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Articles

From Fragile to Collapsed Statehood: The Case of the Republic of Yemen (1990-2020)

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The unification of the two Yemeni states—the northern Yemen Arab Republic (YAR) and the southern People’s Democratic Republic of Yemen (PDRY), respectively—in 1990 has been a resounding failure. Merging the tribal-dominated northern and state-party dominated southern regimes meant increasing the number of factions competing for access to state resources to satisfy material and security needs of their respective networks of influence. In particular, efforts at growing the resource base of the unified state after 1990, by means of an expansion of oil and gas exploration and extraction, raised the revenue base of the state in an unsustainable manner. Such growth in national oil and gas rents increased rather than decreased competition over state authority to control the spoils.

The major subsequent events, such as the 1994 civil war, the 2004-2010 “Saada wars” against the Houthi movement, the Yemeni version of the “Arab Spring” in 2011, the failure of the National Dialogue Conference (March 2013-January 2014), and the start of the Saudi and Emirati bombing campaign and subsequent ground war in Yemen since March 2015 all triggered major clashes between different factions of the Yemeni state bureaucracy, army, and civil society. On each of these occasions, efforts to freeze out some Yemeni actors produced escalating conflict between the remaining factions instead of a winning coalition that could have reestablished a degree of stability. The article explains how local, regional, and global factors have jointly overwhelmed the Yemeni actors, and how foreign intervention has led to the further deterioration of the pre-existing national crisis.

INTRODUCTION

The state of Yemen, formed in 1990 after the unification of North and South Yemen, the northern Yemen Arab Republic (YAR) and the southern People’s Democratic Republic of Yemen (PDRY), respectively, does not feature prominently in the literature of development studies. For example, an influential monograph titled *Why Nations Fail: The Origins of Power, Prosperity and Poverty* does not make any reference to the country (Acemoglu & Robinson, 2012). Crucially, Yemen’s case of fragile statehood, which has dramatically deteriorated since the Kingdom of Saudi Arabia (KSA) and United Arab Emirates (UAE) military intervention and bombing campaign targeting the country since 2015, now represents the most severe humanitarian crisis in the world (International Rescue Committee, 2020, pp. 7-8).

This paper scrutinizes the comparatively underexplored case of Yemen. It takes the form of a qualitative case study based on a longitudinal approach that examines the Republic of Yemen between 1990 and 2020. The absence of reliable statistical data and of meaningful quantitative research methods suggests that qualitative research is in the Yemeni context the most suitable approach.

Yemen’s unification was initially presented as a political

project based on the principle of full equality between the north and the south. However, the population of the north is at least three times higher than the less densely populated but geographically more spacious south, and the political establishment of the north subsequently became prone to marginalize the south politically. This resulted in the large-scale collapse of southern representation in the unified state following a brief civil war between northern and southern forces in 1994.

Since then, the country has suffered from many rounds of internal military, economic, and social upheaval, producing long-standing conflicts between an increasingly fragmented and brittle state facing various domestic opponents. Most prominently, the so-called “Houthi” insurgency that initially started off in 1997 as a local conflict over land rights in the northern border region of Saada challenged the state. Since 2004, Yemen’s military conducted counterinsurgency against the Houthis. In 2011, the long-standing Yemeni President, Ali Abdullah Saleh (officeholder in the YAR between 1978 and 1990 and in the unified country between 1990 and 2011), was toppled in a series of events related to the “Arab spring.”¹

However, the removal of Saleh and the announcement of Abdrabbuh Mansur Hadi as new president of a “transi-

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tional government” produced further escalation of Yemeni conflicts. Hadi had previously served for twenty years as Saleh’s Vice-President. Many defectors from Saleh’s previous regime considered him as a suitable replacement exactly because he did not stand for any fundamental restructuring of Yemeni politics. Following pro-forma elections with him as the only candidate in February 2012, he received endorsements from the United States (US), the United Nations (UN) system, and Saudi Arabia. A subsequent “National Dialogue Conference” between 2013 and 2014 developed into a talking shop that produced 1800 recommendations but failed to offer any agreement on inclusive government. Two major Yemeni opposition groups, the Houthis and the Southern Movement, the latter a political alliance demanding autonomy or full separation of the south from the north, became increasingly excluded from the conference proceedings. This meant that Hadi came to rely on Saudi-backed Islamist groups and foreign aid rather than domestic support (Brehony, 2015)

Hadi’s decision to exclude significant Yemeni political actors from power-sharing subsequently triggered the Houthi’s military takeover of the Yemeni capital of Sanaa in September 2014. This move was facilitated by the switch of loyalty of many state actors, notably Yemeni army and air force units still close to former President Saleh, to the Houthi camp. Saleh also started to work with the Houthis since his earlier loss of control of state resources meant that he had to find new allies to regain influence, which was only possible by forging ties with groups that he had previously fought against.

Following the Houthi takeover of Sanaa, Hadi narrowly escaped to Saudi Arabia from where he subsequently endorsed the Saudi military campaign on Yemen code-named “Operation Decisive Storm” (subsequently redubbed, equally inappropriately, “Operation Renewal of Hope”). Ongoing ever since September 26, 2015, this campaign was supposed to return Hadi to office by defeating the Houthis and other opposition groups. However, Saudi bombing only resulted in the destruction of Yemen. Indeed, airstrikes and the subsequent ground war of Saudi and UAE backed forces in Yemen dramatically escalated the crisis, not least due to the fact that both sides backed competing Yemeni factions as proxies in their mutual competition to control Yemen.

The subsequent article is organized as follows: The next section presents basic geographical and historical information on Yemen. Afterwards, a “conflict matrix” is put forward suggesting that local, regional, and global influences and different time frames must all be considered to gain a

better understanding of root causes of Yemeni conflicts. Applying such conflict matrix, understood as a heuristic device, allows for a balanced analysis of the past trajectory and recent dramatic deterioration in Yemen’s development and statehood. In the subsequent section, a representative sample of the academic literature on Yemen is examined – in line with the conflict matrix – to trace main causes of the current conflict. Three subsections present local, regional, and global drivers of the shift toward Yemeni state collapse since 2015.

The penultimate section then moves toward a descriptive account of the major political, economic, and military developments within Yemen in the period between 1990 and 2020 in the light of the previous theoretical analysis. Finally, the conclusion sums up the argument and examines how Yemen’s case might be instructive in the context of larger debates about “collapsed,” “fragile,” “illusory,” “limited,” “failed,” or “broken” statehood—each of these terms having been applied in the context of debates on Yemen (Bonney, 2017).

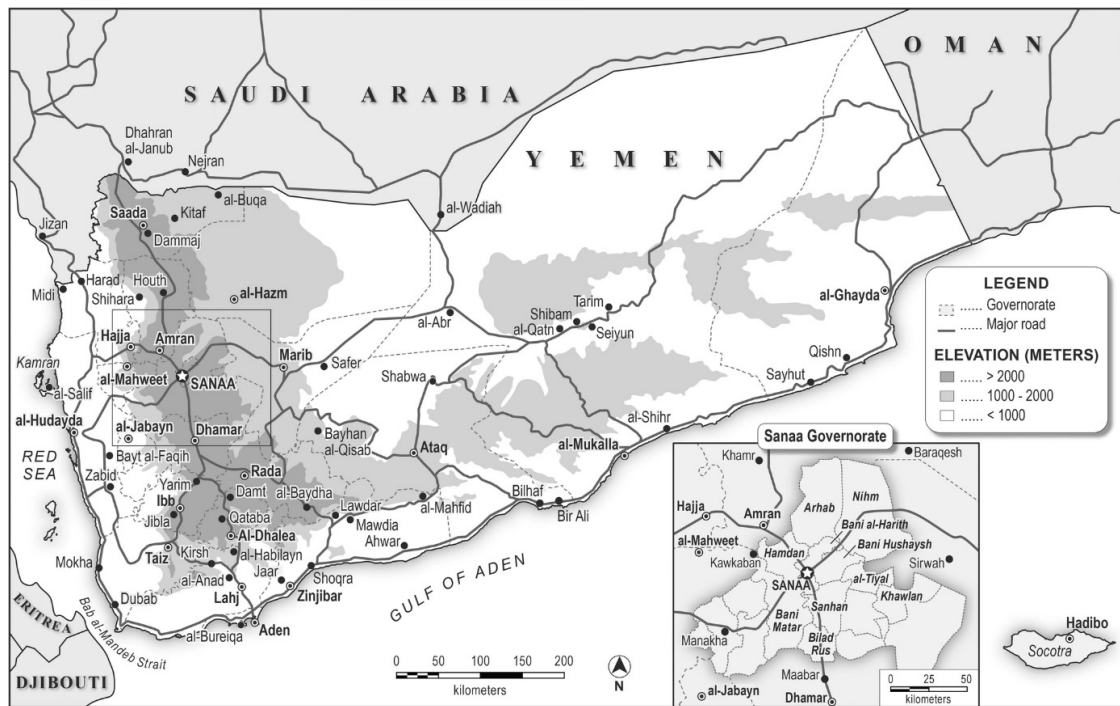
YEMEN: GEOGRAPHY AND POLITICAL HISTORY

Regional and tribal cleavages have had the most persistent influence on Yemeni society throughout history. By contrast, a unified state monopolizing the legitimate use of force in the sense suggested by sociologist Max Weber has been largely absent. Rather than to analyze “the state,” it is therefore more useful to focus on degrees of statehood during different time periods. The territory of today’s Republic of Yemen consists of three major geographical components, namely the most populous North Yemen, the harbor town of Aden (a British colony between 1839 and 1967), and the less populated Hadramaut area. The latter two regions jointly made up what became between 1967 and 1990 the state of South Yemen (PDRY).

What is remarkable about North Yemen is that it emerged from the collapse of the Ottoman Empire in 1918 as the only entity on the Arab peninsula free from significant British influence (Macris, 2010). It was ruled between 1918 and 1962 by the “Imamate,” namely two rulers drawn from the “Zaydi” minor branch of Shia Islam (so-called “Fiver” Shiites).² In 1962, a republican revolution removed the last Zaydi Imam resulting in the foundation of the YAR. This event was directly followed by a civil war in which Egypt supported the republican side while Saudi Arabia and the United Kingdom (UK) backed a failed effort to restore the Zaydi monarchy. After the end of the war

1 There exists no single accepted Arab transcription standard. Thus, the spelling of Arab names and localities differs in English-language sources. In addition, different accents of the Arabic language within Yemen also result in alternative transcriptions. The current paper uses the most common transcriptions. However, different spellings might be used depending on the quoted source. Thus, the two spellings of the name “Saleh” and “Salih” both refer to the former Yemeni President Ali Abdullah Saleh.

2 The Zaydis form a minor branch of Shia Islam and are unique to Yemen. They differ substantially from “Twelver” Shias in Iraq, Iran, and Lebanon. The former believe that Zaydi ibn Ali ibn Husayn should have been the rightful fifth Shia imam (hence the term “Fiver”), while the latter believe in the mystical disappearance of the twelfth imam. “Twelvers’ have a conflicted relationship with Sunni Muslims because of the martyrdom of Imam Ali’s son, Husayn, the grandson of Muhammad, at Karbala, Iraq, in the year 680 C.E.” (Day, 2012, p. 31). To put it differently, the Zaydis and Shafi’is of Yemen are closer in terms of religious doctrine than is the case in other traditions. Western journalism reporting the war in Yemen as part of a regional conflict between Sunnis and Shias is in this sense misleading.



Map 1. Topography of Yemen.

Courtesy of Prof. Paporn Thebpanya, Department of Geography and Environmental Planning, Towson University.
For the online version, click for enlargement.

in 1970, the victorious republican regime in North Yemen managed to bring Zaydis and Shafi'is together. The YAR became more consolidated during the presidency of Ibrahim al-Hamdi between 1974 and 1977. Al-Hamdi is still broadly credited as the first individual to master modern Yemeni mass politics in unifying various regional constituencies in the service of nation building. After his assassination in 1977 and following a transition period, the long-standing Saleh Presidency started off in 1978. In order to perpetuate his rule, Saleh came to rely on ever-shifting alliances with domestic and external actors. He notably failed to gain personal credibility as an impartial actor along the lines of his predecessor al-Hamdi.

It should be noted that political cleavages in North Yemen continue to strongly overlap with geographical features. The northern province of Saada bordering Saudi Arabia amounts to a "Zaydi heartland." Slightly further south but north of the capital Sanaa, the Hashid and Bakil tribal confederations (also Zaydi) are settled. Many observers considered the long-term leader of the Hashid tribal confederation, Shaykh Abdullah Ibn Husayn al-Ahmar (died 2007), as the most powerful single actor in Yemen. As the leader of the then most coherent tribal network, he was usually believed to be placed above Saleh in the informal political hierarchy of the country.

Looking at Yemen's different geographical regions, the northern and central highlands (up to 3600 meters altitude) are Zaydi-settled, while the southern midlands and coastal zones are mostly Shafi'i-settled. The Shafi'is, a minor sect within the Sunni Muslim tradition, form an overall majority of the northern population. They are mostly settled in the areas south of the capital Sanaa around the city of Taiz and in the coastal areas facing the Red Sea. The southern re-

gions of Yemen (the former PDRY) are in turn overwhelmingly settled by Shafi'is. There also exists a third much smaller sect of Ishmaelites settled in the north.

As already stated above, the academic literature on Yemen generally warns against using sect dichotomies to explain political and economic conflict. It should therefore be stressed that Zaydis and Shafi'is both form minorities within their respective religious traditions and have been moderate in terms of their limited doctrinal differences when compared to other Muslim countries. It has further been suggested that "Zaydi-Shafi'i politics were less a matter of religious sectarianism than they were a reflection of the age-old division between highland and midland/coastal regions of Yemen" (Day, 2012, p. 33). Finally, it is important to note that the Zaydi highlands have historically been associated with tribal authority and warrior traditions, while the Shafi'i mid- and lowlands have been associated with trade and commerce.

Moving beyond these "traditional" regional and sect-based divisions, the country's "modern" politics also includes political party actors, namely the catch-all "General People's Congress" (GPC) that used to be associated with former President Saleh as the party of power. Since the latter's demise, the GPC has collapsed into different tendencies. Some GPC elements have subsequently become associated with the Houthis. Another influential party used to be the Saudi-sponsored "Yemeni Congregation for Reform" (or al-Islah Party), which was formed in 1990 as an explicitly Islamist party led by the then Hashid tribal leader Abdullah al-Ahmar. Finally, the Yemeni Socialist Party (YSP) represented the former southern regime that was, until its dissolution in 1990, nominally Marxist-Leninist in orientation.

The 1990 unification of the two Yemeni states partially came about because the southern regime had been shaken by a 1986 intra-party war in which one YSP faction (the one led by Ali Nasir Mohamed which included Hadi in a junior capacity) was militarily defeated by another YSP group (the conflict was mostly driven by tribal rather than ideological factors). Survivors of the defeated southern YSP Ali Nasir faction, including Hadi, fled to the north and subsequently formed an interest group lobbying for unification of the two Yemeni states. More importantly, however, it had become known since the second half of the 1980s that significant energy resources (oil and gas) are located in the Marib and Shabwah provinces located along the then intra-Yemeni border (Reliefweb, 2010). Unifying the two states appeared as a necessary political precondition to effectively exploit the natural resources.

Apart from its resource base, Yemen is also of high geostrategic and geoeconomic significance. Strategically, Yemen's south-western coastal shores oversee Bab el-Mandeb ("Gate of Tears"), a 27-kilometer wide sea route connecting the Red Sea with the Gulf of Aden and the Indian Ocean. This shipping route is one of ten "choke points" of international trade, namely the Gate represents the major trade route between the Mediterranean Sea (via the Suez Canal) and Asia. The opposite shore of the Yemeni choke point belongs to the state of Djibouti, a former French colony which still hosts a French military base (the largest outside of mainland France). In addition, Djibouti houses permanent US, Italian, Japanese, and Chinese military bases, as well as a temporary German, Spanish, and Turkish military presence. This heavy military buildup is usually described as motivated by the struggle against piracy in waters off the shores of Djibouti's southern neighboring state of Somalia, which has been devastated by decades of civil war. However, it also underscores the significant strategic value of controlling Yemeni coastal areas.

Moreover, the detached Yemeni island of Socotra located off the southern coast of Yemen in the approach to the Gulf of Aden is also of considerable geostrategic value. In recent times, the island has experienced incursions of Saudi, US, and Emirati military forces. Saudi and UAE military units are currently stationed on the island located in the center of significant oil routes. Major Chinese regional investments such as the Chinese-funded Pakistani harbor project of Gwadar, the Chinese oil exploration in Somaliland, and the Chinese infrastructure and harbor projects in Eritrea and Ethiopia are also located in the vicinity of Socotra. Thus, future contest over control of the island could develop into another conflict spot with regional and global repercussions.

Turning to geoeconomics, there exists a longstanding debate about Yemen's potential as an oil and gas producer. The existing oil and gas fields are located in the regions of Al Jawf, Marib, Shabwan, and Hadramout (the former two located in the former north and the latter two in the former south). It needs to be stressed that US, Soviet (in the late 1980s), Canadian, and Chinese oil companies have all conducted some surveys, although information about the magnitude of discovered oil and gas fields is not publicly available and all drilling activities have stopped since 2015 due to the war. Yemen's overall significance for global oil and

gas supplies has so far been modest and some existing fields are now already close to exhaustion. However, a geological survey suggested that "[t]welve onshore and offshore sedimentary [oil/gas] basins have been identified in Yemen.... [O]nly two ... are well explored; the rest remain frontier basins" (As-Saruri & Sorkhabi, 2016).

Indeed, there exists a gap between the officially acknowledged resource base of the country and much higher unofficial estimates. In fact, maritime zones of Yemen and the larger Red Sea area bordering Yemen's western coastline are already known to contain rich oil and gas deposits. Exploration and drilling outside of Yemen's Red Sea zone has already started involving Saudi, Norwegian, Chinese, and Canadian companies (Henni, 2017). Apart from access to mineral resources, principally oil, gas, and precious metals, the control of Yemen's harbors, coastlines, and fishing areas is also very significant. However, foreign takeover of Yemen's infrastructure and resources or an externally enforced new division of the country into northern and southern zones of influence, or separate states, would fundamentally shift the regional balance of power. Thus, external intervention is bound to trigger new rounds of conflict.

A CONFLICT MATRIX OF YEMEN

In order to allow a well-rounded analysis of the Yemeni case since 1990, interests of actors at various levels, namely local, regional, and global must all be considered. For the purpose of the current article, the local actors are defined as Yemeni nationals, although they might also form alliance with external (foreign national and/or transnational) actors. This inevitably results in difficulty in explaining their actions in terms of purely local dynamics. Thus, the regional actors must also be assessed. These include the Arab states of the Middle East and the direct periphery of non-Arab states, Turkey, Israel, and Iran, flanking them (Hinnebusch, 2015, p. 1).

In terms of the global level, the three contemporary great powers, namely China, Russia, and the USA, will be examined. Among these three powers, the US influence is still dominant since most Arab states have entered long-term patron-client relationships with US actors in economic and military spheres. Russia (formerly the Soviet Union) is another political and military actor in the region, but the country's role has declined in comparison to the Cold War era with the notable exception of the Syrian case since 2015. Finally, China has recently emerged as a very significant economic actor in the Arab region. The country's "Belt and Road Initiative" (BRI) places major emphasis on expanding economic interdependencies with Arab states and African countries located in the Horn of Africa in the immediate neighborhood of Yemen. Finally, some other OECD countries also play a secondary part in the region. Since their role is limited in comparison to the great powers, they are not focused on in the subsequent analysis.

Rather than assuming any pre-existing hierarchy between the local, regional, and global analytical levels, a permanent fluctuation in their relative significance should be acknowledged. Moreover, different time frames, namely long-term, medium-term, and short-term, all influence the events in Yemen. When observing ongoing events, analysts

Table 1. Conflict Matrix of Yemen

	Local factors	Regional factors	Global factors
Short-term	1	4	7
Medium-term	2	5	8
Long-term	3	6	9

Explanation: For the purpose of comprehensive conflict analysis, each of the nine fields of the matrix must be considered. All nine fields are mutually interdependent and no preexisting analytical hierarchy is implied.

should therefore be aware of the structural background variables, namely long-term root causes of Yemen's weak statehood that were already in place long before the start of the 2015 war (see [Table 1](#)).

In conclusion, the conflict matrix presented here and utilized in the next section allows for a dynamic interpretation of geopolitical conflict. Rather than simply assuming fixed strategies of the various actors, the matrix acknowledges that individual "rational" action by state, sub-state, and non-state actors can produce the mutual blockage or even destruction of the parties involved.

LITERATURE REVIEW: CAUSES OF YEMEN'S STATE FRAGILITY

This section reviews some academic accounts of Yemen based on a longitudinal and multidisciplinary approach in order to trace major causes of Yemeni state fragility and subsequent collapse. The next three subsections look at local, regional, and global influences that, taken together, allow a better understanding of the multiple overlapping causes of crisis in Yemen. The first subsection discusses local factors, while the two subsequent subsections focus on regional and global factors.

Local factors

The four sources utilized here were published by an Egyptian public administration scholar, a British anthropologist, a North American political scientist, and a Czech-born historian, respectively (Blumi, 2018; Day, 2012; Dresch, 2000; El-Azzazi, 1978). These accounts from different academic disciplines cover various time frames and complement each other. They also highlight some of the long-standing controversies in the scholarship on Yemen.

To begin with El-Azzazi, his account focused solely on the former North Yemen (the YAR) outlining the then basic societal cleavages, namely the sect divisions between Zaydis, Shafi'is, and, thirdly, the much smaller group of Ishmaelites. He stressed the key role of the two most influential Zaydi tribal confederations of Hashid and Bakil in the political power balance of North Yemen. El-Azzazi argued that an analytical focus on religious sect and tribal linkages was most appropriate: "[C]lassification according to religious communities and tribal belonging, not according

to income levels, is put forward because tensions and conflicts within the political-administrative system become apparent here. In this context, other possible stratifications, such as the control of the means of production or land ownership, are irrelevant because there exists hardly any industrial sector in Yemen and disparities in the agricultural sector appear to exercise no significant societal role" (El-Azzazi, 1978, pp. 31–32).³

From El-Azzazi's perspective, the politics of North Yemen was mostly defined by conflicts between traditional tribal power structures and the "modern" state. The latter was being imposed by a group of Egyptian experts during the 1970s. However, this administrative experiment displayed a lack of concern for local realities. It only introduced nominal structures of modern statehood such as ministries and public sector bureaucracies to North Yemen. However, the author's field work suggested that employees of North Yemen's recently founded ministries were unable to explain their own job responsibilities and had been recruited based on their tribal or family links. In fact, role distribution within the "modern" state reflected pre-existing divisions of resources and power among traditional leadership groups. These consisted primarily of Zaydi tribal elites, entrenched in the northern and central highlands, and of Shafi'i trading and commercial elites concentrated in the central midlands.

Crucially, El-Azzazi suggested that no transfer of loyalty toward the state or growth of state capacity over time had yet occurred. In addition, the state's capability to extract resources from society, by taxation of the agricultural sector and of traders' activities, remained very weak. Conversely, state authorities were compelled to distribute access to public employment, including the armed forces, in consultation with the tribal authorities and had to offer "loyalty payments" to the powerful northern tribal leaders in order to avoid armed resistance. Thus, state authority remained limited and contested at all times. Finally, El-Azzazi suggested that future state-building in North Yemen would have to focus on an 'appropriate expansion of opportunities for political participation of the traditional groups [i.e. tribes] to weaken their autonomy and to decrease the tensions within the existing [state] institutions' (El-Azzazi, 1978, p. 192).

Another prominent author on Yemen was by contrast

³ All German-language translations are by the author.

more hesitant to impose any “grand narrative” on the country’s history, suggesting that “[u]nifying forms of history work well for unifying institutions—ministries, states, standardized school systems—but Yemen works largely in other terms” (Dresch, 2000, p. xv). Dresch broadly agreed with El-Azzazi’s view that tribal structures were a main explanatory factor defining social relations in North Yemen. Yet he stressed that this was not, or no longer, the case for some central and the southern regions (Dresch, 2000, p. 24). He also downplayed the cleavage between Zaydis and Shafi’is holding that “[t]he difference between ‘sects’ was seldom doctrine” (Dresch, 2000, pp. 15, 68).

By contrast, Dresch stressed the shallow roots of the modern state and its concomitant “fiscal crisis,” namely public subsidies paid to tribal sheikhs for their loyalty were in the early 1970s considerably larger than the state’s agricultural tax base. Thus, the material survival of state and society depended on external income, such as remittances of Yemenis working in neighboring Saudi Arabia and elsewhere, and foreign funds granted to Yemeni elites in the context of development and state building projects (Dresch, 2000, pp. 124, 134, 139). Dresch further suggested that efforts at analyzing state and tribal authorities independently from each other were doomed to failure. In fact, “[t]he literature deals often in terms of state against tribe, in particular, as if these were separate entities and the advance of one geographically meant the other’s retreat” (Dresch, 2000, p. 160).

In the context of “security” being imposed by the state’s army on tribal areas, according to Dresch these operations could only take place because the tribal authorities conducted them on their own terms, namely “the [army] men were all Hashidis [i.e. the militarily strongest tribal confederation in North Yemen] and those in charge of them chosen by the Shaykh, but they wore uniform” (Dresch, 2000, p. 160). To sum up, Dresch interpreted Yemen’s history as driven by the multitude of local actors: Yemeni leaders and their respective politico-economic projects fluctuate while society prevails for reasons that are beyond the reach of the “state”—about whose existence as a separate entity from other power structures we should in any case always remain skeptical.⁴

In a more recent political science account, the politics of post-1990 unified Yemen was examined. According to Day, former President Saleh owed his long-term tenure as leader to his “Bonapartist style” in running Yemeni state structures. Saleh’s origin from the Sanhan tribe, a small subtribe of the Hashid tribal confederation, initially rendered him a rather weak political figure. However, he patiently expanded his power base using patron-client relations and the central state’s control of certain types of resources as a device to co-opt or punish his political competitors (Day, 2012, Chapter 3). As in other states of the Arab region, such neo-patrimonial rule refers to the use of informal loyalties, originating in clan, tribe, family, regional and other pre-existing net-

works, in formal political institutions, such as political parties, state and military bodies, or parliaments.

Significantly, Saleh normally did not question underlying tribal and other traditional power structures as long as they served the purpose of expanding his personal patron-client network: “The state-tribal relationship in the northern YAR created an unstructured political system, which often appeared chaotic whenever highland shaykhs acted coercively toward state leaders. *But the relationship ultimately served the mutual interests of tribal and political elites from the highland region.* (...) Throughout Salih’s rule of north Yemen, he governed with the mind-set of a tribesman, acting as a guardian of the old status quo where nontribal elites from midland and coastal regions must accommodate themselves to the highland tribes” (Day, 2012, pp. 97, 99, emphasis added).

In a critical insight, Day further charges that the political scene after unification became too complex to maintain the earlier northern state-tribal network without triggering too much resistance elsewhere. Thus, the lengthy and bloody factionalism within unified Yemen and the step-by-step decline of Saleh’s ability to control the situation due to splits amongst his former supporters, including northern tribal leaders, now demands a political and economic decentralization of the country along federal lines (Day, 2012, pp. 281–291). Day further argues that local government structures should be empowered and resource-rich regions, notably the south, be allowed to gain more control over their resources, thereby “decentralizing decision-making powers outside the capital” (Day, 2012, pp. 105, 267–268, 298). The author declares that there is “little doubt that the success or failure of rebuilding Yemen’s government will depend on how the country’s complex regional dynamics are managed, and how the issues of federalism and local government power are handled” (Day, 2012, p. 301).

It should be noted, however, that the concept of regionalism as a solution to internal conflicts in Yemen has been attacked by other scholars as being overly reductionist to advance ongoing debates on how to stabilize Yemeni statehood (Elie, 2013). To begin with, scholars of Yemeni tribalism have stressed that tribal structures provide many elaborate procedures for conflict resolution. They suggest that such structures have historically helped to de-escalate tensions between different groups in Yemen, thereby avoiding the use of state coercion (Salmoni et al., 2010, pp. 53–64). The untested vision of federalism in Yemen, on the other hand, appeared to recent observers as part and parcel of a power grab by Hadi and other actors to deliver Yemeni wealth to outside interests. In particular, Hadi’s 2014 attempt to introduce regionalism, namely the projected division of Yemen into six extraordinarily unequal federal regions concentrating most of the population in three northern federal districts and nearly all of the currently known natural resources in two southern federal districts, became in itself one major cause of his downfall in the sub-

⁴ A similar view has more recently been expressed in the context of anthropological research on the Houthi movement: “This epic conflict is too large to be read from a single perspective, on a single ‘plateau of analysis,’ whether sectarian, religious, economic, tribal or political” (Brandt, 2017, p. 4).

sequent large-scale revolt against his rule.

However, in order to appreciate why the solution to Yemen's domestic problems cannot be found in clever domestic constitutional engineering, such as regionalism, one must return to a more comprehensive analysis of the transition period from Saleh to Hadi. To begin with, any powerful executive figure within Yemen necessarily had to balance between domestic and international interests. This meant performing a dual role of satisfying domestic clients and striking deals with external actors. Saleh understood that his value as a middleman with the external interests depended on delivering in both directions, namely "the key to long-term returns on investments to Yemen was stability" (Blumi, 2018, p. 182). Thus, Saleh had been always keen to develop close personal relationships to US presidents, such as Bush Sr. and Obama. He had allowed US corporations such as Hunt Oil, linked to the Bush family, to explore and extract Yemeni oil sources to strengthen his position with US decision-makers (Blumi, 2018, pp. 146–151).

Yet the domestic coalition of interests that had enabled Saleh to act as an interlocutor with outside powers became eroded since the late 1990s. His earlier alliance with Abdullah al-Ahmar, head of the Hashid tribal confederation whose Islamist al-Islah party nominally governed in a coalition with Saleh's GPC party, slowly collapsed. The cause of disagreements was economical, namely the al-Ahmar clan's illegal selling of Yemeni oil via a London-based Norwegian firm called Arcadia (Blumi, 2018, p. 172). Following the death of al-Ahmar in 2007, Saleh turned against his earlier allies, now represented by a son of the deceased Shaykh. He also broke with General Ali Muhsen, a military figure that he had earlier, in 2004, ordered to fight the Houthi insurgency in the northern Saada province bordering Saudi Arabia. Saleh started blaming his general for corruption in alliance with the al-Ahmars, as well as for the military failure to defeat the Houthis. Ali Muhsen therefore joined the 2011 revolt against Saleh and at the moment of writing nominally still serves as Hadi's deputy in Saudi exile.

Crucially, "Saleh's dutifully implementing IMF and World Bank readjustment programs" (Blumi, 2018, p. 183) also undermined his earlier popularity with Yemeni state employees. The majority of Yemeni citizens and especially young people and those living in rural areas suffered from reduced state subsidies and economic shocks. In particular, Yemen's oil revenue was utilized to secure the political loyalty of regime followers, much of it ending up in foreign accounts, rather than invested in a productive manner. For the bulk of the population, the economic balance sheet of the 1990s and 2000s was that prizes rose, average incomes declined, and youth unemployment reached record levels. Moreover, the agricultural sector was neglected resulting in Yemen's increasing dependency on food imports. The unregulated over-usage of water supplies for growing "qat," a mild narcotic plant whose chewing releases a stimulant and is customary in Yemen, further contributed to chronic and increasingly severe water shortages (Varisco, 2019). Saleh's last ditch efforts to draw in China, by offering various investment opportunities, came too late to allow him regaining leverage over surrogates. An alternative reading might be that this move annoyed US observers sufficiently to finally drop him.

However, Saleh's forced withdrawal from the presidency and his replacement by Hadi in 2011 did not slow down but rather further speeded up efforts to privatize state assets. Most crucially, Hadi signed the protocol for Yemen's accession to the WTO in December 2012. This included concessions to "privatize eleven service sectors within a maximum of five years ... expos[ing] Yemen's companies to competition in the 'free market,' a move that promised tens of thousands of layoffs" (Blumi, 2018, pp. 189–190). Since Hadi insisted on policies opposed by a majority of domestic political actors, not least state employees, members of the military, northern tribes, and the Houthi movement, he was compelled to fall back on support from his external sponsors, namely Saudi Arabia. Hadi also failed to offer domestic constituencies any credible vision of state-led development and provision of welfare policies (Dostal, 2010). Instead, he continued to run a predatory state along the lines of his predecessor—except that the spoils were distributed even more narrowly. This proved to be the main cause for the failure of his regime to consolidate and prepared the Houthi's subsequent takeover of most of North Yemen since 2014.

Summing up this brief literature review of local conflict in Yemen, there appears consensus that northern tribal power structures and the impact of unification of the two Yemeni states in 1990 produced an ever more divided and fragmented polity in which access to new resources such as oil revenue produced multiple new claims on the state while further blurring lines of accountability. In addition, state structures had never, pre- or post-unification, consolidated in the sense of gaining autonomy from other forms and sources of political authority. These issues are discussed in the subsequent section, which examines the domestic political cleavage structure in further detail. Beforehand, the remainder of the current section turns to regional and global factors.

Regional factors

The Arab regional state system emerged after the collapse of the Ottoman Empire in 1918 under primarily British influence. Thus, state units on the Arab peninsula mostly relate back to British indirect rule: pre-existing privileged relationships of the UK with certain clans (such as the al-Sauds) turned "protectorates" in a slow and unsteady process into state units. Instead of nation states, state building on the Arab peninsula produced "state nations" that continue to include various forms of traditional authority, such as ruling families, and must still relate to external patrons to guarantee a degree of domestic stability. Following World War 2, the Arab regional system was essentially taken over by the US starting with the agreement between US President Franklin Delano Roosevelt and King Ibn Saud in 1944 to establish a strategic relationship. During the early Cold War, British influence collapsed. The Soviet Union now emerged as the second major external power in the region and started backing a number of "radical" Arab regimes such as South Yemen after 1967.

In the post-colonial Arab state system emerging after 1945, two states made efforts to become regional hegemons, namely Gamal Abdel Nasser's Egypt in the 1950s and 1960s and Saddam Hussein's Iraq during the 1980s.

Both efforts failed primarily due to external balancing by the US, which used its own power and a regional system of non-Arab close allies, namely Israel, Turkey and the Shah's Iran (between 1953 and 1979) to back up its regional Arab clients, namely Saudi Arabia and the Gulf States, against "radical" challengers. After the demise of the Soviet Union in 1991, most relevant states in the Middle East, other than Syria and Iraq, were already closely aligned with the US. The Arab states currently competing for influence in Yemen are all close US allies, namely Saudi Arabia, the UAE, and Qatar. Two other regional Arab states, Bahrain and Oman, are too weak to exercise much influence on the Yemeni situation. Finally, Turkey and Iran as non-Arab states are geographically further removed from Yemen and their role within the conflict is also more limited. In particular, there is no conclusive evidence of Iranian direct military support of the Houthis due to Iran's logistical limitations, although ideational support is acknowledged and investigations about one small arms cache claimed to be linked to Iran are currently ongoing (United Nations Security Council, 2020, pp. 17, 25).

In order to explain the three Arab states' interventions in Yemen, one might first stress that they all held long-term track records of investing in Yemen economically and politically. Namely, Saudi Arabia, the UAE, and Qatar each competed in terms of investing in infrastructure such as harbors, mining, and real estate projects. In particular, it has been suggested that Saudi Arabia was pre-2015 most interested in advancing a strategic "Bridge of the Horn [of Africa]" investment, namely to construct a bridge linking Yemen's coastline with Djibouti (Blumi, 2018, pp. 174–175). To facilitate this project, access to the entire coastal lowlands (Tihama) facing the Red Sea, which consists of the western shores of Saudi Arabia and Yemen, was required. The project would connect Saudi Arabia and Yemen on the Arab Peninsula with Ethiopia, Eritrea, Somalia, and the productive agricultural lands of Sudan. This would allow direct Saudi access to essential resources in the region. However, the Saudi bridge project would at the same time devalue pre-existing investments of the UAE in maritime transport and regional harbors in Djibouti and elsewhere in the region.

In turn, the UAE was most interested in maintaining and expanding its share of control of regional trade routes and harbors. Therefore, the agreement between the UAE's Dubai Ports World (DPW) and then Yemeni President Saleh in 2008 to expand the harbor of Aden and to initiate a Free Zone was the most important single UAE project within Yemen (Blumi, 2018, pp. 177–179). As soon as Hadi became president in 2012, however, the Aden and other UAE investments became scrutinized for "corruption." The new government "initiated a 'review' of all deals made by the previous regime.... There was little doubt that the new bid would go to a Saudi or Qatari interest" (Blumi, 2018, p. 191). Since Hadi's regime was leaning toward Saudi interests and was domestically backed up by the al-Islah party, led by the al-Ahmar clan, and other Saudi-aligned northern tribal interests, the UAE started linking up with southern Yemeni interests to counterbalance the new political landscape. Soon the Southern Movement and southern tribes received tacit UAE support in demands for regional autonomy

or the restoration of South Yemen's statehood. This policy shift was conducted in order to protect the previous UAE investments. At the same time, the UAE started to designate the al-Islah party as a terrorist organization.

Finally, Qatar had also heavily invested in Yemeni politics and real estate under Saleh's protection. In addition, it had linked up with northern tribes and the al-Islah party. This resulted in direct competition with Saudi parallel efforts to control the al-Islah party and northern tribes. Overall, Qatar proved the weakest link among the three competing Arab powers and, post-Saleh presidency, lost its earlier influence in Yemen. In 2017, Qatar openly fell out with Saudi and UAE forces, especially the former, and some observers suggested that a new coalition consisting of Qatar, Turkey, and Iran was emerging to balance against Saudi and UAE forces in Yemen. Yet the actual degree of such alliance-making, beyond the rhetorical level, remains in doubt since the potential partners might share certain interests in Yemen but strongly diverge on other issues.

The most important analytical question is, however, whether any of the contemporary Arab states enjoys a degree of autonomy to conduct a regional foreign policy independent from US patronage. In particular, the Gulf States and Saudi Arabia each host permanent US military installations. The only theoretically conceivable candidate for regional Arab hegemon is Saudi Arabia on amount of its population size and economic significance as a major oil producer. But Saudi Arabia is an exceptionally poor candidate for regional hegemon due to the absence of strategic autonomy. The war in Yemen since 2015 has once again underlined that the Saudi military is unable to conduct independent operations in the absence of US military and logistical support, British military trainers, Pakistani pilots, and "Saudi" ground troops hired from places other than Saudi Arabia (Lewis & Templar, 2018; Zeihan, 2020, p. 245).

Moreover, Saudi Arabia also lacks meaningful economic autonomy from the western powers. Since the 1970s, the country's oil revenue has principally been invested abroad in the advanced OECD economies. This translates into Saudi reluctance to push for higher degrees of Arab economic autonomy: "The al-Saud's came to see Western and Saudi interests as nearly indistinguishable: oil price rises that damaged the Western economy would damage Saudi investments, reduce demand for oil and stimulate oil exploration in non-OPEC countries" (Hinnebusch, 2015, p. 52). Thus, it is in fact not possible to find any credible candidate country for regional Arab hegemon. Indeed, only the non-Arab regional neighbors—Israel, Turkey, and Iran—enjoy economic and military capabilities that allow them various degrees of autonomy from the great powers to which attention now turns.

Global factors

The US primary role as external hegemon on the Arab peninsula and in the larger Middle East means that this country's role differs fundamentally from those performed by the other two great powers China and Russia. Only the US engaged in the long-term penetration of the entire region since 1945, establishing a permanent military presence in nearly all regional states. The US Middle East strategy

was first announced in the Eisenhower Doctrine of 1957, declaring that the country would protect the regional “free nations,” by military means if necessary, from “international communism.” The US posture as the Middle East’s main external balancer was restated in the 1980 Carter Doctrine, and the foundation of the United States Central Command (CENTCOM) in 1983 placed the US military focus even more firmly on the Middle East.

After the demise of the Soviet Union, remaining external checks on US regional conduct were largely removed. In preparation for the First Gulf War in 1991, the US military erected new military installations in Saudi Arabia and the Gulf States. These military bases became permanent after the military defeat of the Iraqi forces and their withdrawal from Kuwait. Since then, the US succeeded in installing permanent military bases in nearly all Arab states. Only Lebanon is still free of an officially acknowledged US military presence, while Syria and Yemen (in the former case the north-eastern oil fields and in the latter case the island of Socotra) have in recent years become at least temporary hosts for the US military. In the case of local clients, such US policies are based on the “oil for security” formula and include extensive US arms sales to regional partners. In parallel, the Arab allies frequently fund the US bases on their territories and US military activities in the region (Colgan, 2013, Chapter 9).

With regard to Yemen, US policies since the start of the “war on terror” in 2001 were principally aligned with the Saleh regime, which received limited but steady subsidies and military supplies in exchange for conducting operations against Al Qaida-affiliated groups in Yemen and for officially accepting US drone strikes within Yemen from US military bases in Djibouti. Once the popular protests against Saleh took off in 2011, however, US policymakers withdrew from Saleh in order to back a Gulf Cooperation Council initiative, which suggested handing over the Yemeni presidency to Hadi. This plan aligned US behavior with regional Saudi and UAE schemes (Perkins, 2017, p. 313).

In recent years, China has emerged as the principal challenger of US hegemony. Because of its sustained high economic growth rates since the 1980s, the country has developed into the industrial workshop of the world. While the US operate the largest military navy in the world to back up a system of US-led regional military alliances, China operates the largest merchant shipping fleet and is the world’s largest shipping manufacturer. Thus, China enters regional systems primarily by utilizing its economic strength. With the 2013 announcement of the “Silk Road Economic Belt” by the Chinese President Xi Jinping, subsequently renamed the “Belt and Road Initiative” (BRI), the country offers economic collaboration to developing and OECD countries focusing on infrastructure construction in exchange for China’s access to oil, minerals, and agricultural lands. China puts emphasis on the principle of economic collaboration for mutual advantage and offers long-term credit facilities for developing countries. The country stresses the principle of non-interference in domestic affairs of host countries, suggesting that political and military alliance building is not a principal concern of China (Pakistan is a significant exception from this pattern, however).

In the Middle East and elsewhere, China has accepted the

authority of existing governments treating them as business partners, such as in building infrastructure in Africa and the Arab world in exchange for oil and gas deliveries required for China’s industrial economy. This has resulted in the rapid rise of economic interdependency between China and major Arab oil-exporting countries. Saudi Arabia is currently the largest oil supplier of China while other top sources include Oman and Iran. China has recently also become the major investor in Iraq and is the second-most significant trading partner of the UAE. China’s Merchant Holding International purchased a 23.5 percent share in the Port of Djibouti. In addition, the country has made major investments in the Horn of Africa region where it is constructing roads and harbors. In Yemen, China also engaged in the exploration of the country’s oil reserves before the 2015 war stopped further operations (Gresh, 2017).

Overall, China has not visibly taken sides in domestic conflicts in the region. In the event of state collapse, such as in Libya and in Yemen since 2015, the country has cut its losses and has evacuated its nationals rather than to join in military conflict to protect its investments (Burton, 2019). Significantly, it has been argued that Chinese infrastructure investments aim to deepen mutual dependency. For example, China has further developed economic sectors previously largely abandoned by OECD countries such as nuclear energy. It has offered large-scale construction of nuclear power plants to Saudi Arabia. This country, in particular, would be rather unlikely to receive such technology from other suppliers due to proliferation concerns (Lin et al., 2020).

Finally, the most significant single regional initiative of China is the expansion of Gwadar Port in Pakistan’s Baluchistan province. By expanding the port and building roads and railways from Gwadar to China’s north-western provinces, the country will gain an alternative land transportation route between China and the Middle East region. This allows avoiding shipping routes across the Pacific Ocean and the Malaccan Straights, thereby gaining some autonomy from US naval dominance. Overall, China’s strategy of economic collaboration with Arab states, Iran, and Israel (the latter serves as a source for military and ICT components not directly available to China from the US) aims for national economic gains by avoiding the politicization of trade.

Turning to the role of Russia in the region, the country has recently reemerged as a Middle Eastern power. This is largely due to its military intervention in Syria in 2015 to protect the country’s government from losing power to Islamist insurgents. The Russian intervention occurred in reaction to earlier actions by Western states, namely the US, UK, France and some other EU states. These countries had previously sent special military forces to Syrian territories offering training and guidance to Syrian insurgents and Kurdish militias and supplying them with weapons. Subsequently, US forces have also occupied most of Syria’s oil fields.

By contrast, Russia and China are both concerned about the regional proliferation of Islamist terrorism. They consider the presence of Russian and Chinese-national Islamist fighters in Syria as a potential threat to their own security. Russia’s intervention in Syria underlined the existence of

a long-term geopolitical alliance with the country's leadership that dates back to the 1950s (Dostal, 2018). It could also be interpreted as a response to former US President Obama's statement suggesting that Russia was merely a "regional power." By comparison, Russian policymakers have not shown any interest to directly intervene in the conflict in Yemen. Here, Russia's response has been limited to hosting spokespeople of the former (pre-1990) Soviet-aligned Southern Yemeni regime in high-profile Russian conference venues (Mohamed, 2018).⁵ Similar to China, Russia has focused less on Yemen and more on efforts to trade with major regional states such as Saudi Arabia and the Gulf countries.

FROM UNIFICATION TO STATE COLLAPSE: THE REPUBLIC OF YEMEN BETWEEN 1990 AND 2020

This section summarizes the major developments during the three decades of the nominally unified but post-2015 functionally collapsed Yemeni state. As already stated in the previous section, the primary purpose of the unification of the two Yemens, YAR and PDRY, was to facilitate the extraction of oil and gas in the borderlands between the two states. It was hoped that the resource base of the unified country would allow further social and economic development during the 1990s and into the 21st century.

The main political developments after unification can be divided into six time periods, namely (1) from unification in 1990 to the outbreak of the 1994 civil war; (2) the period of consolidation of Saleh's rule after the exclusion of most southern political actors, which restored northern political dominance (1994-2011); (3) the first transition period after the outbreak of mass protests against President Saleh, which resulted in his forced resignation from the presidency (2011-2012); (4) the second transition period of talks about future power sharing under the Hadi interim presidency (the "National Dialogue Conference" of 2013-2014); (5) the third transition period from the collapse of Hadi's rule in 2014 to the start of the Saudi air war on Yemen on 26 March 2015; (6) finally, the breakup of the Yemeni state into at least three "statelets," namely Houthi rule in most of the former north Yemen; rule of the Southern Movement in Aden and on the southern coastlines; and the presence of Hadi-aligned and Saudi-financed forces in Marib, one of the major centers of oil extraction in the center of the country, and in some other less-populated territories of the former south.

As already mentioned, the unification process in 1990 was initially based on the idea of equal power sharing between north and south. Saleh as the president of the former north retained the presidency of the unified country while the former southern YSP party leader Ali Salem al-Beidh became vice-president. The former head of the southern Supreme People's Council and de facto president of the south, Haider al-Attas, was appointed as prime minister. Significantly, al-Beidh and al-Attas were survivors of the 1986 factional armed clashes in the former south and had

only served in PDRY leadership positions since then. Their respective networks of influence were much weaker in comparison to the ones controlled by Saleh. The capital of the former north, Sanaa, became the capital of the unified Yemen and all ministries were equally shared between northern and southern representatives. Finally, there was also some limited exchange of northern and southern army units who became stationed on opposite sides of the former border.

Nevertheless, this nominal political partnership of equals did not work out in practical terms. Within the Sanaa-based northern bureaucracy, informal power structures heavily favored northern actors—no matter what kind of formal organizational hierarchy existed on paper. In addition, budgetary and fiscal discipline quickly started to decline. The more corrupt northern economic actors took over economic management and abolished the former southern budgetary system that had followed strict accountability rules. Subsequently, progressive southern family legislation was abolished reintroducing polygamy in the south (Dahlgren, 2013, section 30-33). Ultimately, southern YSP politicians were intimidated and a campaign of political assassinations began targeting them. Most observers agreed that northern tribal elements and Yemeni Islamists returning from fighting in Afghanistan, in cooperation with northern security forces, were driving the violence in which more than 100 people were killed in 1992 (Day, 2012, pp. 112-113).

In 1993, the first relatively free and competitive parliamentary elections in the history of Yemen took place. Three main parties, namely President Saleh's GPC, the YSP, and the al-Islah (or "Yemeni Congregation for Reform") Islamist party, founded in 1990 and led by Abdullah al-Ahmar, contested the national vote. The electoral system was based on single member electoral districts and winner-takes-all principles, which encouraged competition rather than coalition building. All three parties relied in their campaign efforts on pre-existing networks of patronage. In particular, the GPC of President Saleh overlapped with state institutions while the YSP had lost its former control of the southern bureaucracy since 1990 and was therefore in a weaker position. Thirdly, al-Islah, as another predominantly northern party and generously financed by Saudi Arabia, emerged as the decisive third force.

Categorizing the politics of al-Islah has proven to be difficult for scholars. The party represents a form of Islamist outlier that brings together moderate Islamists, social conservatives, and radical Salafi elements (Milton-Edwards, 2016, pp. 143-144). Briefly, al-Islah is a political movement in which nominally Zaydi elements that are in fact very close to Sunni doctrine coexist with Wahhabi extremist and more moderate Islamist currents. This eclectic coalition came about for a number of reasons. First, the founding of the new party helped to defend the role of the northern tribal element in the newly unified state. Second, "pragmatism" in terms of al-Islah's ideological profile must be un-

⁵ As already mentioned, Ali Nasir Mohamed was the leader of the YSP faction that lost the 1986 power struggle in the PDRY.

derstood as part of Saudi efforts to gain a veto position in Yemeni politics while also maintaining close relations with Saleh and his supporters at the same time.

The 1993 competitive parliamentary election returned 123 seats for the GPC, 62 seats for al-Islah, and 56 seats for the YSP, respectively. This election result fairly closely mirrored the difference in population size prior to unification (the former north had in 1990 a population of 7.5 million citizens, roughly three times higher than the number of citizens in the former south). In 1993, pre-unification regional cleavages essentially were still in place and al-Islah failed to gain any seats in the former south. The YSP managed to gain 41 of the 56 contested southern seats, while the remainder was mostly taken by independent candidates rather than the GPC which finished with only three southern seats. In turn, northern regions witnessed sometimes rather close two-way contests between the GPC and al-Islah (Day, 2012, p. 119). The inconclusive election result triggered conflict between the three parties about how to proceed: northern and southern politicians could not agree on how to renew their earlier power-sharing agreement. Efforts at addressing this situation in a national dialogue committee produced a “Document of Pledge and Accord” that mostly focused on devolving political authority to the regions. The Document was signed by Saleh, Vice-President al-Bid, and Shaykh al-Ahmar during a ceremony in Amman, Jordan, on February 20, 1994.

However, the Document failed to solve any of the open questions with regard to power sharing. Instead, civil war broke out on April 27, 1994, when southern military units stationed in the north came under attack from northern forces in Sanaa and Dhamar. The subsequent brief war triggered the announcement of secession on the part of the southern politicians, namely al-Bid declared himself to be the acting president of a “Democratic Republic of Yemen” before full-scale military defeat of southern forces on July 21 ended this effort at secession. Subsequently, southern political leaders were compelled to flee the country while Saleh abandoned his earlier pretense of power sharing with YSP southerners and enforced direct northern economic control of southern oil and gas resources.

In this process of political and economic restructuring, he once again relied on northern tribal networks, made parallel efforts to reorganize southern tribal networks under his personal patronage, and closed down southern branches of the civil service with a pre-unification track record. Ever since 1994, he governed in an unstable alliance with al-Islah: all effective political power was now controlled by northern actors and especially by Saleh himself. In subsequent years, Saleh further strengthened his hold: the 1997 parliamentary election was reduced to a contest between GPC and al-Islah delivering 187 seats for the former and 53 to the latter while the YSP boycotted the election. Another round of parliamentary voting in 2003, the last one so far, delivered 226 seats for the GPC, 46 for al-Islah, and 7 for a re-organized YSP. There were also two presidential elections, in 1999 and 2006, in which Saleh was re-elected with 96 and 77 per cent of the vote, respectively. All of the electoral contests were organized in a manner that heavily favored Saleh at the expense of his competitors.

When the “Arab Spring” occurred in Yemen in 2011,

Saleh was initially challenged by a popular movement of students and civil society activists demanding democratic reforms and an opening of the system to the younger generation excluded from the existing cartel of power holders. As was the case in other Arab countries, the movement was quickly taken over by Islamist forces, especially al-Islah (Manea, 2015). Following an assassination attempt, Saleh was forced to leave Yemen for medical treatment in Saudi Arabia between June and September 2011. His long-standing Vice-President Hadi took over as acting president and was subsequently confirmed as chief executive in a transitional government that divided cabinet representation equally between Saleh’s GPC and al-Islah. Overcoming much resistance on the part of Saleh, Hadi was subsequently, on February 21, 2012, elected as the new Yemeni president in elections with him as the only candidate. Many observers expected this negotiated power transition to put Yemen’s statehood on a more stable track. This proved to be illusory, however.

On the initiative of the Gulf Cooperation Council, a “National Dialogue Conference” of Yemeni political actors, inclusive of the Houthis and the Southern Movement, took place between March 2013 and January 2014. This event was supposed to deliver a new political settlement for the country. Foreign NGOs, in particular, hoped that encouraging the participation of new independent actors would facilitate the creation of a broad-based political system. Such “transitology,” defined as “confidence in international experts’ ability to engineer transitions from authoritarianism to stable liberal democracy,” was criticized by long-standing observers of Yemeni affairs (Yadav & Carapico, 2014). These efforts risked interfering with Yemeni realities, by backing weak actors against stronger ones. In fact, “transitology” ended up preparing new rounds of conflict, while celebrating what amounted to a “facade of inclusiveness that lent the conference legitimacy” (Transfeld, 2016, pp. 155–159). Ultimately, the conference delivered an agreement over power sharing that included only the existing power holders. The former President Saleh was allowed to retain his position as leader of the GPC and was granted immunity from prosecution—this also covered his position regarding his large personal wealth gained during his time in office.

As for the new President Hadi, most journalistic observers simply stated that he had become “internationally recognized,” i.e. he was endorsed by the US, the UN-system, and Saudi Arabia. The fact that his presidency was always considered to be transitional in character—he was only expected to serve in order to facilitate the reorganization of Yemen’s political system after Saleh’s final departure from the presidency—and that the February 2012 election limited his tenure to a fixed transitional term of two years, from 2012 to 2014, is ignored in such statements. To complicate matters further, Hadi severely lacks in leadership skills such as oratory ability, charisma and, most significantly, does not command any powerful political faction in Yemen other than the remnants of the post-1986 Ali Nassir group. One observer suggested that his political supporters “were constrained by the interests of other factions of their organizations” only to conclude that “[he] was also weak in terms of tribal and military support, *but enjoyed the backing of the*

international community" (Transfeld, 2016, p. 155, emphasis added).

Hadi's effort at restructuring the Yemeni army, by removing military leaders loyal to his predecessor and replacing them with people deriving from Abyan province, the former regional stronghold of the Ali Nassir group, failed due to unclear lines of command within the armed forces and general resistance against his authority. One observer summed up that "plans remained plans and could not be implemented. (...) Although Hadi did his best to install his own loyalists in sensitive positions, his administration could not dismiss the many thousands of Sanhani officer [i.e. the sub-tribe of the Hashid tribal confederation to which Saleh belonged] with whom Saleh had staffed his armed forces for the previous three decades" (Barany, 2016, p. 31).

One of the principal outcomes of the National Dialogue became the focus on regionalization, namely the country's existing 22 administrative units were supposed to be reorganized into six "regions" (four northern and two southern). The latter suggestion was strongly opposed by the Houthis since the scheme would have left the northern highland region, cut down to a single region, without access to resources, the sea, and harbors. In addition, it also would have created a new enlarged southern "Hadramaut Region" covering more than half of the country's territory and, most significantly, including 80 percent of the officially acknowledged national oil reserves. Reacting to this regionalism plan, the official spokesperson for the Houthi movement, Mohamed Abdel Salam, stated that "[w]e did not sign this document and we consider it does not represent a solution, not to the issue of the South or to the unresolved national issues, and the division was in accordance to the political whim" (quoted on Al-Alam TV website, February 10, 2014, source no longer available). The overall outcome of the Dialogue Conference was to exclude the Houthis, the Southern Movement, and the youth protesters of 2011 from representation in government (Al-Eriani, 2020).

In turn, Hadi made some efforts to counterbalance his exclusive reliance on the GPC and al-Islah by signing another deal, on September 21, 2014, with representatives of the Houthis and the Southern Movement. This second deal, in fact not very different in style from his predecessor Saleh's effort to double-cross other political forces, suggested appointing Houthi and Southern Movement advisors to the Hadi Presidency, followed by the selection of a new prime minister expected to be a "neutral and impartial national figure of competence and high integrity (...) who shall enjoy broad political support" (Peace and National Partnership Agreement, 2014). The agreement also included the commitment to appoint only non-party figures to key ministries, which questioned the strong previous position of GPC and al-Islah in a future government. Finally, the agreement promised restoring fuel subsidization that had been cut in July 2014, which had triggered Houthi-led mass rallies against the Hadi government.

However, this second power-sharing formula, which theoretically would have provided for inclusive government, also broke down. The Houthis now advanced militarily on the capital city of Sanaa and the port city of Hodeida and took control of these two cities in September and October

of 2014. At the same time, the Houthis and Saleh formed an informal alliance which delivered a majority of the Yemeni army, including the elite Republican Guards still loyal to Saleh, Saleh's GPC party faction, and many northern tribal leaders, to the Houthi-led camp. On January 22, 2015, the Houthis and elements of the Yemeni military loyal to Saleh seized the presidential palace in Sanaa and pressured Hadi to declare his resignation from the presidency. By this time, the latter's nominal two-year term in office had in any case already expired.

Hadi subsequently escaped to Aden, where he withdrew his earlier resignation. This only triggered further military advances of the Houthis on Aden resulting in heavy fighting between March and July of 2015. Ultimately, the Houthi forces were pushed back from Aden after the insertion of new Saudi-backed ground troops. Hadi left Yemen for the Saudi capital Riyadh, arriving on March 26, 2015, and has resided in his host country ever since. On the same day, the Saudi air strikes against the combined Houthi and Saleh forces began.

In parallel, the Southern Movement (since April 2017 termed the Southern Transitional Council) declared aspirations for full-scale independence of the south or, alternatively, for a renegotiation of conditions with regard to the distribution of Yemeni state revenue in order to improve the economic and political position of the southern provinces (Alshaibi, 2017). On December 4, 2017, former president Saleh was assassinated by a Houthi sniper while he tried to flee from the city of Sanaa. It has been suggested that he had once again tried to double-cross the Houthis in trying to reconnect with Saudi Arabian political authorities (Bensaid, 2018).

As already previously stated, outside backing of Yemeni political and military actors is a major explanatory factor for events on the ground. In terms of regional Arab states, Saudi Arabia, the UAE, Qatar (until 2017), and, on a smaller scale, Egypt, Jordan, Kuwait, and Sudan all intervened on the side of the Hadi forces. Some of these states have sent their own troops and/or mercenaries into south Yemen to participate in fighting on the ground or have paid others to do so. In turn, the Houthis have intermittently fired rockets from north Yemen into Saudi Arabia. They argue that these attacks retaliate for the Saudi blockade of the Yemeni coast that they hold responsible for starving the Yemeni population. Saudi media has acknowledged the incoming rocket fire, which also proves that the Houthis captured a large share of the former Yemeni army's arsenal.

Since the Saudi military had no previous experience in fighting ground wars, it relied on US military assistance and guidance. In turn, the Houthis were able to sustain their resistance partially due to the geographical features of Yemen's northern highlands, which offer some protection against foreign invasions and aerial bombardments. In particular, the war against the Houthis is only notionally "Saudi-led" and could not continue without US target reconnaissance and in-air refueling of Saudi jets (New York Times, 2018). Yet in spite of the vast technological superiority and large-scale spending of resources on the part of Saudi Arabia, the war on Yemen has failed to produce any military decision in favor of Hadi or other pro-Saudi factions.

Summing up the current military situation, the Houthis and, in a secondary role, the Southern Transitional Council have gained influence and control over most of Yemen's population centers. While Saudi Arabia is principally still interested in maintaining a unified Yemen under its tutelage, the UAE are in turn backing southern factions favoring southern autonomy or independence. This "war within a war" between the two "allies" concerns access to natural resources in the less-populated southern regions of Yemen, such as oil, silver, and gold. Thus, Saudi Arabia and the UAE might "triangulate" their backing of Hadi with support for various other Yemeni factions along tribal lines of loyalty, in the hope to have a strong say in future decision-making on southern resources.

Last but not least, the US, France, and the UK have all signed new record arms deals with Saudi Arabia and the UAE. Saudi Arabia is now the world's largest arms importer and 73 percent of its military supplies derive from the US while the UAE is the third-largest US arms importer (Stockholm International Peace Research Institute, 2020; Wezeman, 2016). In turn, Yemen as the poorest state in the Arab world is paying the ultimate price by providing the battlespace for the regional conflict between Saudi Arabia and the UAE. In summary, it remains difficult to judge whether "controlled chaos," due to external intervention, is most adequately describing the Yemeni situation. Alternatively, the large-scale collapse of state and civil society institutions might simply point to "failed statehood" as a permanent outcome.

The best conceivable outcome would of course be turning back to a dialogue-based negotiated settlement. However, this would imply withdrawal of external intervention as a precondition for peace in Yemen. Unfortunately, this is not very likely to happen any time soon. If it were to happen, in fact, the Houthis would certainly have to receive a large share of influence on the "state" (in inverted commas) due to their strong political and military position. By now, a majority of the northern tribal networks are also aligned with the Houthis. If no dialogue occurs, another potential scenario might be the partial occupation of economically interesting regions of Yemen by outside powers, although "stability" could never be restored under such scenario.

CONCLUSION: YEMEN'S COLLAPSED STATEHOOD RECONSIDERED

This section returns to the conflict matrix put forward above and asks why the conflict in Yemen prevails as a hurting stalemate and how global, regional, and local actors interact in the destruction of Yemen. To begin with the global actors, they are far away from the crisis zone and feel not threatened by the situation in any existential manner. The previous two US administrations of Obama and Trump never expressed any major concern over the situation in Yemen. From their points of view, Yemen could be controlled indirectly by dealing with the more important Arab clients, principally Saudi Arabia and the UAE. Under the Obama and Trump administrations, drone warfare in Yemen, peaking twice in 2012 and 2017, largely replaced efforts to build political alliances with Yemeni actors. The escalating drone attacks also underlined the collapse of any

US pretense of acknowledging nominal government authority in Yemen. As far as Yemen's potential significance as a source of natural resources is concerned, the current war closed down nearly all commercial activities of third countries, which is an acceptable outcome from the US perspective.

In turn, China and Russia are also unwilling to directly engage with the conflict in Yemen. Similar to the US, both countries are primarily interested in economic openings with the economically and politically more significant regional states. Since Saudi Arabia's military failures in Yemen have highlighted the kingdom's inability to act as a regional hegemon, these lessons might be considered reassuring for Chinese and Russian observers. Both countries wish to maintain existing economic and political relations with the Arab states and Iran. As long as Saudi Arabia and the UAE are occupied with the situation in Yemen, they are unlikely to confront Iran. After all, Iran remains an important partner of Russia and China in terms of checking the US-led coalition of Arab states.

As far as regional Arab powers are concerned, they are the main losers of the stalemate in Yemen. The efforts of the current Saudi leadership to acquire regional prestige, by backing Hadi's Yemeni regime in exile, have only delivered humiliation. The UAE has fared relatively better since it picked a more viable Yemeni proxy, the Southern Movement, and therefore purchased more influence on the ground (Brehony, 2020). Yet the fundamental problem in the relationship between Saudi Arabia and the UAE is that both sides fear that the other side might gain the upper hand in Yemen. Therefore, they continue to hurt each other by supporting opposite Yemeni factions.

In fact, the Houthis movement's well-earned reputation as a formidable military opponent means that even a truly unified front of Saudis and UAE would be unlikely to produce any decisive outcome of the current war. On the one hand, Saudi Arabia's leaders do not want to be seen to walk away from the catastrophe in Yemen as long as the Houthis' rockets succeed in striking Saudi targets. On the other hand, the UAE could certainly live with an indecisive outcome of the current conflict, namely re-dividing Yemen once more into a northern and southern state—as long as the latter with its economic resources would be part of the UAE's zone of influence. This outcome is in turn unacceptable from the Saudi point of view: it would hand over most of the economically interesting parts of Yemen to the main regional competitor while still leaving the destabilized north for Saudi policymakers to deal with in an open-ended manner.

This leaves finally the local Yemeni actors. To begin with, Yemeni statehood has always retained features of traditional rule based on pre-existing structures of authority deriving from clan, tribe, family, sect, region, and other factors. When left alone, the local Yemeni actors were normally able to effectively stop the uncontrolled escalation of domestic conflict. However, under conditions of globalization and regionalization, the longstanding dysfunction of the larger Arab state system, combined with foreign states' intervention in regional and local affairs, multiplied the challenges for Yemeni actors who have been increasingly tempted to appeal to outside forces for local back-up. In this context, domestic actors claim to represent "the state"

because they hope to strengthen their bargaining position in relation to external interests. Hadi still claims to represent the state, and so do the Houthis, and the Southern Movement. Yet attempting to save the state in places where it does not exist means that a phantom is being rescued (Jütersonke & Kartas, 2015).

Back in 2012, Hadi appeared to be an ideal candidate for external support from the US, Saudi Arabia, the UAE, and the UN system as expressed in the UN-Security Council Resolution 2216 of April 14, 2015. Without previous fact-finding, the UN resolution claimed that Hadi enjoyed “legitimacy” (Russia notably abstained from this particular UN vote). While Hadi’s predecessor Saleh had always retained a habit of searching for new political deals with external sponsors and was prepared to double-cross his patrons, including the US, his successor was expected to be more reliable in following external advice. However, the events of subsequent years demonstrated that Hadi was in no position to deliver a sufficient number of Yemeni factions to his external sponsors.

Thus, Yemen’s domestic actors certainly cannot expect salvation from any individual leadership figure. Their best hope remains agreeing on power sharing within some inclusive national body. Failing to do so means that they will continue to face endless rounds of “external balancing” in which Yemeni factions are resupplied for another round of fighting (each round weakening all domestic actors in their bargaining position vis-à-vis external forces). Crucially, domestic actors must acknowledge that the existing power relations, inclusive of tribal structures, make up the political reality of the country. Yemen’s state failure has forced citizens to fall back on entrenched traditional institutions and identities in order to organize their survival. There is no contradiction in the statement that most Yemeni people do not hold a tribal identity, a claim mostly accepted in the academic literature, and the parallel observation that tribalism has recently re-gained in significance due to the ongoing state collapse.

The structural decline of the country in terms of its dramatic health crisis (the 2017 Cholera outbreak is due to the destruction of the sewage system in Saudi air strikes), and parallel ecological collapse (water shortages) suggests that any future polity would require a degree of domestic stability to utilize remaining local resources for development. In this context, re-dividing the country and returning to

a pre-1990 two states situation is very likely not a viable option because it would create winners and losers, locally, regionally, and globally, in terms of access to natural resources and political influence. It would issue in the next round of conflict and also offend against the long-standing regional and global norm to avoid redrawing state boundaries (Fazal, 2007, Chapter 7).

If ignored any further, the humanitarian catastrophe in Yemen will certainly continue to escalate. Further regional and global acceleration, due to famine, refugee movements, and pandemics, must be expected. Until now, the underreporting of the humanitarian costs of Saudi and UAE warfare in Yemen is largely due to the disinterest of the great powers to assume any leading role in the crisis. In fact, China, Russia, and the US currently compete in other venues that are more critical for their respective future prospects. Further rounds of politicized trade conflict between China and the US, in particular, could of course change the current pattern of regional interaction in the medium term. This would certainly affect China’s growing role in the regional oil trade vis-à-vis Saudi Arabia and other Arab producer states. No matter what happens elsewhere in the region, however, the crisis in Yemen is not going to go away. To sum up Yemen’s predicament, the external actors have overreached, have tried picking winners in poorly understood domestic conflicts, and have destroyed much of the country—rather than putting forward an agenda based on the principle of peace through development.

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