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# The Yemeni Conundrum

BY MUSTAFA BAHRAN, JUNE 12, 2021

## GET ACQUAINTED WITH YEMEN

Yemen is an ancient country whose history is not well known in the West. It is also one of the most beautiful and naturally touristic countries on this planet. It has diverse natural wonders, two long, beautiful sea coasts (the Red Sea and the Gulf of Aden), a rich culture, pleasant climate, unique architecture, fantastic food, characteristic music, folklore, and perhaps the most hospitable people on earth. Yemen has the archipelago of Socotra, well known as a unique jewel of biodiversity – the pearl of the Indian Ocean. Socotra, the largest island of the archipelago, is home to numerous endemic species – about two-thirds of its plants.

The population of about 30 million people live mainly on the highland plateau. Yemen is widely considered the origin of all Arabs and its population is young, with an average age of 20, compared to Canada's 41 years. Its highlands cover entire mountains with terraces, in addition to the normal farming of valleys and open land. Among its ancient wonders is the Marib dam, which dates back to around 1700 BC, and its modern wonders includes a distinctive coffee. (The term "Mocha coffee" is derived from its old seaport Mocha. In the 17th century, the Dutch sailors traded the coffee they bought from Yemen, referring to it as Mocha coffee.) About 99% of all Yemenis are Muslims (about two-thirds Sunni and one-third Zaidi-Shi'ite).

Yemen's ancient history is mostly buried underground. Excavations have gone as far as about 1000 BC, mostly uncovering the very famous Saba kingdom (800 BC-200 CE).



The high-rise architecture at Shibam, Wadi Hadhramaut

*Photo: Wikipedia*

Islam reached Yemen around 630 EC (AD). The Zaidi imam, started by a non-Yemeni Imam, arrived at the tip of the north (Sa'ada) around 900 CE. The Imamate was never able to control more than small parts of north Yemen until the time of the Mutawklit kingdom, between 1918 and 1962, though other dynasties thrived in Yemen between the 900s and the 1400s. Notably, the Isma'ili, The Sulayhid whose queen Arwa is one of the most remembered Yemeni icons, the Rusulid who covered the entire country reaching Mecca north and Dhofar (Oman) east, and the Tahirids whose best-known monument "Amiriya Madrasa" still stands with magnificent beauty. The Othmans came in 1538 and failed, then came again in 1872 only to leave Yemen for good in 1911. In 1839 Britain occupied Aden, established it as a crown colony in 1937, and was driven out in 1967.

## POLITICS SINCE INDEPENDENCE

In 1962 the Mutawklit Imamate was destroyed, and the Republic of

Yemen (North Yemen) was established. In 1967, the People's Democratic Republic of Yemen (South Yemen) was established after the British were driven out of Aden. In 1990, both parts were unified as the Republic of Yemen. In 1994, a civil war (north vs south) took place, but unity was preserved, though grievances related to it continue until today. In 2007, the Hirik (Southern Movement) started and is continuing now.

Between 2004 and 2010, six Sa'ada wars took place between the state and an Iranian-backed local "Houthi" militia, named after their leader Hussein Badr al-Dein al-Houthi. It called itself "the Supporters of God," along the lines of "the Party of God" in Lebanon.

These wars were motivated and led by Ali Mohsen al-Ahmar, a corrupt Sunni Islamist general linked to the "Muslim Brotherhood" (MB) who is currently the vice president of the legitimate government.

These wars, although limited to the Houthis' home region of Sa'ada, created many grievances in the

Houthis' ranks. In 2011, the "Arab Spring" political earthquake reached Yemen. Houthis and the same general that had fought against them joined the Arab Spring against President Ali Abdullah Saleh. This general is the unofficial leader of the MB with the local name "Islah Party."

Although ideologically the MB and the Houthis are not far apart, the Houthis are one notch worse. The MB has been linked to fundamentalist Sunni Wahabi-Islam but the Houthis' ideology centers around a narrow and racist interpretation of Islam. As members of the radical Jaroudi sect, an offshoot from Zaidi Islam, they believe that they have a divine right to rule, not just Yemen, but the entire universe, being the rightful descendants of the prophet Mohammed. Their ideological document officially declares that those descendants will rule over the nation. They rely on the loyalty of the so-called Yemeni Hashemites to fill most of the civil service posts that run the country. Their doctrine is to achieve rule by the sword; war to them is a way of life, but they do not have a large support inside Yemen. Their Yemeni opponents are fighting to defend the republican system, which they believe that the Houthis would replace to reclaim the monopoly over power that was lost in 1962.

### BACKGROUND OF THE CONFLICT

During the turmoil of the so-called Arab Spring in October 2011, UNSC Res. 2014 called for an end to violence and a power transfer from President Saleh. A month later, Saleh accepted the advice of the Gulf Cooperation Council (GCC), which comprises six Arab states, to step down and transfer powers to his vice president, Abdrabbuh Mansur Hadi, who was later elected (Feb. 2012) as president and continues as such today.

An internationally supported National Dialogue Conference (NDC)

started on March 2013 and concluded on Jan. 2014. Next steps were: constitutional drafting, referendum, and national elections. Yet, since 2011, the Houthis expanded influence, carried out a major offensive against military units and tribes affiliated with their rivals; and bypassed the very NDC that they had called for and joined. They decided they wanted it all! They overran part of Sana'a in Sep. 2014 and attacked the presidential palace, as well as key government centers. In January 2015, President Hadi and the cabinet resigned. Hadi fled to Aden and in February 2015 rescinded his resignation. Houthis attacked Aden and Hadi escaped to Riyadh and asked the GCC to intervene to protect his legitimate government.

### THE CONFLICT (2015 TO TODAY)

On March 2015, neighboring Kingdom of Saudi Arabia (KSA) led a coalition of regional powers, particularly the United Arab Emirates (UAE), waging war against the Houthis with an extensive air campaign in support of the legitimate government forces fighting to regain power. These government forces include army units, the MB and the Salafists.

By and large, the legitimate government forces and its generals are in-

herently corrupt and incapable of winning. After thousands of sorties by coalition planes, tens of thousands dead and many more injured, with a significant civilian component including children, 300,000 refugees and asylum seekers, millions internally displaced, and vast destruction to infrastructure, no clear winner is in sight. In Dec 2017, the Houthis killed Saleh at gun point just to prove that they had no intention of sharing power with him, even though he had been essential in bringing them to power.

In August 2019, a southern movement calling itself "The Southern Transitional Council" (STC) backed by the United Arab Emirates (UAE), defeated the legitimate government forces taking control of the city of Aden and neighboring areas. Although both sides are supposed to be against the Houthi, they fought each other for a while until a peace and power sharing agreement (Riyadh Accord) was brokered between them by Saudi Arabia in November 2019. Yet, friction as well as ineffectiveness of their shared government continue to be a common theme on the ground. In recent days, especially in May 2021, this friction is increasing and the STC is increasingly looking for the chance to dissect Yemen again.



Dragon's Blood tree on Socotra Island

*Photo: Rod Waddington from Kergunyah, Australia/Wikipedia*

There are other smaller players, such as AQAP (a group formed by the merging of Yemen and Saudi branches of Al Qaeda), which tries to fill any voids created by the conflict but so far has not been able to control any parts of Yemen permanently. Also, it is worth mentioning “The Guards of the Republic” – a medium-size military force funded by the UAE and headed by one of the late president Saleh’s nephews fighting against the Houthis. Yet, it is not part of the legitimate government. Apart from that, right now there are three major political/military powers competing over the country: the Houthis backed by Iran, the STC backed by UAE, and the legitimate government forces (MB is the main component) backed by Saudi Arabia and Qatar (the Saudis back the entire legitimate government while Qatar, with Turkey, backs the MB only).

## DYNAMICS

Over the last six years, the momentum has shifted out of the hands of the Houthis as they have lost all southern Yemen and are slowly losing other parts in the north, including major loses in Hudaidah Governorate last year. But that was until the STC and the legitimate government forces started fighting. Recently, the Houthis are trying to regain momentum with their Marib offensive and even win the war, taking advantage of the fact that the forces fighting them are not only disorganized but also belong to political factions within the coalition that can best be described as “coalescing enemies.”

The Houthis are to some extent backed by the Zaidi (a form of Shi’ite Islam) northern tribes while the other side is somewhat backed by the majority Sunni population. However, this war is not a sectarian war because the majority of the population does not care for sectarianism. This war is a regional proxy war between Iran (which

is using the Houthis) and Saudi Arabia with its allies – particularly UAE (which are fighting alongside the legitimate government forces). Yet basically this is a local Yemeni war about wealth and power.

*Yemeni children are being killed in the battlefield as child-soldiers for the Houthis and by coalition planes directly, in addition to the regular collateral damage casualties*

## THE HUMANITARIAN CATASTROPHE

According to the UN High Commission on Refugees (UNHCR) and the World Food Programme, about 20 million Yemenis are facing hunger. In fact, 22-24 million people (75% of the population) are in need of assistance; about 8 million of them are in desperate need. Hundreds of thousands of civil servants have not been paid for years. The Yemeni Rial has lost about 300% of its pre-conflict value. Billions of dollars of aid have been pouring in but unfortunately have been consumed by warlords and corrupt dispensing local organizations, apparently with the blessing and alleged involvement of some elements of international organizations, including UN ones.

Both sides of this ugly war have committed atrocities and the death toll is rising among civilians, including children. Too many so-called “mistakes” are committed by Saudi and UAE planes on civilian targets. Some of them can only be described as massacres. Yemeni children are being killed in the battlefield as child-soldiers for the Houthis and by coalition

planes directly, in addition to the regular collateral damage casualties.

## COVID19 AND YEMEN’S DOUBLE JEOPARDY

With the global outbreak of the 2019 novel Coronavirus, Yemen’s health system was not equipped to deal with such a problem. The war has largely destroyed what was there; Yemen is in a grave jeopardy from war on one hand and the virus on the other. The war had produced thousands of deaths and COVID-19 is likely to end up killing hundreds of thousands more. The only way to prevent such a double catastrophe is to stop the war and have the World Health Organization intervene, much as it did with the Ebola virus in Africa. The legitimate government’s ministry of health has been trying to vaccinate health workers within areas under its control, but without success.

## CANADA AND THE INTERNATIONAL COMMUNITY

In 2019, Canada pledged \$46.7 million in humanitarian assistance to the Yemeni people and just weeks ago in March 2021, Canada announced new funding of \$69.9 million in continued response to the humanitarian crisis in Yemen. Canada has shown leadership in humanitarian aid, but perhaps now its political voice is needed too. Canada’s arms sales alone might not provide enough leverage in Riyadh, but at the very least Ottawa should work with its allies to bring pressure to bear on both sides of the conflict.

Although the US has a great leverage over the legitimate Yemeni government and its allies – the Kingdom of Saudi Arabia and the UAE – it has no leverage over the Houthis and their allies (Iran and Hizballah). At the same time, the Houthis have the biggest appetite for war and their current offensive to seize the city of Marib is endangering around one million internal refugees in the city right now.

Instead of taking a stance against the war early on, the Trump administration designated the Houthis as a terror group only days before leaving the White House. Doing so created an outcry by international organizations fearing for the impact on humanitarian efforts in support of Yemenis in addition to affecting the push for peace negotiations. That decision was a mistake.

Immediately after assuming office, the Biden administration overturned the Trump order. That was a mistake as well. Two mistakes have taken place back-to-back! Logically, since the designation had already been done, the Biden administration had an excellent opportunity to use it as a leverage to bring about peace. Instead, it surrendered a tool that was in hand. The Houthis will only accept peace if it guarantees their dominance. Without leverage, nobody can force them to reverse course. Short of a new broader deal with Iran that includes concessions on Yemen, the Trump administration designation had provided significant leverage, indeed an opportunity that the Biden administration has now lost. The US now seems genuinely interested in bringing about peace in Yemen, and for that it must be creative in finding new tools to pressurize the Houthis, since other parties to the conflict are within the US sphere of influence.

The EU and the UN have been trying hard to broker a peace deal. The recent US interest has given this effort new momentum but unfortunately the very recent Oman talks involving Biden's envoy failed, as the Houthis refused to accept the American initiative and the earlier peace offering by Saudi Arabia. Now, the UN envoy's term is ending, and it seems a new envoy will be appointed. Time is dragging on and the war continues with mounting Yemeni sufferings and hardships beyond imagination.

## CONCLUSION AND IS THERE A WAY OUT?

The war must end via political settlement, as no military solution is in sight and the human toll is mounting. The international community has understood this for some time and has been calling for peace in support of the UN envoy efforts. The problem is: Peace is not going to happen unless leverage over the Houthis exists or they win militarily. Apparently, the case of Yemen is going to be intertwined with the Iranian nuclear case. Therefore, the way out of this conflict goes through Tehran! Yes, that is pessimistic, but it is the way I see it.

Very recently, it looks like Sana'a airport will gradually be open for normal operations and the port of Hodeida will also gradually get back to normalcy. This is good news if it happens, and it satisfies the pre-condition the Houthis demanded before any negotiations. Yet, it remains to be seen if they are interested in peace and most importantly if peace prevails! Again, and please remember this, the Houthis are not serious about peace unless Tehran says so!

## *Are the Houthis serious?*

Even though the Houthis are illegitimate rulers and started all this misery and carnage, the other side is no saint — indeed far from it. Meanwhile, an ancient and beautiful country is being destroyed and its people are being killed. Yemen may be buried alongside its ancient history if this ugly war drags on and no end in sight.

In 1893, British journalist Walter B. Harris published an account of his travels into the mountainous interior of Yemen. "Nothing can be imagined more beautiful than the scenery of the mountains of the Yemen," he wrote. "Rich green valleys...are so luxuriant, so verdant, that one's ideas as to the nature of Arabia are entirely upset.



*Photo: Rod Waddington, Kergunyah, Australia, for Unsplash*

The fertility of this region is almost startling, and it can little be wondered at that Alexander the Great intended, after his conquest of India, to take up his abode in the Yemen."

Let me end this article by mentioning some anthropological research. Studies have concluded that all human beings except pure Africans (who were the origin of mankind) possess a Yemeni gene. Yes, a Yemeni gene! It turns out that the only group that survived out of Africa and ended up populating earth is the group that went through southern Arabia (Yemen) — the so-called the southern route! That is why whenever I greeted a foreign guest in Sana'a, I used to say, "Welcome back home!". Now, I also say: Help us stop the destruction of humanity's ancient home! ■

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