

THE PRESENT AND FUTURE OF YEMEN'S GEOPOLITICS AMID LOCAL AND REGIONAL CONFLICT

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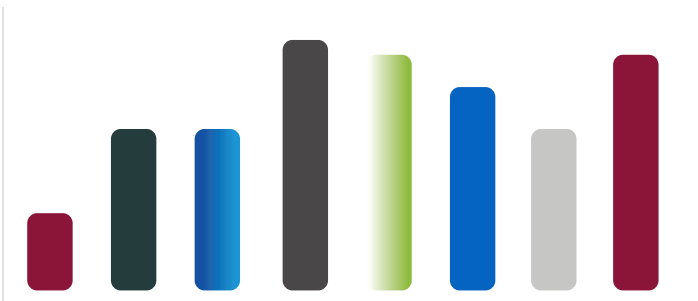
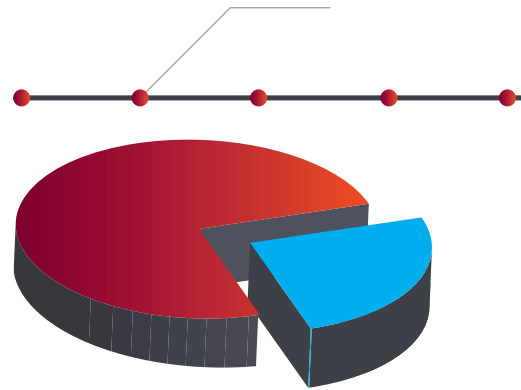
ANALYSIS

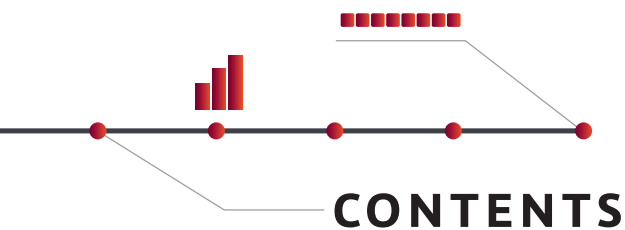
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30 SEPTEMBER 2022



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CONTENTS

ABSTRACT	4
INTRODUCTION TO YEMEN'S GEOPOLITICAL FEATURES	4
THE MAIN DOMESTIC ACTORS	7
AN OUTLOOK OF THE CURRENT LOCAL CONFLICT AND GRIEVANCES	9
THE REGIONAL COMPETITION OVER YEMEN	12
THE (PLC) AND THE FUTURE OF GEOPOLITICS IN POST-CONFLICT YEMEN	17
CONCLUSION	21
ENDNOTES	22
ABOUT THE AUTHOR	25
ABOUT AL SHARQ STRATEGIC RESEARCH	25

Abstract: Yemen has been lead to the dire situation it faces today due to the conflict of local and regional powers which have sought to control strategic areas in Yemen, thereby dismantling the country's territorial integrity. Yemen's strategic location holds high geopolitical value for regional and global powers. This has led to attempts to exploit its geopolitical value by dismantling its unity and subjugating parts of the territory to hegemonic projects. Yemen's primary challenges are territorial division, societal fragmentation, economic structural destruction, and a governance vacuum, the combined effect of which has been state failure. Yemen is also passing through a dangerous phase that threatens the country's territorial integrity. Locally, the Southern Transitional Council (STC) seeks to establish an independent state in Southern Yemen, while the Shiite Houthi group in the North seeks to reshape Yemen's map on sectarian grounds. Moreover, regional actors, namely the Kingdom of Saudi Arabia (KSA), Iran, and the United Arab Emirates (UAE) actively support local proxies in the conflict to pursue their own objectives. Consequently, local actors are engaged in hybrid warfare and are consumed in multiple conflicts in desperate attempts to redraw Yemen's geopolitics. This study demonstrates the complexity of the ongoing conflict in Yemen and examines how local and foreign rivals seek to dominate strategic areas of the country in their quest for influence and control. Such a conflict can affect the geopolitical significance of post-war Yemen. The study uses the descriptive-analytical method, as well as visual aids and maps to demonstrate the geography of the conflict.

Keywords: Yemen, Geopolitics, Local, Regional actors, Post-Geopolitics

The current study uses the term "geopolitics of Yemen" to define the geographical boundary of the conflict and domestic and regional actors as designated geopolitical factors that shed light on the Yemeni conflict.

Yemen stretches over an area of 527,970 sq. km. Its mainland lies in the Arabian Peninsula with an extensive coastline of around 2,000 km and over 200 islands. In addition to sharing borders with Saudi Arabia and Oman, it also shares maritime borders with a number of African countries, including Djibouti, Somalia and Eritrea.¹ Yemen is located in a sensitive geopolitical region that oversees the Horn of Africa with access over the main maritime routes linking Asia, Africa and Europe. Yemen's critical geostrategic position has made it the subject of conflict between ancient and modern empires. In the modern period, colonial powers occupied the Yemeni coastal city of Aden and Yemen's islands due to their connection to geo-strategic interests, while the central and northern regions were held incommunicado, and plunged into

local conflicts. Therefore, geopolitical rivalry is not new to Yemen, and the almost continuous political and military conflicts between Yemeni parties led to the intervention of external powers. Taking advantage of local rivalries, Yemen's neighbors have historically used the country to settle their own scores.

Yemen has important strategic significance for the Gulf countries in particular and the West in general. These countries pay close attention to the Bab al-Mandeb strait, which connects the Red Sea and the Arabian Sea, due to its importance for global trade, as "according to some estimates, 7% of global trade and 30% of the world's oil passes through the Bab al-Mandeb Strait."² There are also six main ports and other local ports on the Red Sea and Arabian Sea coasts. The country is also characterized by natural resources, including natural gas, oil, fish and fertile agricultural lands, and "vast metal resources including silver, gold, copper, zinc, cobalt, and nickel... Before the uprising in 2011, several companies have been licensed to prospect and explore several metal deposits in the country."³ There is also a liquid natural gas project located in Balhaf on the coast of Shabwah, Eastern Yemen, that was launched in 2005. It is the largest investment project in the country, but the seaport has been a flashpoint in clashes between the UAE and the Yemeni government since 2017 to this day.⁴



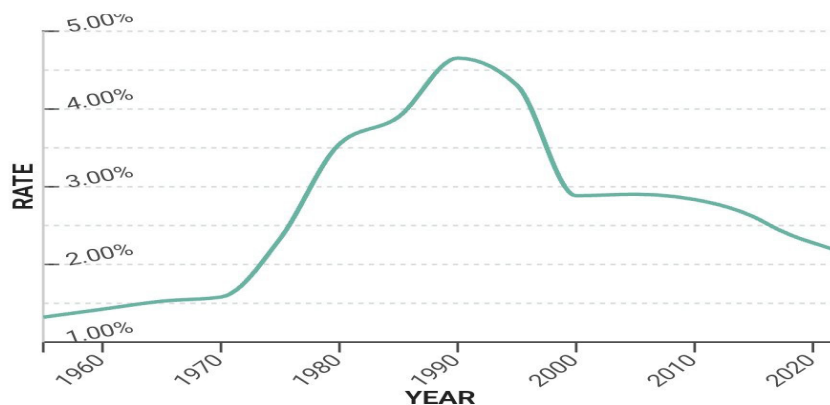
Photo of the project of liquid natural gas, Balhaf, the coast of Shabwah, Eastern Yemen. ⁵

Despite Yemen's important geopolitical location and diverse terrain, it has suffered from its political elites' inability to build a strong governance system and has continuously felt victim to their competition. Thus, it is safe to describe Yemen as "a prototypical weak state characterized by poverty, underdevelopment, and poorly functioning state institutions."⁶ These local rivalries have encouraged numerous Yemeni elites to advance foreign agendas at the expense of Yemen's major interests in exchange for much-needed backing and support.

Also, most of the inhabitants of the mountainous regions are tribesmen, who are a key feature of Yemeni politics “and play a central role in the stability of the Yemeni state.”⁷ To say the least, the position of tribes in northern Yemen over the past century has been decisive in shaping the outcome of past and ongoing conflicts. The previous revolutions against the Imamate system failed because most of the tribes in the mountainous areas supported the Imam. The 1962 revolution succeeded because tribes took the side of the republicans. Similarly, the 2011 uprising was able to force President Ali Abdallah Saleh to relinquish power because the tribes gathered in squares in support.⁸ In the latest conflict, the Houthis, understanding this dynamic well, first imposed their military control over the tribes in the northern mountainous areas before extending their military campaign towards coastal areas. The current conflict shows the weakness of the central state, while social groups, non-state armed and religious radical groups such as the Houthis are gaining strength and resolve.

As mentioned above, the study of Yemen’s demographic characteristics points to a geopolitical weak point in terms of the clearly unequal population distribution.⁹ The majority of the population is located in mountainous areas, which are characterized by drought, poor resources, and a lack of basic services. The harsh living conditions, therefore, ease the recruitment of some of the population into armed groups like Houthis in order to meet their needs. Here, it can be said that reshaping the population map through settlement of the mountainous areas’ inhabitants in the coastal and plain areas is important to prevent future conflict between domestic actors over power and resources. Secondly, in the most recent report, the UN estimates the population as of the first of July 2022, at 31,154,867.¹⁰ High population growth rates, as seen in the chart below,¹¹ may make the problem even worse and cause the state to fail to fulfill its obligations towards its citizens.

Yemen Growth Rate



2- The Main Domestic Actors

Today, there are many local actors, sub-national security and social complexes, with each actor holding grievances it has resolved to act on. The geopolitics of the country is divided between these actors as follows:

2.1- The Internationally Recognized Government

Yemen's internationally recognized government, backed by Saudi Arabia, controls strategic governorates including Hadhramaut, Al-Mahra, Marib, and Taiz city, as well as some parts of Abyan.

2.2- The STC

The STC was founded in Aden, 2017 by the southern separatists and headed by Aidaros Alzubidi "to lead the territories of the former People's Democratic Republic of Yemen to independence."¹² The STC rules the interim capital of Aden and the neighboring governorates of Lahj, Al- Dhale, Shabwa, Socotra and some parts of Abyan. The United Arab Emirates is fully backing the STC.

2.3- The Houthi Group

The Shiite Houthi group seeks to build a Zaydi state in north Yemen. It was founded by Hussein Badreddin al-Houthi, and appeared in 2004 in the district of Maran, Saada governorate, North Yemen. Currently, Abdul-Malik Badruldeen al-Houthi serves as the leader of the Houthi group. The Houthi group controls the capital, Sana'a, most of the northern governorates, and the city of Hodeidah and its ports. Iran is the main supporter of the Houthi group. As stated by one US official, "Iran's support for Houthi group is "quite significant and it's lethal."¹³

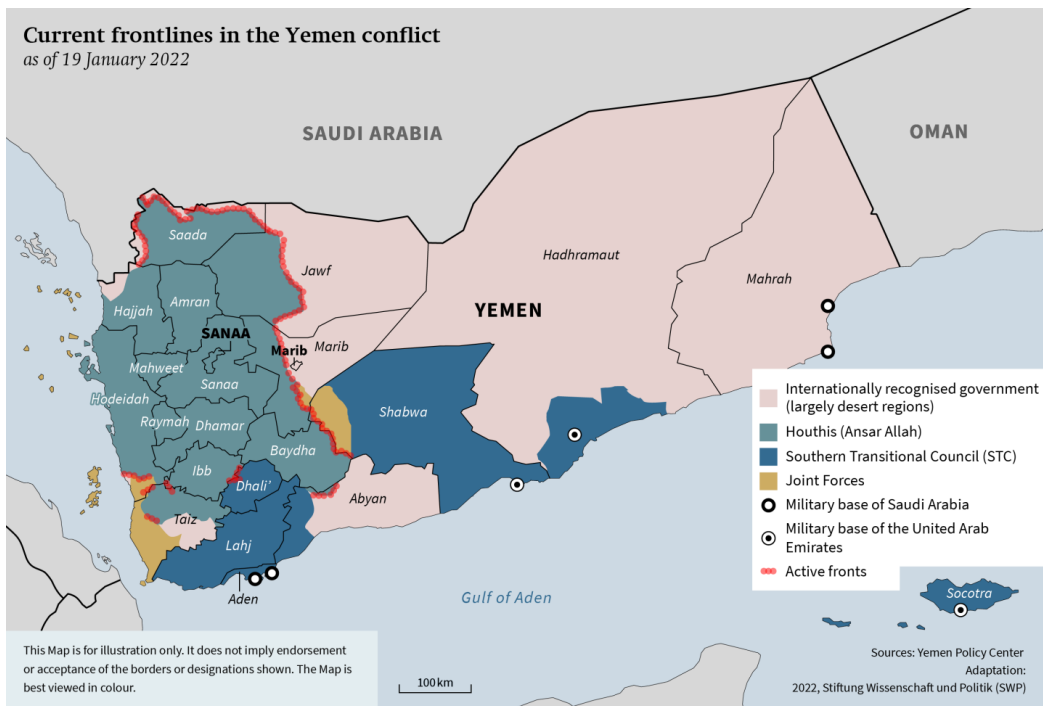
2.4- The National Resistance Forces (NRF)

In 2017, the NRF was founded by Tariq Saleh, the nephew of the former president, Ali Abdullah Saleh, with UAE backing. The NRF consists of some of the previous members of the Republican Guard and security forces. These forces rule the Mocha region and the Red Sea coast of western Yemen.

2.5- The Salafi groups (Giants Brigades)

The Salafi groups (Giants Brigades) were established between 2016 and 2018, run by Abdulrahman Abu Zara'a Al Muharrami, a Salafi religious leader, who is currently a member of the Presidential Leadership Council (PLC). These forces are deployed in some southern governorates. Most Giants Brigades fighters are from the Salafis and some tribesmen from Lahej, Abyan and Dhale. These forces are fully supported by the UAE.

In addition to these military groups, there are some other tribal local actors. These include the “Inclusive Hadhramout Conference,” which focuses on Hadhramaut’s political, economic, security and social interests, and the Southern National Coalition (SNC) which aims to achieve the project of a federal state, according to the outcome document of the National Dialogue Conference (NDC),¹⁴ and Al-Mahhra peaceful sit-in committee which rejects the Saudi presence in Al-Mahra.



The map shows the domestic actors before the latest truce, January 2022.¹⁵

Some of these domestic actors have extended their military control over a specific geography, which made them establish a kind of independent self-rule, leading to the dismantling of Yemen’s political geography. These actors, specifically the Houthi group, the STC and the NRF, are linked to regional powers such as Iran and the UAE. The control of these actors over some governorates and the extension of their military control has led to the spread of chaos, a culture of hatred, the dissemination of inciting rhetoric, the weakening of central state institutions, and a proliferation of the black market, arms trade, and the formation of armed entities spread on non-national grounds. For instance, “during the first years of the war, the Houthi group depleted the Central Bank’s foreign exchange coffers, amounting to 5 billion US dollars, and acquired 500 billion Yemeni riyals, in addition to the deposits of local banks before the current war, which are now frozen and their owners are unable to obtain them.”¹⁶

2- An Outlook of the Current Local Conflict and Grievances

The conflict between domestic actors is focused on power and wealth, with ideologies acting as justifications for the public. Some of these actors are carving territory for themselves even at the expense of the country's territorial integrity. However, the NRF as well as other political parties, including the General People's Congress (GPC), the Yemeni Congregation for Reform (Islah party, an Islamic party), Al-Mahhra peaceful sit-in committee, and SNC, aim to preserve Yemen's territorial integrity and build a unified state. It is true that there are political differences between these parties, but they are united on the importance of the country's territorial integrity. On the other hand, the ultimate objectives of the Houthi group and the STC are to reshape the country's geopolitics. Despite the extension of the truce until 2 October 2022, sporadic military clashes between the Houthi group and the government forces in Marib, Taiz, Hajjah, Saada and Al-Jawfare still ongoing, and there are deep political differences between the STC, the government and the military that may erupt at any moment. Moreover, the current fighting between the Yemeni national army and security forces and the UAE-backed STC fighters in Shabwa poses a serious challenge and exposes the fragility of the Presidential Leadership Council.

2.1- The Houthis Attempt to Reshape the Country's Geopolitics

The first military conflict between government forces and the Houthi rebels was in 2004,¹⁷ and ended in 2010. Despite the government apology for "the 1994 civil war in the south and to Shiite Houthi rebels in the northern province of Saada",¹⁸ in the NDC (2013-2014), the Houthis responded to the conference by demanding compensation, a solution to the grievance of Sada'a and "required a division that would grant them access to the sea... They were not supportive of federalism."¹⁹ As for the separatists, they demanded to establish an independent state in southern Yemen. Thus, both the Houthis and the southern separatists did not accept the outcomes of the NDC.

After the military coup of the Houthi group in September 2014, the country entered into a hybrid internal conflict amid regional intervention, a situation which continues to this day. This military coup of the Houthi group complicated the crisis and led to state fragmentation. Likewise, the coup demonstrated that the Hashemite Zaydi class to which the Houthis belong was a major part of the deep state in Saleh's reign. It did not believe in the republican system and political pluralism. Subsequently, the Houthis have impeded many attempts to build lasting peace and a political solution. In 2018, the UN's envoy, Ould Cheikh Ahmed, announced that "the Houthis failed a consensual political solution in the negotiations hosted by Kuwait in 2016, doubting that they have an actual will to end the war."²⁰

It seems that the Houthis are rejecting political partnership and peace offers is due to their ideology based on “the entitlement of Al–albayt to the caliphate.”²¹ They believe that leadership of Yemen can only be assumed by the Hashimate family, which is currently represented by the family of Abdelmalek al-Houthi.

For instance, The oath of allegiance to the group is given as a pledge to God regarding guardianship and authority (wilaya): “Oh God, we obey you, we obey your messenger, we obey Imam Ali, and we obey whomever you have ordered us to obey, my master Abd al-Malik Badr al-Din al-Houthi. Oh God, we absolve your enemy, the enemy of your Prophet, the enemy of Imam Ali, and the enemy of the one you commanded us to obey, my master Abd al-Malik Badr al-Din al-Houthi.”²²

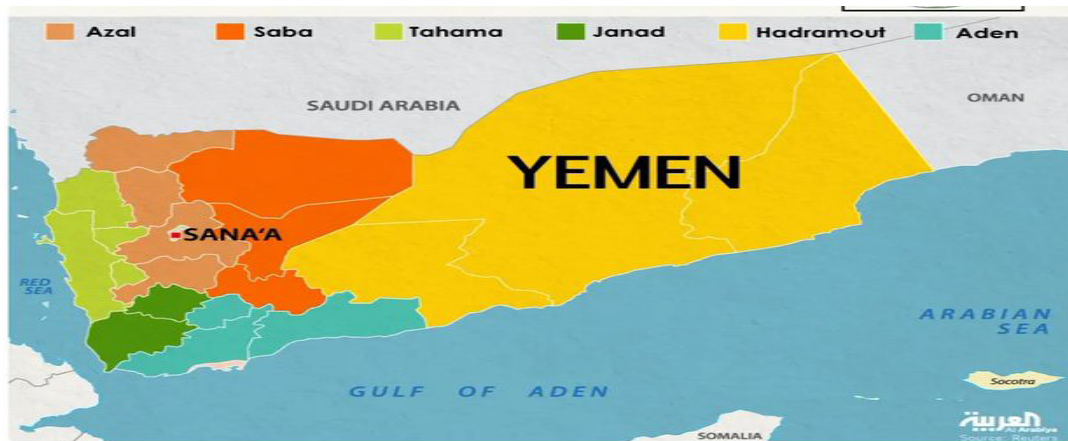
Hussein al-Houthi, the founder of the Houthi group, rejects pluralism in any sense of its meaning in thought or even the branches of jurisprudence.²³ Hence, the political thought of the Houthi group believes that Yemenis must accept the rule of Ahl al-Bayt, and therefore rejects political participation and a democratic system.

Over the past eight years, the Houthis have built a repressive ideological sectarian system in the areas of their control and are attempting to create an independent imamate in Yemen. They are conducting military offensives to control oil and gas resources in Marib and complete their control over the northern regions,²⁴ where they want to seize an outlet on the Red Sea coast through the ports of Saleef, Hodeidah, and Midi, as well as important areas that will supply them with oil and gas, which are centred in Marib. This would allow them to move to control the southern regions. While the continuation of violence and conflict furthers prolong their time in power, nonetheless, the repression and persecution of tribes, the lack of services, and the Houthi ideology based on the exclusion of others remain a possible challenge to their continuation in power as a *fait accompli*.

2.2- The STC’s Ambition of Secession

Under Yemeni unification, “the modern Republic of Yemen was formed on 22 May 1990 with an agreement to unify North and South Yemen.”²⁵ Despite the achievement of unification between South Yemen and North Yemen in 1990, a civil war broke out between the southern socialist separatists and pro-unionists in 1994. In 2007, the Yemeni Socialist Party (YSP) established *Hirak Al-Janoubi* (the Southern Movement), a separatist movement that developed into widespread protests.²⁶

During the comprehensive NDC 2013-2014, a private committee was allocated to discuss the south's political, legal, human rights, economic, cultural, and social grievances.²⁷ The committee concluded that some of the grievances that led to this crisis were legal aspects, as integrative unification was entered without clarity of mechanisms, foundations, and clarity.²⁸ Among the economic justifications for the crisis revealed by the committee is that the unity government did not work to improve living conditions in the southern regions. It tampered with the fisheries and sabotaged the port of Aden.²⁹ Solutions have been developed for the roots of the southern crisis, including political participation divided equally between the South and North. However, the results of the NDC, which divided the country into six federal states, were immediately rejected by some southerners, such as the traditional leaders of the Southern Movement like Ali Salem al Beidh, who insisted on a separate state.³⁰



Infographic: Yemen's new regions

The map shows the six regions of Yemen based on the outcomes of the NDC (2013-2014).³¹

The founding manifesto of the STC in April 2017 “to lead the territories of the former People’s Democratic Republic of Yemen to independence”³² indicates that the separatists do not want a federal system that preserves the country’s territorial integrity. The fact that the political structure of the STC consists of four different social and ideological parties, including the Salafis, tribal groups, leftists, and some members of the General People’s Congress, still remains a challenge to the council’s cohesion. The STC claims to represent the southern regions and uses military force to impose secession. “On April 2020, the Council declared self-rule in Aden.”³³ However, the Saudi-led coalition rejected the South’s declaration of self-rule.³⁴ The international community and the Arab League have further rejected the STC’s declared self-rule. These stances have led the STC to at least temporarily relinquish the idea of secession.

Certainly, the STC has succeeded in controlling the city of Aden and obtaining regional support, but the STC cannot implement its ambitions to establish a southern state without popular local support in the southern areas that are rich in oil and natural resources, such as Al-Mahra and Hadramaut. Moreover, there are many tribes in the eastern areas that still support unification. If the STC continues to insist on secession, they will seek autonomy, which will divide the southern areas into small states. Recently, the STC has taken control of the center of Shabwa governorate by force. These military developments angered the tribes in the governorate. Conflict erupting between southern factions can also not be ruled out. In this context, southerners still remember “the 1986 conflict, which was the longest and bloodiest in southern Yemen. Individuals were detained or killed on the assumption that the location of their birth determined their allegiance to a particular side.”³⁵ This led to approximately 4,000 to 10,000 people killed, and a further 60,000 people, including the President of Southern Yemen at the time, Ali Nasser Mohammed and his supporters, to flee into North Yemen, as much of the city of Aden lay in ruins.³⁶

3- The Regional Competition over Yemen

Regional powers' agendas in Yemen are one of the main factors in prolonging the current conflict by creating and supporting local actors to enhance their geopolitical objectives and economic interests in the Gulf of Aden and the Red Sea. Evidently, there are three main regional actors, Saudi Arabia, Iran, and the UAE, that are involved in the conflict. They aim to control Bab al-Mandeb, the archipelago of Socotra, oil and gas fields, the ports and islands of Yemen and reshape its geopolitics and system according to their interests.



This map illustrates the presence of foreign forces.³⁷

3.1- Saudi Arabia

The KSA is the most crucial regional actor in Yemen. “In the 1960s, it had supported Imam Yahya’s grandson and heir, Mohammed al-Badr, in the civil war against the Republicans and their Egyptian backers.”³⁸ Finally, the KSA and Egypt organized their own peace conference overseen by Arab mediators, culminating in the Khartoum Conference in August 1967,³⁹ which led to an understanding between the Egyptian and Saudi governments on the crisis in Yemen. This in turn led to a political settlement between the Yemeni republicans and the remaining Imamate monarchists.

During the Yemeni revolution in 2011, KSA and some other Gulf states mediated between the former president, Ali Saleh, and the opposition parties, The Joint Meeting Parties (JMP). This led to an adoption of the GCC initiative and its mechanisms, which sought to find a political settlement.⁴⁰ Under this initiative, “a government of national unity was formed with 50 percent from either side, the GPC and its allies and the JMP and their partners.”⁴¹ The initiative “set in motion an orderly transition process and prevented a looming civil war.”⁴² However, the Houthis’ capture of Sana’a and overthrow of the Government of National Unity with support from former president Ali Saleh and the Iranian regime led to the abortion of the transition process.

Consequently, in 2015, KSA militarily intervened in Yemen under the name Decisive Storm. Among the operation’s stated objectives were to restore legitimacy to the internationally-recognized government and disarm the Houthi group.⁴³ Since 2015, KSA could not succeed militarily in Yemen due to its lack of a strategic vision towards the crisis. If the Saudis had succeeded in its military campaign against Houthis, it would have strengthened its influence not only in the region, but also in the larger Sunni Muslim world. However, its military failure in Yemen encouraged Iran to increasingly support Houthis to launch military operations outside of Yemen.

Geopolitically, the possibility that the Yemen seaports could be an alternative to the Strait of Hormuz, leads the KSA to seek presence in the eastern Yemeni provinces, including Al-Mahra and Hadramawt. “It also considers Shabwah as the gate of the eastern region Hadramaut and Al-Mahra, which it considers an extension of its influence in Yemen.”⁴⁴ Saudi Arabia has attempted to obtain a port on Al-Mahra’s coast on the Arabian Sea to counter-act the possibility of Iran closing the Strait of Hormuz in case regional conflict erupts between Iran and the GCC states. However, this option has begun to dissipate, mainly due to the strong opposition KSA has met from the tribes of Al-Mahra. Also, maintaining the status quo in the northern areas of Yemen

is not in the interest of the KSA because this serves Houthi and Iranian strategy, which is based on expansion in the region and threatens Saudi interests and national security. This causes the KSA to view its southern neighbor from a security lens.

In the past, Saudi policy successfully secured permanent influence over Yemen's domestic affairs. In doing so, it inhibited the rise of a strong and independent central administration.⁴⁵ The same traditional policy towards Yemen persists, despite the current conflict proving its failure. For instance, the political calculations of KSA towards the Yemeni Islamic Islah Party, which led the scene of the Yemeni youth revolution in 2011, led to confusion in the political and military scene and even to the derailment of the objectives of Decisive Storm. The Saudi intervention in Yemen has shown that the allies of the KSA are not united as a result of their different agendas. The Saudi attempts to achieve its geopolitical goals in Yemen by establishing relations with the traditional elite, including tribal, religious, and political figures, has proven ineffective. The other problem is that the KSA abandoned its ally, the Islamist Islah party, unlike Iran and the UAE, who continue to support their local allies (Houthis and the STC) by all means.

3.2- Iran

Iran's project of geopolitical hegemony over Yemen is not new. Iran perceives the conflict with the KSA as an enduring rivalry. As such, it has taken additional measures to protect its interests and has chosen to support non-state actors (Houthis in Yemen) to gain access to geographic areas.⁴⁶ Many political factors have helped the allies of Iran, the Houthis, to dominate geopolitics in North Yemen, including the weakness of President Hadi's administration to manage a consensual transition, political disagreements between the political parties, the Saleh-Houthi alliance against the transitional process, the failure of the GCC initiative mechanisms, the failure of the 2011-2015 UN mediation, the policy of the KSA and the UAE towards the Yemeni peaceful revolution and some political parties, the Islah party, in particular.

For Iran, a proxy war by indirectly supporting the Houthis is preferable to entering into a conventional war with the KSA in Yemen, as it knows that there is no solid popular support for it in the country, where the majority still rejects Iranian ideology and sectarianism. Iran aspires for the Houthi group to become a competitor to the Sunni majority in Yemen and KSA. Then, it can "play a greater role in the region and reshape the internal dynamics of the Arabian Peninsula."⁴⁷ As such, providing the Houthis with military training, explosives, and other weapons is enough to pressure its main regional rival, the KSA. Moreover, "Iran believes that the presence of a military arm in Yemen, similar to Hezbollah in Lebanon and the Badr Corps in Iraq, is an effective card in its bargaining with the West to obtain a nuclear weapon."⁴⁸ This

geopolitical plan is feasible because Yemen's geopolitical and military importance for Iran to protect its regional interests is second to only Syria. Indeed, "Yemen is one of the most important potential alternatives to confront any negative developments on Iranian influence in Syria and Lebanon."⁴⁹

Besides, Iran uses the Yemeni crisis as leverage against the West and the GCC States to achieve its nuclear ambitions. The Houthi's attacks "on the UAE"⁵⁰ and Saudi territories during the past can be understood in this context. "Growing ties between (the) Houthi Shiites and Iran also poses a threat to some Arab Nations and the United States."⁵¹ During the next stage, it cannot be ruled out that the Houthi group may continue with the military option and reject political solutions to serve Iran, making it difficult to find political solutions under the umbrella of the Yemeni national state.

3.3- The UAE

In contrast, the ambitions and goals of the UAE differ from those of Saudi Arabia and Iran. The UAE aims to gain geopolitical influence among domestic actors in specific strategic areas. The case of the Socotra Archipelago is the most typical example, as well as transforming Yemen into a market for UAE's products. It is also attempting to obtain a presence on important islands and ports to establish military bases and exploit natural resources in these areas. To this end, the UAE has established several security forces in southern areas of Yemen. These forces are formed from tribes and Salafis "including 250 al-Qaida militants —the UAE-backed Yemeni force."⁵² There are security belts in Aden, Abyan, Al-Dhale, Lahij, and Socotra, in addition to several elite forces in Shabwa and Hadhramaut. There are also the Giants Brigades (Salafist military groups). The UAE has trained and paid all these security and military groups. However, it is also simultaneously attempting to present itself as a regional partner in combating terrorism in the Arabian Peninsula, a policy which has met some success, as the US deals with the UAE as a partner in counterterrorism in the country.

Economically, the UAE realizes that "controlling the island's ports would vastly boost its global maritime trade, as it has also sought to secure ports in southern Yemen and the Horn of Africa."⁵³ Moreover, the UAE's military control of some of the Southern Yemeni Islands enhances its regional position and ability to compete with regional powers such as KSA. In addition, the UAE has a presence in the western part of Yemen, mainly in Bab al-Mandeb.

"The UAE's control of the strait also suggests that there will be an indirect Israeli presence, especially after relations between the two countries normalized. It is no secret that the Bab

al-Mandeb strait is as important to Israel as it is to Egypt, especially if the Ben Gurion Canal, the Red and Mediterranean Sea waterway that the Israelis are promoting as a potential rival to Suez Canal, is ever constructed.”⁵⁴

Recent developments, specifically the normalization of Israeli-Emirati relations, have made many Yemenis afraid of the future control of the Emirates and Israel over Yemeni territorial waters, leading them to oppose the UAE presence in Yemen.

The 2022 Report of the Panel of Experts on Yemen, established according to UNSCR no: 2140 (2014), has confirmed that “the current role of the UAE on the West Coast remains opaque,”⁵⁵ however, the NRF is stationed in the port of Mocha to protect the UAE’s interests in the Red Sea, as well as to secure its presence in Bab al-Mandeb.

The current war may end through the UAE’s seizure of the Socotra archipelago, whether through economic agreements between any future government or by being present in a current way while supporting the STC to take over the southern regions completely. The ongoing conflict between government forces and the UAE-backed STC’s fighters to control the southern regions indicates that the UAE is seeking to achieve the secession of Southern Yemen from the North to implement its geopolitical ambitions. Arguably, the UAE is seeking to repeat the Crimea scenario which Russia seized with military force in 2014. We could call such the theory of the new generation of modern wars, which are based on seizing parts of the territory of conflict zones, or reshaping geography based on ethnic and religious grounds like what happened in South Sudan.

3-4- Oman

In addition to the main regional actors, it is essential to address the soft role of Oman, which has its own economic, security, and political interests in the conflict. It did not participate in the Saudi-led Decisive Storm because of its complex relations with the KSA and the UAE. Its good relations with Iran also irk Saudi Arabia. Concerning the conflict in Yemen, Oman opposes the presence of Emirati or Saudi forces on its western borders. Since 2017, the Al-Mahra province has become a point of contention between the KSA, UAE, and Oman. This dispute has turned into a proxy competition. For this reason, Oman has built broad relations with some public figures and prominent members of political parties like GPC and some members of Saleh’s family. It has also hosted the official spokesman for the Houthi group and his team and expanded its influence in the Al-Mahra governorate with tribesmen, particularly the Al-Mahhra peaceful sit-in committee.

As long as Omani strategy is based on non-intervention in the Yemeni crisis, it can be argued that Oman can play a pivotal role in bringing Iran and Saudi Arabia closer together. However, the conflict's complexity makes it unable to play such a role. Oman's hosting of unannounced dialogues, whether between the KSA and Iran or the Houthis and the KSA, without making any tangible progress on the ground proves its impotence. Even the Gulf reconciliation did not reflect positively on the Yemeni crisis.

3.5- Global Actors

Globally, there is competition between the USA and China over Yemen. China seeks to achieve its geopolitical influence in Yemen to preserve its interests and implement its New Silk Road, which is opposed by the USA and its allies. The possibility that the UAE's control of the Yemeni islands and ports was done with American consent cannot be ruled out. In this regard, the former US Secretary of Defense said: "in the UAE, the US has a quiet, potent ally nicknamed 'Little Sparta.'"⁵⁶ Thus, the USA and Europe pay great attention to the Red Sea, Bab al-Mandeb, Socotra Island, and the oil and gas areas in Yemen. It could be argued that these countries look at Yemen from a security and economic perspective and do not care who rules the central and northern regions. Britain also has its own ambiguous strategy in Yemen, and its political moves indicate that it seemingly does not mind the Houthis ruling the northern regions.

For Russia, geopolitically, "Yemen is an indispensable element in the Kremlin's growing ambitions throughout the Sahel region, across the Red Sea."⁵⁷ In 2009, it expressed interest in establishing a military base near the ... Bab al-Mandeb Strait.⁵⁸ However, it has not directly intervened in Yemen like it did in Syria, "where it stood against the West and Gulf Arab monarchies."⁵⁹ Consequently, it still has a good relationship with all Yemeni local actors and supports political solutions. The international competition over Yemen remains among the factors that led to the prolonging of conflict.

4- The Presidential Leadership Council (PLC) and the future of Geopolitics in Post-Conflict Yemen

In April 2022, after pressure from the KSA and the UAE, president Hadi transferred his powers to an eight-member PLC to unite the anti-Houthi forces. Political decision-making was distributed between different political, military, and ideological components, which has adverse effects on the decision-making mechanism. "It is also notable that this council was formed and announced outside of Yemen, and maintaining a balance between KSA and UAE loyalists... so they can be expected to put the demands and agenda of their patrons ahead of the Yemeni street."⁶⁰

The KSA took the step of forming the council for several reasons. First, it aims to organize its exit from the Yemeni scene during the upcoming period. Second, the Western pressure on Saudis to stop the war in Yemen forced them to cease military operations. Third, the economic losses from the war pushed Saudis to seek a political settlement with the Houthis. Fourth, the KSA is seeking security guarantees from Iran and the Houthis. At this stage, the Saudis are counting on the ongoing dialogue with Tehran to reach understandings that will lead to the Houthis' acceptance of a political settlement. Fifth, there is talk of an Arab-Israeli alliance. Therefore, if no agreement is reached with Iran, protecting its borders and controlling Bab al-Mandeb and the Yemeni islands remains an option. In this scenario, the prolonged conflict will continue to serve the geopolitical aims of the regional powers. It will further enhance sectarian conflict, given the regional conflict between Iran and the KSA, and may turn the Red Sea region into an arena for international and regional conflict more than ever.

Locally, there are many challenges facing the PLC. The military and security aspects are among the most challenging. The PLC recently formed a committee “to achieve security and stability and unify the armed and security forces under one national command.”⁶¹ Notwithstanding the necessity and importance of this move, integration of forces will not be easy due to the different agendas and projects of the members of the PLC. The fall of the Shabwa governorate into the hands of the STC represents a serious step backwards in unifying the security and military forces under one national command. The military developments in Shabwa also complicate the PLC's work during the next stage of managing the transitional period.

If the PLC succeeds in unifying the anti-Houthi military groups, restoring services to citizens in the liberated areas, and carrying out its work from the interim capital of Aden, the Houthi group would be confronted with a *fait accompli*. The first option is to accept peace based on internationally recognized standards or end the war. But if military formations remain outside of state control, it is unlikely that the PLC will be able to achieve a balanced settlement with the Houthis for several factors. First, the council is not homogeneous.⁶² Each member of the PLC will present his vision for solving the war. This will weaken the PLC in upcoming negotiations with the coherent ideological Houthi group. Even if a political solution is reached under the auspices of the UN without the separatists abandoning their secession project and the Houthis' political sectarian project, the settlement will be liable to collapse at any moment. Hence, the PLC cannot preserve the country's territorial unity.

The PLC also faces other challenges, including in the humanitarian and economic fields. “Economic and social prospects in 2022 and beyond are highly uncertain and hinge critically on a resolution of the conflict and the overall security conditions.”⁶³ There is no lack of strategies

to overcome the economic maladies that confront Yemen. In my opinion, in-country state sovereignty must return to the PLC to rule internal affairs and build a balanced external relationship. If president Rashad al-Alimi becomes a frontman like his predecessor, Abdrabbo Mansour Hadi, the situation will deteriorate, economic and social conditions will collapse, and armed groups may extend their control over the ground. In this case, Yemen's sovereignty will be further divided between armed groups. For the PLC to succeed in liberated areas, the Arab coalition must fulfill its economic commitment of three billion dollars, which was announced following the PLC as support for Yemen.

Based on the above analysis, it could be argued that there are some possible scenarios for Yemen's territorial integrity, which are as follows: in the first scenario, if the Houthi group captures the city of Marib, it will become the decisive actor in the northern areas. Hence, the geography of the northern regions will be coherent. "But the war itself would not be over, nor would the Yemeni people's suffering."⁶⁴ The Houthi group could sustain theocratic rule in Yemen through force, but it would not last long as the densely populated northern regions will not accept the rule of the Houthi group in its current form.

On the other hand, the separatists' power is increasing, which is a real challenge for Yemen's territorial integrity. Nonetheless, the southern geography will be disjointed due to clear divisions among the southerners. Currently, "the southern region is subject to varying degrees of control by a mixture of UAE-backed secessionist militias...and the government's forces."⁶⁵ Many tribes in Hadhramaut, Abyan, Al-Mahra, and Shabwa reject the STC's project. For example, the people of Hadhramaut, as the country's largest province, want to build their own state. Also, the people of Al-Mahra do not want to join the Hadhramaut region within the framework of a federal state and instead demand a region of their own. These differences will hinder the realization of the STC project to establish a southern state on the pre-1990 borders.

The instability of the southern regions also means the emergence of armed ideological groups such as al-Qaeda, and it cannot be ruled out that al-Qaeda will impose control over some southern areas. If al-Qaeda controls some of the southern areas, these regions will enter into military conflict. Here, the continuation of armed groups in power will divide the country between the Shiite Houthi group in the north, separatist groups in Aden and neighboring governorates, the al-Qaeda group in some parts of Abyan, Shabwa and Hadhramaut as well as the tribal groups in Al-Mahra, etc.

The second scenario is expected to establish a *fait accompli*, with each local armed actor governing the area under its control. If the situation gets out of control, Yemen will slip into sectarian violence and lead to a significant geopolitical division. It is important to point that while in the past, there only two religious groups, split between the Zaydis in some of the mountainous northern areas and mainly Shafi'is in the rest of Yemen, today, there are multiple religious groups, such as Madkhali Salafism, the Jamiyya, the Wahhabis, Sufis, and other radical groups like al-Qaeda and the Shiite Houthis, etc.

The third scenario is to form a political partnership similar to the scenario of Lebanon and Iraq. This partnership will be under the auspices of the UN given that the UN Special Envoy for Yemen, Hans Grundberg, succeeded in convincing the parties to the conflict to accept the truce and “halt all offensive military air, ground and maritime operations inside Yemen and across its borders,”⁶⁶ which took effect on 2 April and lasts until the beginning of October 2022. Currently, international efforts are focused on extending the truce without addressing the root problems, such as ending the Houthi rebellion, disarmament, and the necessity of the Houthi group recognizing the republican system. Thus, it cannot be said that the current truce will lead to a lasting peace that will prevent Yemen from returning to military conflict. All scenarios, including a military option, remain open.

Based on the current truce, geographical and demographic nature, and the multitude of local non-state actors, the option of a central state and even the secession of southern Yemen for post-war Yemen cannot solve the country's problems and preserve its territorial integrity. Therefore, supporting the existing local governments is one of the best options to preserve the post-war integrity of Yemen. Local governance has proven to be acceptable during the current war. For instance, Marib was able to accommodate nearly 3 million displaced people, Al-Mahra was able to focus on infrastructure in the governorate, and Shabwa also implemented some developmental achievements in education and health during the reign of former governor Mohammed bin Adeow.

After stabilization and the disarmament of armed groups, the outcomes of the national dialogue and the new federal system can be discussed and implemented. In this regard, the geographical division of the regions must be reconsidered by focusing on the demographic differences between the population as well as a fair redistribution of wealth for all geographical regions. The division agreed upon in the NDC did not focus on these differences, which led former president Ali Saleh and the Houthis to reject “the attempt at federal reform because under this plan their strongholds would be grouped into a new macro-region of Azal, which is densely populated, poor in energy resources, and landlocked.”⁶⁷

Conclusion

The study has discussed the geopolitical dynamics of the local conflict and its impact on the geopolitics of the country, the goals of the local actors to reshape geopolitics, and the willingness of some regional powers to dismantle Yemen on sectarian and tribal grounds to implement their regional geopolitical agenda. It has argued that the Yemeni actors are unable to dismantle geography into two countries, as the Houthis and the STC imagine. It has also concluded that the Houthi group's continued control of the densely populated northern mountainous areas still poses a threat to the country's territorial integrity, civil peace and social fabric and helps prolong violence and civil strife. The STC's project of secession of the southern regions from the northern regions, with clear Emirati support, remains another obstacle to rebuilding the Yemeni national state.

It has also found that the recent attempts of the Arab coalition informing the PLC are not sufficient to preserve the country's territorial integrity. Rather, this would require taking practical steps that would enable the Yemeni state to carry out its political, military, security and sovereign tasks, and supporting it economically, rather than supporting non-state actors like separatist forces.

At the level of regional conflict, the study found that the UAE's continued military presence in Yemeni areas, mainly the ports and islands, as well as Bab al-Mandeb, does not help to end the status quo, but rather opens the door wide to regional competition and the militarization of the Red Sea. The study concluded that Iranian strategy based on military and ideological expansion in the region undermines Yemen's post-conflict integrity. Rather, Yemen may be divided into several de-facto independent statelets under tribal and ideological groups, which would represent a threat to regional security and international interests, including energy supplies.

In a nutshell, achieving comprehensive national reconciliation is one of the most important factors to preserving Yemen's sovereignty. To implement peace, international support must be available to push the regional powers to rapprochement before confidence can be built between the different components of Yemeni society. The legacy of the current conflict will be one of the most pressing challenges, including preserving Yemen's sovereignty within the framework of a federal state. Hence, stakeholders must work towards a unified federal Yemen that could contribute to stability and security in the region.

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