 countries, with an index score of only 16 on a scale of 0-100 where zero is highly corrupt (Corruption Perception Index, 2018). In the last four years, the economic situation has not changed much because of the war profiteers from different groups who continue to exploit chaos in Yemen to gain financial benefit. Fragmented elite structures have become more influential than formal state institutions, and the bribery and favouritism became a characteristic of the administrative system (Sana’a Center, 2018).

In addition to the elite groups, tribes and security forces in the conflict, new actors began to control the state resources. The Houthis, for instance, have taken control of the import, distribution, sale of fuel, and taxation, in addition to the telecommunications sector, and vehicle imports in the northern part of the country (Sana’a Centre, 2018). On the other hand, the southern part, stretches from the Taiz governorate to al-Mahra governorate, turned into a kind of de facto region of the UAE that they control directly or through secessionist southern rebels who continue to receive support from Abu Dhabi (Al-Awlaqi and Al-Madhaji, 2018).

Since secessionist southern rebel groups have little incentive to end the war, they are also not eager to contribute to the UN peace process of the UN envoy to Yemen, Martin Griffiths in Stockholm, Sweden. As their ultimate goal is to establish an independent southern state, it’s not an easy task to bring them to the table with Hadi government. Therefore, whether they undermine the process or not heavily depends on the incentives making them ready to negotiate in order to bring stability to the country. In this regard, economic sanctions might be one of the options the UN can consider for them, however, this is not likely to be effective since the groups continue to receive significant support from the UAE.

There are various mechanisms of corruption and source of patronage in Yemen such as inflating military payrolls, monopolizing fuel imports, and misusing state funds (Sana’a Center, 2018). The patronage networks around these mechanisms become more complicated every day as the war continues (Sana’a Center, 2018). Two regional actors – Saudi Arabia and the UAE – have also changed the economic and political structure of Yemen in favour of their advantage (Fenton-Harvey, 2018). In this regard, the incentives in the peace process should include not only non-state actors but also states the ones who gaining benefits of the war economy.

Due to the economic gain from the turmoil in Yemen, enemies seem to cooperate behind the scenes for their respective benefits. According to an investigation by Sana’a Centre in 2017, the Saudi-led coalition has sent the weapons to the Houthi forces (Sana’a Centre, 2018). In addition to this, a recent report by CNN, Saudi Arabia and its coalition partners have transferred US-made weapons to Al-Qaeda affiliated fighters, Salafi militias and the Houthis (Elbagir et al., 2019). An image obtained by CNN shows the serial numbers of a second American MRAP vehicle in the hands of senior Houthi official last year in Hodeidah (CNN, 2018). This development demonstrates that the actors who aimed to bring stability at the beginning of the conflict are now benefiting from the ongoing chaos. The continuation of war as far as possible make them more able to take the advantage militarily, economically and strategically against their adversaries. The Trump Administration, who they already legitimise their presence in Yemen for counter terrorism measures, back Saudi-led coalition in order to confront Iran as well. In this regard, the failure of the UN peace process does not only stem from lacking of incentives and good framework, but also derives from a lack of pressure and motivation of belligerents.
Humanitarian Crisis and Reconstruction

Even before the war in Yemen, the country was the poorest on the Arabian Peninsula. The conflict made the situation more complex, and it has created the worst humanitarian catastrophe in the world (according to the UN) and threatened to turn into the largest famine in decades. According to the UN Global Humanitarian Overview 2019, 24 million people are in need of assistance, more than half of them, mostly women and children, are in acute need (GHO, 2019). The crisis in Yemen is the world’s largest manmade food security crisis and is driven by congruence of factors constraining the supply and distribution of food as well as people’s diminishing purchasing power (UN, 2018). Today, 18 million people are food insecure, and almost half of them at risk of starvation (GHO, 2019).

The country has witnessed the largest cholera outbreak in modern history with 1 million people having fallen ill. In the past three years, almost 4 million people have been displaced including the 600,000 who have fled the intensive fighting and strikes in Hodeidah province since June (GHO, 2019).

Even if the war is over in Yemen, reconstruction process will be very problematic for a number of reasons, and this will further deepen the humanitarian crisis. Firstly, the legitimisation problem can be an obstacle because of the fact that the Hadi government cannot be an authority for the reconstruction in the areas where they do not govern (Diwan et al., 2018). Another difficulty in Yemen is that every actor on the ground seeks to prioritize their interests for the post-conflict environment, which makes the reconstruction process very complicated by crippling the equal distribution of the rebuilding process (Diwan et al., 2018). As the country heavily depends on the oil and food imports for its economy, the reconstruction in Yemen in the near future seems unlikely.

Turkish Humanitarian and Diplomatic Efforts for Yemen Crisis

From the very beginning of the crisis, Turkey has supported resolving the conflict through multilateral negotiations (MFA, 2019). In this regard, Turkey has been supporting Hadi government and promoting an inclusive political settlement based on the established framework, namely UN Security Council Resolution No. 2216 (MFA, 2019). Turkey’s foreign ministry welcomed the UN-backed Stockholm agreement between the Yemeni government and the Houthis, and stated that “Turkey will continue to support efforts towards lasting peace and stability in Yemen in solidarity with the Yemeni people” (Daily Sabah, 2018).

Turkey’s official institutions, NGOs and civil society organizations are showing all their efforts to help the people of Yemen. Turkish President Recep Tayyip Erdoğan’s recent call for Yemen boosted donations and raised over $3.8 million in one week (Daily Sabah, 2018). Turkey’s state-run aid agency, TIKA, Turkish Cooperation and Coordination Agency, has carried out 93 projects and humanitarian activities between 2012 and 2018 in the war-torn country. Yemen (Anadolu Agency, 2018). TIKA’s office in the capital Sana’a, has realized many projects in the areas of health, education, agriculture, and infrastructure (TIKA, 2018).

The Disaster and Emergency Management Authority (AFAD) initiated a humanitarian aid campaign, called “Be Hope for Yemen” (AFAD, 2018). The institution has delivered the donations collected as a part of this campaign to deaf and mute children in the Aden province (AFAD, 2019). Turkish Red Crescent is another organization operating very effectively for humanitarian relief in Yemen. The organization hosted many officials from major international aid groups in the event of “Towards a More Collaborative Future” on January 3, 2019, to reach a shared understanding in order to help the over 140 million people in need across the world (TRT World, 2019).

1 For further information about Turkey’s official statements regarding bilateral political relations between Turkey and Yemen, please check: http://www.mfa.gov.tr/relations-between-turkey-and-yemen.en.mfa
Yemenis, who have escaped from clashes in Taiz are seen next to the sacks of humanitarian aid, distributed by a Turkish association, at a camp in Taiz, Yemen on December 16, 2018. (Said İbicioğlu - Anadolu Agency)
Why the UN-brokered Stockholm Agreement collapsed?

The peace talks, held in Stockholm in December 2018, have been seen ‘a hope for Yemen’ to end the disastrous war (UN News, 2018). Under the auspices of Martin Griffiths, the international community brought together the warring parties with the hopes of reaching some sort of last agreement. The delegates from Yemeni government and Houthi rebels agreed – in principle – on the Stockholm agreement, which called for a ceasefire in Hodeidah in order to facilitate the humanitarian access, an executive mechanism on activating the prisoner exchange, and the demilitarisation of Taiz (OSESGY, 2018).

However, both sides did not comply with the terms of the agreement and have accused each other of breaking the truce. According to the Houthi-controlled Saba news agency, “the mercenaries of US-backed Saudi-led coalition waged on artillery attack on residential areas of Hodeidah province” (Saba News, 2019). On the other hand, the Hadi government with Saudi Arabia and the UAE are complaining about the Houthis’ violation, stating that they would not attend the next round of the talks unless the Houthis comply with the Stockholm agreement (Oil Price, 2019).

The agreement designated that security of the city of Hodeidah and the ports of Hodeidah will ‘be the responsibility of local security forces in accordance with Yemeni law’ (Hodeidah Agreement, OSESGY, 2018). This part posed a problem since both warring parties consider themselves legitimate authorities, and they interpret ‘Yemeni law’ and ‘local security forces’ in different way (Sana’a Center for Strategic Studies, 2019). At the end of March, no clause of the agreement was implemented and nothing was successful despite all efforts made by Martin Griffiths and officials.

Since the crisis in the country is not solely a struggle the Houthis and the Yemeni government, the fact that the peace process is being carried out with only two of them is misguided. Yemen has been suffering through what amounts to three distinct but interrelated wars. In addition to the civil war between the Houthis and the Hadi government, there is second conflict between the STC and the central government centred on Aden, Shabwa and Hadramawt, and the third is a nationwide campaign against terrorist groups like AQAP (Ahram, 2019). Hence, the peace process would have to deal with all problems and conflicts on the ground rather covering the war in Yemen is a Houthi-Government civil war. However, significant actors have been excluded from the process such as the STC, the group took a leading role in the battle thanks to the support of the UAE. Their exclusion also showed how the Stockholm agreement is misleading as they ignore the southern question and the relation between the UAE and the STC. Al-Zubaidi’s statement ‘the southern people will defend their own land’ also revealed that new conflict zones may be opened which makes the crisis more complicated. Therefore, as the new fronts continue to open among different groups, there will be no major change in sight for the Yemen crisis. In this regard, Saudi Arabia, the UAE and Iran should restrain their forces and support in order to succeed ceasefire in the way of peace and stability rather than being spoilers of reconciliation in pursuit of their own interests in the region.

Humanitarian aid was one of the priorities of the agreement, however, aid groups have warned that the ceasefire in Hodeidah was on the verge of collapse. The US-based International Rescue Committee has said that clashes between The Houthis and government forces backed by Saudi-led coalition have dramatically increased (Al Jazeera, 2019). To put more pressure on the warring parties, UN-backed talks have taken place 5 February 2019 in Jordan to discuss and finalise the list of prisoners and detainees to be released and exchanged (Arab News, 2019). The deal for prisoner exchange was critical especially to persuade the Houthis to de-escalate the conflict, nevertheless this initiative failed as well.

As of recently, there have been reports saying that the Houthis have started to withdraw from Hodeidah. This could be a turning point at a time when international actors are tired of long delays in the peace process in Yemen. (Al Jazeera, 2019). The reason behind the Houthis’ withdrawal may be the idea that they’ve already gained upper hand in Sana’a, Hodeidah and different cities with the support of Iran. However, according to some, this recent development is just a “deception”. For instance, the Yemeni government information minister, Moammar al-Eryani said that Houthis were only acting under pressure and the fear of the upcoming UN security council meeting (Guardian, 2019).
Conclusion

It has been four years since the Saudi-led coalition intervened Yemen in order to restore Hadi government and—ostensibly— to bring stability to the country. However, the intervention made the situation more complicated. The war in Yemen has become the world’s largest humanitarian crisis, with a significant portion of the population on the brink of starvation. Millions of people continue to wait with bated breath for the war to end.

The Stockholm agreement failed to address major problems and take a forward step towards peace because of flawed points in the framework. One of them was the mistake of identifying the war in Yemen as a conflict merely between the Houthi and the Hadi government. There are different groups fighting against Hadi government such as the forces in the south backed by the UAE which is supposed to be in the coalition together with Hadi. Additionally, as long as regional and local actors pursue their objectives and keep the conflict going in different parts of the country, the road to peace will be much harder and deeper. Conflicting agendas of Saudi Arabia and the UAE dragged the war into something different than aimed at the beginning. Today, southern part of Yemen, particularly in Aden and Mokha southern part is a kind of de facto region of the Emirates, and their influence is increasing with each passing day.

Since the factors drive the conflict are multi-faceted, the road to long-lasting peace should be clarified by considering the nature of the crisis. The attention should be paid on the local actors as well in order to find solutions towards the root causes of the conflict. Another critical issue is how the post-war environment and reconstruction process will shape up. Ineffectiveness of the initiatives taken by the Stockholm agreement for a transition process has proved that the international community should increase pressure on the belligerents in order to obtain desired results. Failure to do so could result in the greatest humanitarian crisis in modern history.


Full Text of The Hodeidah Agreement. OSESGY (December, 2018). Available at: https://losesgy.unmissions.org/sites/default/files/hodeidah_agreement_0.pdf


Sana’a Center for Strategic Studies (March 2019). The UN's Stockholm Syndrome. The Yemen Review.


