

## A Complex Character of the Civil War in Yemen, A Perspective from Pakistan

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### ABSTRACT

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The civil war in Yemen is a complex case to understand. Till the start of the 21<sup>st</sup> century, Yemen was not a hotbed for sectarian strife however, in the milieu of the ‘Arab Spring’, the ‘sectarian divide’ emerged as one of the many dimensions of the conflict. While Iran and Saudi Arabia continue to accuse each other of their great designs in the Middle East, yet, the interplay of other complex factors also impacted the Yemen crisis. The study concludes that besides the ‘sectarian divide’, the other approaches to the conflict are grounded on political/social and strategic aspects, duly influenced by the outside actors. The study also concludes that Yemen being its soft underbelly, Saudi Arabia would not compromise on its stated goals of having direct sway over it, even if it has to pay a heavy cost. The study suggests that to preserve durable peace in the region, Iran and Saudi Arabia will have to give up their ambitions to dominate the region, address perception problems and help various factions to sit across the table under the UN umbrella and resolve their differences. From the theoretical angle, this paper adopts a neorealist line, focusing on the security concerns of the state actors.

**Keywords**

Arabia Felix, Historical Legacy, Ultra-orthodox, Perception Problems, Canvas.

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### Introduction

Yemen’s politics is anchored on shifting alliances at domestic and regional levels. The country once titled ‘Arabia Felix’, can now be referred to as ‘Arabia Infelix’, as it stands destroyed due to civil wars between various factions (Tharoor, 2010). It is concluded that the history of present Yemen resembles that of Afghanistan where opposites had often been forced to coexist through flimsy agreements, crafted by strong men. Currently, Yemen is known for the presence of terrorist groups like al-Qaida in the Arabian Peninsula (AQAP) and the Islamic State (ISIS) (Alamenciak, 2012). Yet, regardless of its current political structure, due to its location, it enjoys strategic significance in the region.

North and south Yemen remained under the influence of the Ottoman and British

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empires till 1918 and 1967 respectively (*Aljazeera World*, 2017). Since the early 1960s, Yemen is in a state of war. The social structure in north Yemen was destroyed due to the civil war between royalist and republican forces backed by Saudis and Egypt respectively (1962-1968). The security situation in north Yemen during the next 10 years also remained fragile. In 1978, as a compromised solution, Lt Col Ali Abdullah Saleh assumed the charge as president (Whitaker, 2015; Tharoor, 2010).

In 1967, south Yemen got independence from the British (*Aljazeera World*, 2017; Alamenciak, 2012). In late 1989, in historical development, north and south Yemen decided to unite and the Republic of Yemen was formally declared on 22 May 1990 (Whitaker, 2015; *Aljazeera World*, 2017) Saleh became the president of united Yemen, while Ali Salem Al-Beidh, the leader of the south Yemeni Socialist Party, was elected as vice president. President Saleh failed to keep the north-south united. Starting from 2003, the low-intensity war between Houthi rebels and the government forces continued which turned into conflict after 2011, forcing Saleh to step down. In 2012, through a National Dialogue Conference (NDC), vice president Abed Rabbo Mansour al-Hadi was elevated to the post of president for an interim period of two years. Yet, by taking benefit of the power vacuum, Houthis launched an attack against the government forces and forced Hadi to flee from Sana'a. Since 2015, Saudi Arabia stands with the deposed president Hadi (Whitaker, 2015; Tharoor, 2010).

Saudi Arabia and its Gulf allies have long feared Iran's imperialist designs. The 1979 Iranian revolution, added a new dimension to the threat based on the 'sectarian line'. Though since early 2000, both sides remain involved in the proxy war, Yemen emerged as a new epicenter of their activities (Mabon, 2018). Presently, Yemen is confronted with what the UN has called the world's worst humanitarian crisis since World War II (Letter dated January 27, 2017). To begin with, the 'sectarian divide' was not the main cause of the civil war in Yemen but it has now taken on a power of its own (*Carnegie, Middle East Center*, 2015).

From a theoretical angle, Iran and Saudi Arabia are doing 'real politics' in Yemen. Saudi loss in the Middle East is considered as Iranian gains and vice versa. Since 1979, there is no empirical sign that the two sides have ever shown cooperative behavior in the region. To dominate the region, both sides are involved in the balance of power and the balance of threat game by applying the neo-realist approach. Yemen being its soft underbelly, Saudi Kingdom is unlikely to give up its stated goals, even if it has to fight a costly war, following the neorealist structural determinism.

In this endless war, the ultimate losers are the people of Yemen. Thus, we must sincerely encourage the UN initiatives of creating enabling environments for the "resumption of a peaceful, inclusive, orderly and Yemeni-led political transition process that meets the legitimate demands and aspirations of the Yemeni people." Though Special Envoy Hans Grundberg in his inaugural briefing has hinted that there are no quick wins, (Salloukh, 2018) it does not mean that we should give up the hopes to guarantee peace for the people of this war-torn region.

In this backdrop, this research paper aims at analyzing the complex nature of the Yemen

crisis driven by the 'sectarian divide' and suggests a possible way forward in the following sequence: One, Iran-Saudi strategic competition in Yemen, a debate from the theoretical prism, two, the strategic significance of Yemen; three, circumstances leading to the current crisis in Yemen, four, Yemen's current security and political status, five, the sectarian divide, a driving force behind the Yemen conflict, a net assessment, and finally concluding thoughts and the suggested way forward. The opinion expressed in this paper is that of the authors and is not backed by any institution.

## Literature Review

An overview of the literature on the subject proved that due to the volatile security situation, it is difficult for independent reporters to reach out to the contested areas, hence, authentic reporting on the Yemen conflict is lacking. The key issues motivating the study amply highlight that the subject titled, "A complex character of the civil war in Yemen, a perspective from Pakistan", still needs an in-depth study to establish the fact or change the perception that whether or not the 'sectarian divide' was a driving force behind the Yemen conflict. For writing this research article, the qualitative research method has been used. Due to the compelling reasons, the authors have primarily relied on secondary sources for the collection of data.

A great deal of work has been done in Yemen's civil war. In this section, the researcher will examine some of the most important works. "Yemen Endures: Civil War, Saudi Adventurism, and the Future of Arabia" is a significant book that delves into the history of Yemen's civil war. This work discusses Yemen's imamate ruling system, its unification, tribal conflicts, the Saudi-Iranian rivalry, and the country's humanitarian situation. (Hill, 2017). "Civil war in Yemen: A Complex Conflict with Multiple Futures" is a good work that discusses the impact of civil war on ordinary people's lives and how the Saudi-Iran rivalry exacerbates the situation, as well as different sociopolitical scenarios in Yemen. This book will help you understand Yemen's overall situation (Mitreski, 2015). The book "Yemen in Crisis: the Road to War" examines Yemen's current situation and how the Houthi uprising has made the country politically unstable. The work also provides information on Yemeni unification in 1990, the political transition in 2011, and relevant situations that contributed to the country's conflicting situation (Lackner, 2019).

For the study of the Yemen crisis from a theoretical perspective, the authors have concluded that the two regional rivals i.e., Iran and Saudi Arabia follow a neo-realist approach in pursuit of their national goals. To understand the subject better, the authors have gone through the research work done by various renowned scholars mentioned in the section of theoretical framework.

This section concludes that the growing power of China and the renewed firmness of Russia seem to be a beginning of a new phase of reduction of the Western impact on the rest of the world including the Middle East. In the emerging scenarios at the global level, Russia might look for a strategic alliance with Iran, while China seems to prepare to strike the right balance between its relations with Iran and Saudi Arabia. Because of the US lean-back position and Russia's /China's proactive role in the Middle East, Iran would seem encouraged to pursue

its nuclear weapons program vigorously. Its nuclear weapons program will have security implications for the regional countries especially that of the Saudi regime which seems losing its grip, creating milieus for Iran and Israel to emerge as new ‘competitors’ in the region.

Ishaan Tharoor, Ishaan Tharoor in his article “A Brief History of Yemen: Rich Past, Impoverished Present” and Ahmed A. S. Hashim in his work “Yemen Arabia Infelix” have explained that Yemen was a country once titled ‘Arabia Felix’, which can now be referred to as ‘Arabia Infelix’. (Tharoor, 2010: Hashim, 2017). North and south Yemen remained under the influence of the Ottoman and British empires till 1918 and 1967 respectively. In late 1989, in historical development, north and south Yemen decided to unite and Lt Col Ali Abdullah Saleh became the president who failed to keep the north-south united. Starting from 1994, there was unrest in the country due to unfriendly relations between north and south Yemen. Starting from 2003, the low-intensity war between Houthi rebels and the government forces continued which turned into conflict after 2011, forcing Saleh to step down who was later killed by Houthis. “Yemen: the 60-Year War” is an important article that covers the entire history of Yemen's civil war, its causes, its consequences, and the role of neighboring countries. The article discusses the roles of the Yemeni army, the Houthis, and foreign powers (Fierstein, 2019). The work “Yemen and the Politics of Permanent Crisis” provided an overview of the Yemeni civil war's history. It discusses Yemeni politics, the role of Yemeni political parties, the Houthi uprising, the corrupt role of Yemen's government, and the Saudi-Iranian rivalry, which has complicated the war (Phillips, 2017).

In continuation, concerning the backgrounds leading to the current crisis in Yemen, and the present security situation/ political status of the country, the authors have analyzed the archives of various organizations including the UN, and the research work done by well-known scholars. through literature review, it has been established that ever since president Abed Rabbo Mansour al-Hadi was forced by the Houthi rebels to flee from Sana’a in 2015, and the Saudi regime decided to stand with the deposed president Hadi, it was a beginning of a full-fledged war between Saudi Arabia/ its allies and Houthis. Presently, Houthis have an upper edge on the government forces which are fragmented/divided. Houthis continue to mount pressure for the capture of the desert city of Marib, the government's last stronghold in Yemen’s north. They have already refused to continue with the suggested UN-backed truce with the government forces.

The literature review has made us crazier to read more and be able to find out the rational answers to the questions which have come up as a result of this study. The authors were able to find many gaps to raise and analyze the questions. However, as explained earlier, in the absence of well-established norms of the Geneva Convention, the rival groups of the two sides in Yemen are ill-prepared to freely allow independent war reporters to come up with true reports. Both sides are conducting human rights violations and most of the time, even the humanitarian aid workers are not allowed to reach out to the needy innocent people.

### **Theoretical Framework**

Despite the significant impact of other theories on international relations (IR) still, due to the anarchical nature of the global system, structural realists continue to dominate the states’

behavior (Glaser, 2007:122). The shifts from multi-to bi-to uni-polarity and back to undefined polarity since the start of the 21<sup>st</sup> century illustrate, how strongly differences in polarity affect the behavior of states and alter the international order. Hobbes's definition of the state of nature as a state of war was mirrored in the Middle East region in the setting of the 'Arab Spring' that was deemed to be anarchic and as such, like a state of nature (Aldoughli, 2018).

The conclusions drawn from this study amply prove that the two regional rivals i.e., Iran and Saudi Arabia follow a neo-realist approach in pursuit of their national goals. At the higher level, they are involved in balancing the game by improving their military capabilities and making alliances with outside powers, and at the lower level, they provide backup support to their local allies in the balance of threat role. According to Robert J. Art, balancing refers to "behavior designed to create a better range of outcomes for a state vis-à-vis another state or coalition of states by adding to the power assets at its disposal, in an attempt to offset or diminish the advantages enjoyed by that other state or coalition." (*SSRN Electronic Journal*, 2013).

Simply, in the balance of threat, "states form alliances to prevent stronger powers from dominating them and to protect themselves from states or coalitions whose superior resources pose a threat to their national sovereignty." The nature of the threat is influenced by the "geographic proximity, offensive power, and aggressive intents" of the stronger state. States ally to balance against threats rather than against a nation's power alone (Watson, 2001). Yet, since the 'perception problem' is an intangible factor thus, it is difficult to address the threat accurately.

It is viewed that the IR theorists did not take into account factors like ideology/religion in the matter related to alliance politics. From the authors' viewpoint, in the changing nature of regional politics, ideational factor like religion has a definite bearing on alliance politics. The sectarian divide in the Afghan civil war during the 1990s was obvious in which Iran and Pakistan supported the opposite factions. It is more relevant in today's Middle East geopolitics in which making alliances has become easier between co-religionists.

An in-depth 'discourse analysis' of the leadership of the two rival states indicates that since early 2000, they are striving hard to take a leadership role in the Middle East by following the 'structural realism' theory, coined by Kenneth Waltz and Mearsheimer. Iran-Saudi behavior can also be studied in terms of the 'relative and absolute gains' game theory, engineered by neo-realists (Brad Spangler, 2013; Cai, 2011; Powell, 1991; McDonough, 2020). Both are involved in fighting a 'war of position' in some form. The 'war of position' is a form of war where great powers struggle over the control of small third parties (Waltz, 1979).

Riyadh views Tehran in offensive realist terms whereas Iran considers itself engaged in a defensive realist mode with Riyadh, Tel Aviv, and Washington (Salloukh, 2018). Iran's claim besides, it already dominates Iraq by applying 'offensive realism' whereas, in the case of Yemen, it maintains 'defensive realism' (Valeriano, 2009). In the regional framework, the Iran-Saudi strategic rivalry is driven by the balance of power theory while the balance of threat theory is relevant to the alliance between Iran-Houthis, Iran-Iraq, and Iran-Syria. On the contrary, to balance Iran's threat, Saudi Arabia provides financial/ military support to Hadi-led

coalition forces in Yemen, anti-Iranian groups in Iraq, an anti-Iranian lobby in Lebanon, and full military backup support to the Al Khalifa regime in Bahrain.

In the regional balance of power game, losses for Saudi Arabia represent gains for Iran and vice-versa. Iran has already established its greater influence in the region, extending from the Levant to Western Afghanistan. Concerning Yemen, Iran managed to bog down Saudi Arabia by providing moral and military help to the Houthi rebels. As highlighted earlier, Saudi Arabia has high stakes in Yemen. The authors do not subscribe to the idea of Ms. Darwich, published in *Insight Turkey* as well in *Global Policy* that Saudi direct intrusion in Yemen was “driven by a non-material need, aimed at asserting the Kingdom’s status as a regional power” (Darwich, 2018).

As highlighted earlier, with Yemen being its soft underbelly, Riyadh did not have the option to let it go under Iran’s influence which means encirclement of Saudi Arabia. Thus, its reaction was not aimed at ‘status-seeking but it was natural to protect its ‘redlines’. It is believed that the Saudi leadership merged two theoretical approaches (rational choice and neorealism’s structural determinism) while deciding to protect its ‘redlines’. On the contrary, it may be correct to assume that Iran is looking for status as a regional power by asserting its influence over Syria, Iraq, and Lebanon, and indirect control over Yemen. Yet, because of Covid-19 challenges, the two rivals are compelled to look ‘inward’, and it might take quite a long before they come back to re-initiate their strategic moves to bring the other sides down.

In the recent past, in pursuit of their political/ strategic goals, the two sides have purposely brought sectarian factors into their strategic calculus through well-thought-out narratives. The sectarian divide has emerged as a decisive factor to regulate the behavior of two blocs having dire consequences for the entire region. For Washington’s role, it is opined that due to its changed priority to engage China and to an extent Russia, it is less interested in the Middle East affairs which would let other regional and extra-regional powers including Turkey play a greater role in the regional matters.

In the near term, Iran presents the lowest threat to Saudi interests in the region because of multiple reasons. It has occasionally, expressed its desire to follow a policy of peaceful co-existence but essentially, it has not given any space to the Saudi Kingdom to extend its influence in the region beyond certain limits. The internal destabilizing factors besides, Iran has no threats from its immediate neighbors. The two powerful Sunni states namely Turkey and Pakistan have no intention to create any rift with Iran to please Saudi Arabia. Despite the US sanctions, the Turk president has already reaffirmed his support for Iran (Aljazeera, 2019).

Conversely, the Saudi regime is exposed to both internal and external threats. In a balancing game, Saudi Prince Crown, Mohammad bin Salman, has gone a step forward to reach out to Israel for its support against Iran by conceding Saudi’s stated position on Palestine. Despite divergent national interests, the Israel-Saudi-US nexus is at play against Iran. A Pakistani scholar warned that a weak Iran would only help Zionists to further limit Saudi’s leverage over the Middle East (Imran, 2019). Hence, it would be a lose-lose game both for the Saudi Kingdom and Iran. Benjamin Netanyahu has already been sworn in as prime minister of

a coalition government of Israel that includes “a mix of an ultra-Orthodox and right-wing bloc.” Netanyahu's government has overtly declared to pursue anti-Palestine policies without caring for the regional concerns (Imran, 2019).

The growing power of China and the renewed firmness of Russia seem to be a beginning of a new phase of reduction of the Western impact on the rest of the world including the Middle East (Baldor, 2020). In the changing world, Russia might look for a strategic alliance with Iran, while China is looking for a middle ground to strike the right balance between its relations with Iran and Saudi Arabia. Because of the US lean back position and Russia's /China's proactive role in the Middle East, Iran would seem encouraged to pursue its nuclear weapons program vigorously. Iranian's nuclear weapons program will have security implications for Saudi Arabia and other regional countries. Saudi regime seems losing its grip, creating milieus for Iran and Israel to emerge as new ‘competitors’ in the region. Yet, in realpolitik, the word impossible is missing so, one cannot rule out the probability of Iran once again becoming CIA Headquarters in Asia.

### **Research Methodology**

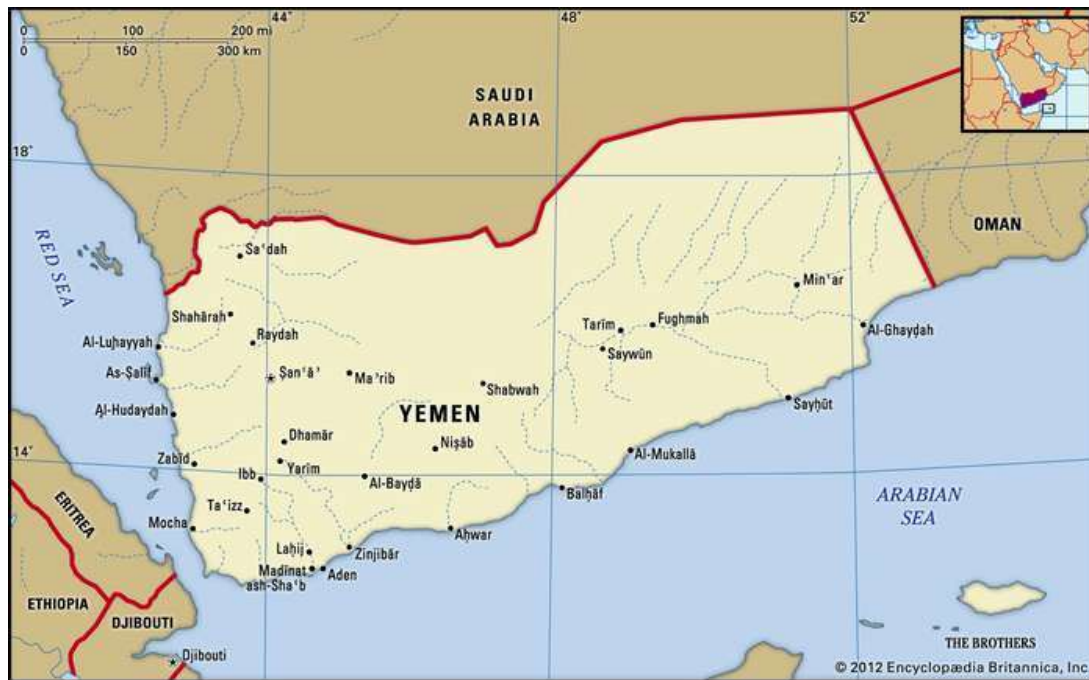
The study is limited to qualitative and investigative methods. A secondary source of data was used to investigate this content material, which was gathered from various sources such as journal articles, research reports, research papers, news magazines, news reports, e-library, and expert opinions. The study intends to examine the Yemen situation and the circumstances that led to the crisis in Yemen using qualitative research methodologies. The content has been critically examined using qualitative analysis techniques. This method entailed identifying patterns within the collected data, categorizing them into themes, and then connecting them to the study's theoretical framework. Furthermore, the study relies on analytical and descriptive approaches to provide a thorough analysis of the Yemen crisis. As a result, the study concludes that, besides the "sectarian divide," other approaches to the conflict are based on political/social and strategic considerations, which are influenced by outside actors. The study also concludes that, despite the fact that Yemen is its soft underbelly, Saudi Arabia will not compromise on its stated goals of having direct sway over it, even if it comes at a high cost. According to the study, in order to maintain long-term peace in the region, Iran and Saudi Arabia must abandon their ambitions to dominate the region, address perception issues, and assist various factions in sitting across the table under the UN umbrella to resolve their differences.

### **Discussion**

In this part the discussion will be on strategic significance of Yemen, different causes and circumstances leading to Yemen Crisis, the current political and security status of Yemen and finally an assessment about the sectarian divide which is a driving force behind Yemen crisis or not. After discussing all these dimensions, the study will be concluded with analysis and some recommendations.

### **The strategic significance of Yemen**

From a location point, Yemen is a very important country that controls the southwestern tip of the Arabian Peninsula and the Bab-al-Mandeb strait (Aljazeera World, 2017). As covered in the map below, it shares a border with Saudi Arabia to the north, Oman to the east, the Red Sea to the west, and the Gulf of Aden and the Arabian Sea to the south. Several islands in the Arabian and Red Seas form part of this country. Its population is around 28.5 million with 99.1 percent Muslims (65 percent Sunni-35 percent Shia), out of which three-quarters are located in north Yemen (Mundi, 2019; Demographics, 2019).



Yemen is divided into two distinct regions (northern and southern), whose tribal, religious, and geographic divisions complicate its politics today. Due to rough going, it has always been very tough for the invaders to seize/ maintain executive control over Yemen. Most of Yemen consists of mountainous terrain which lies in the east and descends into a rocky plain in the central-east part before it is merged into one of the most hostile deserts in the world (State University, 2020). Yemen being Saudi's soft underbelly constitutes a cornerstone of its foreign policy. An unstable Yemen is a grave threat to the Saudi economy/security. Yemen presents opportunities and is not a threat to Iran (Juneau, 2016).



Currently, Iran enjoys influence over north Yemen due to Houthis' presence in Sana'a. If Sana'a and its adjacent areas are enduringly seized by Houthis, they would dominate the narrow Bab-el-Mandeb strait through which over 4.8 million barrels of oil are shipped daily to Asia, Europe, and the US (Annual Energy Outlook, 2017). Saudi Arabia has four main oil terminals located on the Red Sea Coast thus, any tension along two straits (Bab-el-Mandeb & Strait of Hormuz) will have strategic costs for Saudi Arabia and its regional allies as their trade could be brought to a standstill (BP Global, 2019). The closure of these straits will have similar consequences for Europe and the US because any shipment from the Persian Gulf to Europe and the US around the continent of Africa through 'Cap of Good Hope', would involve additional several thousand naval miles, hence, the price tag would increase manifold.

### **Causes of Yemen Crisis**

As highlighted earlier, the unification process between north and south Yemen did not go well thus, the country continued to face periodic civil uprisings and restive tribes within and across the two halves. Haidar Abu Bakr al-Attas, former prime minister (1990-1994), opined that the unification process failed because Saleh failed to pay attention to seeking real unity (Aljazeera World, 2017).

In the early 1990s, Saleh committed political suicide by endorsing Saddam Hussein's decision to invade Kuwait without the consent of Saudi and its allies. Saudi regime reacted and expelled around one million Yemeni employees from Saudi Arabia which caused both "an abrupt end to the remittances/ an unwelcome addition to the ranks of jobless people in Yemen." America too sharply cut back its aid, bringing Yemen to its knee (Alamenciak, 2012; Whitaker, 2015). This development had an impact on the outcome of the 1993 election. In 1994, the tension between the two halves increased, resulting in a civil war started by southern secessionists against the north-based government (*History*, May 22, 1990).

The civil war between the two halves continued through the decade of the 1990s which facilitated the Houthis to grow stronger. It also created space for terrorist groups to creep into Yemen. Against this backdrop, Saleh was persuaded by Saudi Arabia/the US to take strict actions against terrorist groups like AQAP. Saleh was also compelled by the Saudi regime to also clip Yemeni Zayidi Shia (Houthis) in the north as part of a terrorist group thus, it was the beginning of the Yemen crisis on the 'sectarian lines' and Saleh's downfall (Gordon and Parkinson, 2018).

Since 2004, Houthis emerged as an ideological, Zaydi revivalist group and engaged in fighting with official forces. Following the 'Arab Spring', the security state in Yemen further worsened (Micallef, 2017). To begin with, protests in Sana'a by Houthis focused on social issues, pressing Saleh to resign. As described earlier, in 2012, Saleh stepped down in favor of his vice president Hadi (Aljazeera World, 2017). In 2013, Jamal Benomar, the UN Special Envoy tried to speed up the negotiation process but failed with the Houthis' takeover of Sana'a in January 2015. Hadi along with his close associates managed to escape and later moved to Saudi Arabia. Since then Hadi remains president of Yemen's officially recognized but exiled government. This was the start of a new phase of the crisis in Yemen (*Brookings*, 2018).

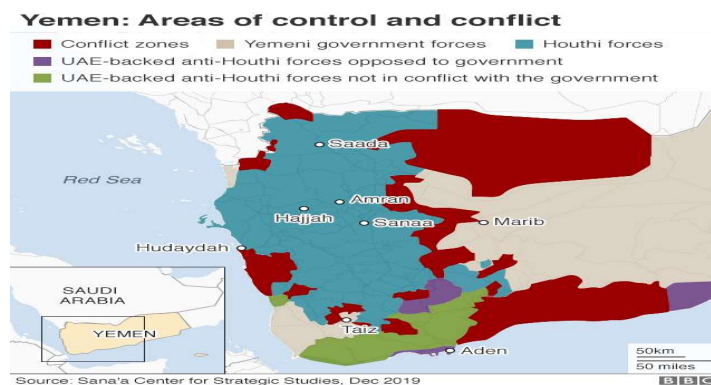
## The Current Political and Security State of Yemen

Till February 2015, the unrest in Yemen was considered a localized issue. Yet, in March 2015, the Saudi Kingdom, backed by its allies duly reinforced by the US with logistic and intelligence support, was directly involved in Yemen crisis by launching airstrikes against Houthi rebels with a code name, ‘operation decisive storm’ (Gordon and Parkinson, 2018). Since then, Yemen is in a state of war.

Saudis’ main purpose of initiating war in Yemen was aimed at reversing the Houthi military conquest of Yemen, restoring the Hadi government, securing the Saudi southern border, and preventing Iran from interfering in the Arabian Peninsula (Aljazeera World, 2017). However, none of the stated goals of Saudi Arabia has been materialized. Its mainland is constantly under threat of missile attack from Houthis. In the recent past, the Saudi regime was shocked when two of its oil facilities were stuck with drones and cruise missiles which Saudis say “was unquestionably sponsored by Iran” (Hubbard, Karasz et al, 2019).

Presently, the security state in Yemen is as bad as it was at the time of the outbreak of civil war in 2015 (Chatham House, 2015). In the case of south Yemen, there is no fully functional state structure. Lately, Southern Transitional Council (STC) declared self-rule in south Yemen on April 25, 2020, yet, there are, several groups in south Yemen who are still loyal to the Hadi government (Raghavan, 2020).

The other changes, causing major blows to Saudi policies include: One, the Emirates has unilaterally decided to pull out from the Yemen conflict, though under public pressure, its leadership has back-stepped from its decision, said Darwich (Darwich, N.D). Two, regarding the STC role, there is a clear divide between UAE and the Saudi regime. Three, the US has virtually withdrawn its support to the Saudi Kingdom (Hiltermann and Alley, 2017).



### The map depicting the latest political/security picture inside Yemen

The above map depicts that as of now, in Yemen, freedom of action lies with Houthis. They seem confident to maintain an offensive posture in face of the fragmented/weak Yemeni government. They have already declined to extend an UN-brokered truce between the two factions that ended on 2 October 2022. Right now, Houthis are pressing hard for the capture of the desert city of Marib, the government’s last stronghold in Yemen’s north. For

the time being, the loyalists have managed to push Houthis back (Mwatana, 2022). However, over the last 8 years, both factions have committed gross human rights violations. The year 2022 was another tragic year for civilians in Yemen in which besides other crimes, civilians were also denied access to humanitarian aid by the warring factions (Mwatana, 2022).

The physical presence of the Houthis along the Yemen-Saudi border shows that they have the advantage of freely operating across the border as it is largely occupied by the Shia community. Thus, Saudi Arabia has become to the Houthis what Israel has long been to Hezbollah. There is a possibility that the local war inside Yemen might spiral out into Saudi territory, a scenario that could threaten the internal stability of the Saudi Kingdom (Hiltermann and Alley, 2017).

### **Sectarian divide, a driving force behind the Yemen conflict: A net assessment**

Besides other factors as explained earlier, the ‘sectarian divide’ has also emerged as one of the key factors that continues to play negatively in maintaining peace in the Middle East. The term ‘sectarian divide’ is often “characterized as the violent and illiberal manifestation of competing, age-old antagonistic religious identities in the region.” (Agha and Malley, 2019). It is “discrimination between the people in their access to power”. It “stokes conflict with the ‘other’ based on antiquated conflicts and inherited beliefs”, it is an infra-political struggle” (Shams and Kaileh, 2014). The authors opine that from a religious angle, the ‘sectarian divide’ is an extreme attachment to a particular sect in which one side projects itself as superior and undermines the credibility of the other. It is a political weapon, duly encouraged by the top hierarchy, and readily available to help attain strategic goals.

There are two schools of thought on the subject, one believes that the current sectarianism is part of ancient hatred which means it is permanent and immutable. The scholars from the opposite side view that “sectarianism is a latent factor that can become politically activated by elites or circumstances.” The political alignments of the last century in the region, prove that sectarian divides are neither permanent nor always a salient feature of politics (Tharoor, 2010).

Some leading scholars concluded that sectarianism is not the primary source of the great divide in the Middle East, rather, the rivalry in the region is driven by geostrategic reasons. In the Syrian crisis, Iran’s decision to support the Assad regime was politically motivated (Agha and Malley, 2019) In the earlier civil war in north Yemen (1962-1967), Saudi-Egypt stood in opposite camps while in the conflict between north and south Yemen, Saudis-Iran and other regional monarchs stood on one side.

Despite the close friendship between Islamabad and Riyadh, Islamabad refused to send its troops to protect Saudi interests in Yemen due to multiple reasons. A Saudi-led initiative to form a NATO-like alliance by the Gulf Cooperation Council to deal with Iran also failed. “Even the two variants of Shiism, being followed by Iranian and Iraqi Shiites are not on one page”, said Hussein Agha and Robert (Agha and Malley, 2019). Yet, the switch from one side to

opposite camps, predicts much about current Middle East politics (Colgan, 2020). The arguments made in the ensuing paragraphs highlight the impact of the 'sectarian divide' on the Yemen conflict and the Middle East region as a whole.

In the larger context, there is a broad consensus among the scholars that since 1979, Iran and Saudi Arabia in specific and other regimes across the region, in general, have been engaged in a vindictive rivalry, shaped by geopolitical aspirations. The sectarian language was a readymade recipe to influence their respective factions. The Gulf War-2003 and later the 'Arab Spring', created new arenas of competition between them either directly or through proxies (Mabon, 2018).

Traditionally, Yemen has not been the center of the sectarian clash however, since the Arab uprisings, "sectarianism has become one-of many-dimensions in the Yemeni conflict", Morten Valbjorn opined ( Valbjorn, 2018) In this regard, Jeff D. Colgan viewed that if we look at the issue from a limited angle, primarily, it seems a political struggle for power but if we look at the dispute from a broader prism and see the role of foreign actors in the conflict, one would believe that present civil war in Yemen is based on the 'sectarian divide' (Colgan, 2020).

Houthis' revolted to protect their identity as Zaidi Shiites against Saudi missionary activities done by the Wahhabi version of Sunni Islam inside Yemen. As for as political motivation of the groups who are fighting in Yemen, there is no change, but now "the central cleavage has switched from regime type to sectarian identity" (Whitaker, 2015). This trend was practically activated after the 2003 Gulf War which unleashed insurgencies and deepened the sectarian divide across the region. While till the recent past, the Sunni-Shia divide was not an issue in Yemen, yet, the argument is no stronger because the 'sectarian divide' has already taken on a power of its own (Carnegie Middle East Center, 2015).

During the period from 2003 to 2011, for global consumption, president Saleh frequently used the narrative of the 'sectarian divide' by labeling the Houthis as an Iranian proxy. "The Houthis were not 'born Shia', instead they 'became Shia'", said Anna Gordon and Sarah E. Parkinson. The later events further complicated the problem (Kendall, 2018) thus, local strife went through a dynamic of 'sectarianisation', said Annalisa Perteghella. During this period, ISIS also capitalized on and contributed to such division (Perteghella, 2018). The subject under debate has also been analyzed by Thomas Juneau who viewed that since March 2015, a localized conflict in Yemen has been regionalized by clipping Houthis as an Iranian proxy.

While negating the Saudi claim, Juneau argued that the Houthis are neither a proxy nor a pawn of Tehran and its modest support is far from a game-changer. Yet, with the rise of the Houthis, Tehran did avail the opportunity to gain some leverage in Yemen (Juneau,2016). In line with other pro-Houthi scholars, Joost Hiltermann and April Longley strongly denied that the Houthis are not Hezbollah yet, the combined efforts of the US and its allies in the Gulf could still drive them into Tehran's camp though presently, there is very little evidence of the Iranian large scale military support made available to them (Hiltermann and Alley). The arguments made

by these scholars besides, generally, since March 2015, the scholars have started analyzing the Yemen war as a sectarian struggle and a byproduct of Saudi-Iranian rivalry (Darwich, N.D).

Above besides, despite its confines, Iran tends to intervene in any of the regional states with weak central authority in national contexts, not necessarily due to sectarian divide. Iran draws strength from its transnational religious linkages which gives it a significant role among Shia communities. Houthis and Iran's rapprochement is grounded on their common anti-status quo interests, rather than a sectarian divide (Mabon, 2018).

Till now, Tehran continues to deny Saudi claims of stirring up sectarian strife by Iran in Yemen and across the region. In this regard, Ms. Darwich argued that "Houthis has evolved as a genuinely rebellious movement that cuts across sectarian lines", yet, "the longer the war continues, the more likely the Houthis become increasingly vulnerable to Iranian influence" (Darwich, 2018). However, since Yemen has appeared as a weak state in the Arab world, thus, despite its tradition as a liberal society, sectarian and tribal identities have become its inbuilt character which plays an outsized role in politics (Gordon and Parkinson, 2018).

The authors do not fully endorse the above arguments. Iran may not have hegemonic designs in the region but its military support to Houthis is not fiction. Iran cannot be given a clean chit. Whether or not Iran publically acknowledges its role, empirically, all indicators point towards Iran for its intimate technical/military support to the Houthis directly or through its military wing Hezbollah, which has already displayed its skill in Syria on a sectarian line (Hubbard, Karasz et al, 2019).

Nevertheless, from the above debate, one may conclude that contrary to the widespread portrayal of a straight conflict between pro-Houthi and pro-Hadi forces, the motivations for fighting in Yemen are manifold and the conflict has been increasingly internationalized. Finally, the Saudi and Iranian mindset indicates that regardless of their strategic/political goals in the region, the 'sectarian divide' is an important foreign policy tool for their survival at home. In this regard, the authors would like to quote F. Gregory Gause who said, "as the rulers' control came to be challenged, they relied more and more on fellow sectarians for support...." (Darwich, 2018).

### **Concluded thoughts and the suggested way forward**

The year 2003, was the beginning of the crisis in Yemen. Nine years later, the war in Yemen became too complex, consisting of the distinctive but overarching parts involving Houthis vs Saudi led coalition, Houthis vs Yemeni Sunnis in the areas such as Taiz, STC vs Houthis as well as Hadi-led government forces, Saudi- Iranian proxy war and independent operations by terrorist organizations including AQAP and ISIS. In this endless war, Yemenis are the ultimate losers.

After a detailed study of this complex subject, the authors stand even more confused. It is hard to forecast correctly, the behavior of the rivals involved in the said conflict. To date, the academic debate remained inconclusive but it does not mean that the academic circle should stop working to create openings for peace in the region. Thus, even at the cost of

repetition, the following way forward is suggested for consideration:

- To ward off the challenges of 21<sup>st</sup>-century war, a ‘new social contract’ between Iran and Saudi Arabia should be evolved by adopting a comprehensive approach towards all unsettled issues. Such an ideal model for a lasting peace can only be evolved after correcting the ‘perception problem’. The ‘new social contract’ between the two countries must have the inbuilt character to also protect the core interests of other small countries of the region.
- The negotiation process under the UN umbrella must be approved and represented by all stakeholders including Iran and Saudi Arabia. Although outside powers like China, Russia, and the US will have no direct role, they need to extend backup support to the outcome of the negotiated accord, once reached. An imported decision would not yield the desired results.
- To facilitate the dialogue process, an independent peacekeeping force duly acknowledged by both factions may be deployed in Yemen.
- Yemeni people must be encouraged to promote democratic values and emerge as a ‘role model’ for the Middle East to follow. It will help to restore the original image of Yemen society. The accord should also encourage the regional monarchs to gradually shift from autocratic to long-lasting democratic systems.
- Presently, due to the worst kind of humanitarian crisis, Yemen needs outside support. As an immediate step, the UN Security Council must remove the UN sanctions and arrange a relief package for the people of Yemen.
- The Saudi-led allies, Iran and Iraq should evolve a joint mechanism to protect the movement of ships carrying oil through the Hormuz and Bab-al-Mandeb straits to the Persian Gulf. Their joint strategy would build confidence among the participating states.
- For the ‘grand accord’ to succeed, a step-by-step approach would be required. The foremost step is that the two rivals should bridge the trust deficit by making the following pledges: One, both sides should extend the UN-brokered truce for another year to create environments for the peace process to move on, two, both sides must give up the ambition to dominate the region at the cost of the other. Three, they must come up with a common narrative of ‘Muslim Ummah’ and clean the slate that has badly damaged the Muslim image by dividing them into sectarian lines. Once the two rivals are on one page, the road to peace in the region would be smoothened.
- If we wish to see a nuclear-free zone in the Middle East, world leaders will have to play a constructive role in engaging Iran on nuclear matters so that a race for nuclear weapons development in the region is avoided. If the ‘great powers’ fail to engage Iran and Saudi Arabia now, they may have to fight a long-drawn war against the proliferation of weapons of mass destruction in this region and elsewhere.

The Iraqi experience has shown us that “the seeds of ethnic and sectarian hatred, once planted, are difficult to eradicate”. The growing trends of “sectarian polarization in Yemen and invoking and promoting the borrowed sectarian slurs by the two sides” *would lead the Muslim world nowhere*. Yet, the respite will come when global and regional powers implement and enforce an end to hostilities, deliver uninterrupted large-scale humanitarian assistance, and reach a political settlement that puts the needs of the Yemeni people first and foremost.

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