

CIVIL WAR IN YEMEN: THE POWER STRUGGLE, REGIONAL INFLUENCES AND RELATIONS WITH TURKEY

CENTER FOR MIDDLE EASTERN STRATEGIC STUDIES



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Report No: 10

January 2010

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CENTER FOR MIDDLE EASTERN STRATEGIC STUDIES

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It is certain that the Middle East harbors a variety of interconnected problems. However, neither the Middle East nor its people ought to be stigmatized by images with negative connotations. Given the strength of their populations, Middle Eastern states possess the potential to activate their inner dynamics in order to begin peaceful mobilizations for development. Respect for people's willingness to live together, respect for the sovereign rights of states and respect for basic human rights and individual freedoms are the prerequisites for assuring peace and tranquility, both domestically and internationally. In this context, Turkey must continue to make constructive contributions to the establishment of regional stability and prosperity in its vicinity.

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Summary

Violence in Yemen resurged after the government's decision to launch an extensive operation against the Houthi elements on August 11, 2009, and made the southeastern region of the Arabian Peninsula a new area of interest to the international community. Tension between the Zaidiyya (a Shiite sect) and Yemeni government forces has been ongoing since 2004, and again erupted into armed conflict in August 2009. This conflict is sure to increase the tensions between sectarian groups in the Middle East and trigger rivalry between Iran and Saudi Arabia.

Houthis lead the uprising of the Northern Shiite tribes, which have an important place in Yemen's political life, against the government, and are embracing an anti-US, anti-Israeli and anti-Saudi Arabian approach. The Abdullah Saleh regime, on the other hand, is blaming Shiite organizations in Iran, Iraq and Lebanon for destabilizing Yemen. As a result, the conflicts in Yemen create new problems for the Middle East, already unstable since the 2003 Iraq War. The major development is the emergence of a Hezbollah-like Shiite military organization on the border of Saudi Arabia and Yemen as an active power.

The conflict between the Houthis and the government in Yemen, one of the poorest countries on earth, has forced 150 thousand people to flee their homes. Economic and humanitarian problems have worsened in Sa'ada, which was once the best developed region in Yemen. There are many ways to explain the causes of the conflict. Some analysts put an emphasis on the intensifying competition between Iran and Saudi Arabia in the Arabian Peninsula, while others point to the intertribal conflicts in Yemen, the Shiite-Sunni tension, the power struggle of the Zaidiyya and the potential power struggles of the post-Saleh period expected to begin in 2013 when his presidency will end. Here, one should note that that all of these elements did play a part in the civil war to some extent. We should consider the social and historical background of current conflicts. While the 23 million people of Yemen are facing Shiite-Sunni discrimination, the new Salafite movement spreading in the Shiite regions is increasing the tension. Therefore, when considering the sectarian, historical, political and regional facts, we can assume that the civil war in Yemen will not cease in a short term and will trigger the dynamics of conflict in the region.

Yemen:**An Analysis of its Sociopolitical Structure**

Yemen is located in the southwestern corner of the Arabian Peninsula and is populated by Arabs. Yemen, with the Red Sea to the west, the Indian Ocean and the Gulf of Aden to the south and borders with Saudi Arabia and Oman, is located at a strategic point. It dominates the Gulf of Aden due to its position at the convergence of the Red Sea and the Indian Ocean.¹ Unlike other Arab states, it has a settled social structure rather than a Bedouin society. Yemenis are ethnically homogenous, but ethnicity is not a unifying element. Although they are religiously homogeneous as well, they belong to the Zaidiyya and Shafi'ite sects of Islam. Zaidiyya is a branch of Shiitism that believes society should be ruled by Shiite Imams. Zaidiyya differs from strict Shiite belief since it recognizes the caliphate of all four caliphs, but it limits the caliphate rights to the Ehl-i Beyt (Mohammed's descendants), and it differs from Sunni belief as well. Thus Zaidiyya beliefs are different from Iranian Shiism, or the Twelve Imam's belief. According to Zaidiyya Shiitism, only the Seyyids and Sharifs who are Mohammed's descendants have the right to rule. The chair of the imamate also belongs to the Ehl-i Beyt. The Shiites in Yemen do not accept the Iranian Velayet-I Fakihi theory, developed by Ayatollah Khomeini. In this context, Hz. Hussein's descendants are called Seyyid, Hz. Hasan's descendants are called Sharif, and members of this bloodline form Yemen's privileged social group.²

Beyond these privileged groups, Yemen's characteristic social structure is not a modern society, but a tribal organization based on blood relations where each tribe has its own leader. In Yemen, where old traditions are still current, regional and provincial authorities were chosen with the consent of tribes in the past. Therefore, the power and authority of the chosen leader was limited, since it derived from the powers of influential tribal leaders. After all, he had influence among the grassroots since he was elected, not appointed. For this

reason, during the reign of the Emevites, Abbasids and Ottomans, these powers could not take ultimate control over the area. When Sultan Selim I ended the reign of the Mamelukes in Egypt, the Mameluke governor declared he would recognize the reign of the Ottomans, but the Shiites refused. The Shiite rebellion led by Imam Sherafeddin was followed by many other Shiite rebellions. One of these Shiite tribal rebellions led by Imam Kasim lasted for 40 years (1595-1635) and as a result, Ottoman rule in Yemen actually ceased in 1635. After this date, Yemen was ruled by Shiite Imams for two hundred years. The Ottoman Empire made an agreement with Imam Yahya before WWI, and sent troops to liberate Southern Yemen from British occupation.³

Shiite Imams played significant roles in the political life of Yemen, and drew their real strength from the Shiite sect that included half of the population. The rest of the population includes Sunnis and small minorities of Shiite Ismailites, Christians, Jews and Hindus.⁴ Zaidiyya Shiites constitute 45% of Yemeni society, and Sunni Shafi'ites, 55%. There are about three thousand Christians in Yemen. The majority of Yemen's Jews left the country after the civil war in 2004, due to the threat of the Shiite insurgency.⁵

Sunnis, the second important sect in Yemen, also play a significant role in Yemen's history. They live mainly in Taiz and Tihama. Sunnis, who fought with the Shiite tribes and refused the reign of the Shiite Imams before the Ottomans, submitted to the rule of Ottoman authorities when the Ottoman Empire seized the region. The Ottoman Sinan Pasha, even rewarded the Sunnis with a Sanjak for their loyalty since they did not take part in the uprisings and were referred to as the Mazlum (oppressed).⁶ When Southern and Northern Yemen united, the Sunnis formed Yemen's largest community. Today they are said to be influential within the state and military bureaucracy of Yemen. Although the original Sunni belief in

Yemen was Shafi'ism, since the 1980s, especially with the influence of Saudi Arabia, Wahhabism became widespread in the region. Still, Wahhabism does not have strong social support or political significance in Yemen's history.

Another outstanding element in Yemen's social structure is the role of the Seyyid's, Sharif's, Sheikhs and Cadis. Hz. Hussein's descendants are called Seyyid, Hz. Hasan's descendants are called Sharif and members of this bloodline form Yemen's privileged social group. The Seyyid's have a great prestige since their family tree goes back to Hz. Mohammed. In Shiite belief, it is essential that the imams are Seyyids. Another privileged group is the Cadis. These are the Shiite scholars and jurists of the Shari'a. These qualities make them not only religious but also social authorities. This social rank is followed by the sheiks who are religious authorities and tribal leaders. The next rank consists of tradesmen and artisans.⁷

The most important social structures in Yemen are formed by the Bakil and Hashid Confederations in the North and the socialist and Islamist groups at the South. In this context, sectarian and tribal structures play an important role in the power struggles in Yemen today as they did in the past. Sheikh Abdullah al Ahmer who is the leader of the prominent opposition party, the Islah Party, is a tribal leader at the same time. Ali Abdullah Saleh who holds power in the country is affiliated with the Hashid Confederation. Sheikh Sinan Abu Lahum, the leader of the Baath Party, is affiliated with the Bakil Confederation.⁸ Tribes are strongly represented within the state bureaucracy. In Yemen's social structure where tribes are ruled by powerful leaders, the tribal leaders play important roles, but they cannot always look out for the interests of their own tribe members or represent their own tribes in every case. Still the power of political leaders is not free from the support of his own tribe or associate tribes. Therefore, intertribal struggles and cooperation hold a significant place in Yemen's political

life.⁹ These facts have made the region hard to control externally and limited the government's control on the tribes. The Shiite Imams who play a major role in Yemen's political life draw their strength from the Shiite sect which constitutes the 43-48% of the society. The rest of the society is made up of Sunnis and minorities such as the Christians, Jews and Hindus. As a result of the intimidations of the Shiite militia, Yemen's Jewish population has decreased in number during recent years. Although the current President Abdullah Saleh is of Shiite origin, the Sunni majority in the government and army causes sectarian stress. Shiite groups that rebel against the government want the Sunni, especially Salafite, movements in their regions to be limited. Due to the activities of the prominent Hafeite leader, Muqbil al-Wadi (who died in 2001), the Salafite movement became influential within the state bureaucracy in the Shiite regions. This movement and President Abdullah Saleh's tolerant approach towards the movement is harshly criticized by the Shiites.¹⁰

Northern and Southern Yemen: The Process of Unification after One Hundred and Sixty Years of Separation

There were two rival Yemeni states in the Arabian Peninsula until the early 1990s. North Yemen was under Ottoman control until it declared independence after WWI under the leadership of Imam Yahya, and had been ruled by Shiite leaders for the last thousand years. Its capitol was Sana. On the other hand, Southern Yemen adopted a Marxist regime and its capitol was Aden.

The English became interested in South Yemen during the early 1820s, and finally in 1839 they occupied Aden, a strategic point that controls the outlet of the Red Sea. So the English became involved in the power struggle in Yemen. Until 1839 when England occupied Aden, the Imam regimes in Northern and Southern Yemen were ruled from Sana, both during the Fatimi and Ottoman periods. Thus, the socio-political structure in both regions was not dif-

ferent. Emirs, sheikhs and cadis came to the fore as prominent figures and leaders of society. That is why the borders between the regions are political. They appeared after England began to exploit South Yemen and paved the way to a different political culture. Contrary to the situation in North Yemen, the English occupation in South Yemen caused Arabic nationalism, trade union movements and socialist ideologies to find a social base. During the 1960s, Aden became the center of Arab nationalism and unionist movements in the Arabian Peninsula. In other words, Aden became the Beirut of Southern Arabia. Nasser nationalism, Baathist ideology, organized unions and civilian organizations such as the Teacher's Union made Aden the center of insurgency against English occupation. The population of Aden was 500 when the English occupied the city and it reached 150,000 in 1959. The population was partially formed by those coming from English colonies in Somalia and India, the rest were Yemenis coming from the North and the other federation. The newcomers formed the labor class in Aden. Thus, the social structure of South Yemen developed differently from the North. In Aden, the local powers were civilian organizations such as the trade unions, student unions and the teacher's union rather than tribal leaders and sheikhs.¹¹

Paralleling Colonel Sallal's 1962 Coup in the North, a group in South Yemen launched a guerilla operation based on Marxist references to rid the country of the English presence. As a result of the National Liberation Front's insurgency against the English launched in 1962, the organization took control of the region up to Aden in a short time. After the NLG took control over the regions near Aden, English troops withdrew on November 29 and on November 30, 1967, a new, independent state was established on the Arabian Peninsula by the name "People's Republic of Southern Yemen." Thus the English reign of 128 years came to an end.¹²

Marxists took over the government and soon changed the state's name into "The People's

Democratic Republic of Southern Yemen," establishing close relations with the Soviet Union and other socialist states. The new government also embraced social transformation regarding its internal policies and realized reforms such as the land reform, the nationalization of foreign corporations, educational and cultural reforms successively since the 1970s.

Meanwhile, the Imam regime in the North was overthrown by a coup in 1962, and with the support of Egypt it was replaced with a republican regime. South Yemen ended the 150 year long English occupation with a Marxist insurgency in the early 1970s, was expected to unite with the North. But in the contrary, regime issues caused border conflicts between the North and the South and the tension lasted until the 1980s.

In fact, the United Yemen policy emerged as a serious political movement in both nations after the English occupation, and was supported by the local authorities and social institutions on both sides. Unification was the aim of the Imams in the beginning, but later it was embraced as an aim by republicans and Yemeni nationalists as well. In this period, pro-unity nationalists gathered in Aden at the South and Sana and Taiz at the North. When the English withdrew from the South and a republic emerged in the North, Yemeni intellectuals and nationalists assumed that unity would happen as a matter of course. But first the failure of the republicans in the civil war in the North, and then Marxist rule in the South hindered unification. The ideologies embraced by the parties created barriers to unification.¹³

In 1989, parallel to the collapse of the Soviet Union, the unification of the North and South again became an issue. Negotiations to this effect were finalized in April 1990 with the signing of a unification treaty. In fact, both sides supported unification in order to expand their areas of influence. For the South, unity would spread the revolutionary structure, rather than the national and regional character, to the

North. This argument left its mark on the 1990-94 process. Both sides supported unity for internal political reasons and believed that unity would consolidate legitimacy and support for their authority. A bipartite federation would allow both sides to influence the other's regime and community easily. Therefore, rather than a process of accommodation, unity was seen as a competition between two sovereign entities within one state. In the 1993 elections, Northern parties increased their influence in the South, while Southern parties remained ineffective in the North. This strengthened Abdullah Saleh's hand. In the parliamentary elections of April 27, 1993, Abdullah Saleh's General People's Congress (GPC) won 123 out of 301 seats in the parliament while the Islah Party won 62, the Yemen Socialist Party (YSP, the governing party in Southern Yemen) won 57, the pro-Iraqi Baathists won 7, Nasserist parties won 4, and independents (including Shiite candidates) won 47 seats. Despite the YSP's objections, a coalition government was formed by GPC and Islah Party (ruled by Hashid Confederation leader, Sheikh Abdullah bin Hussein) which caused conflicts between the North and the South. In other words, the election results proved that Abdullah Saleh could control the YSP through pressure. As a result of the tension caused by the failure of Southern parties, Aden retreated from unity. In 1994, a riot in Aden was quelled and unity was achieved. To maintain unity and power politics, Abdullah Saleh formed alliances with three groups: the Shiite tribes, Islamist groups and Southern Yemenis who had fled the Southern regime and migrated to the North since 1970. With the support of these three groups and by using military power, Abdullah Saleh managed to annex South Yemen to the North.¹⁴ Still, even in 2009 some groups defending the separation of South Yemen from the North are holding demonstrations in Aden.¹⁵

Democratization and Yemen's Economic Structure

The law number 66 adopted in 1991 allowed parties to pursue politics legally. Yemen thus

took an important step towards parliamentary democracy in the Arabian Peninsula, and held its first parliamentary elections in 1993. Except for the YSP, which played a significant role in South Yemen's political life, and the GPC of North Yemen, all political parties have been established in accordance to the political parties and associations law, adopted after the unification and are continuing their activities in the same manner. In Yemen, the establishment of parties based on regional and tribal discrimination is banned and racist parties are forbidden as well. Besides the GPC and the Islah Party, the Baathist Party (based on Arab nationalism) and the Nasserist Party are the prominent parties.¹⁶ Groups that separated from the the YSP and the Islah Party in 2005, and five opposition parties, including the Nasserists, have formed the Joint Meeting Party. This party, supported by the liberal Shiite powers, is leading a stiff opposition to Abdullah Saleh. The conservative Shiites, on the other hand, are organized by the Houthi Young Believers Movement and by the Hak Party in legal politics.¹⁷

Securing the constitutional transition into a multi-party system, supporting free and pluralist journalism and the enfranchisement of women are seen as major achievements in Yemen, where traditional structures are very strong. As we know, in traditional societies where the tribal structure is still powerful as it is in Yemen, women have a secondary role in society. They remain in the background in the fields of education and political life. In this context, Yemen is significant for being the first government in the Arabian Peninsula to give women the right to vote and to be elected. Yemen achieved success not only by granting these rights, but also by encouraging women to participate in the elections. In Yemen, where 45% of the voters are female, the number of registered female voters was 1.8 million in the first elections. This number increased to 3.4 million in the following elections. Still, the number of female representatives in the parliament remains very low.¹⁸

Since 1993, when the democratic process began, Yemeni voters have gone to the polls eight times: three times to elect parliament members (1993, 1997, 2003); two times to elect the president (1999, 2006); two times for the Local Assembly Elections (2001, 2008); and once for the constitutional referendum. These elections have played a significant role in the development of democratic culture in Yemen. This process is also supported by all Yemeni groups.¹⁹ But since the parliamentary elections planned for March 2009 were postponed to 2011 for various reasons, criticisms of “one man’s” authority in Yemen have been raised.

The results of the parliamentary elections are given in the chart below.²⁰

The democratization process in Yemen has also caused debates regarding the relations between the government and the tribes. In Yemen, where economic figures indicate deterioration, President Saleh transfers some of the oil income to regions where tribal leaders are influential in order to keep the tribal leaders within the system. This way tribal leaders take control over the regions the government fails to control. Yemen has 3.5 billion barrels of oil reserves. Back in 2002, Yemen’s oil export was 460 million barrels per day, but in 2008 that number decreased to 300-350 million barrels. Low oil prices may draw Yemen into a serious economic crisis since 75% of the state revenue is based on oil income.²¹ Due the low oil prices,

the unemployment rate reached 40% in Yemen, which is the poorest country in the Arabian Peninsula. The unemployment rate was 30% in 1995. In Yemen, where the inflation rate is around 27%, 45% of the people are living below the poverty line.²² Accordingly, literacy rates have dramatically declined. While 1995 figures indicate that literacy rates were 50% among the female and 30% among the male population, recent figures show that these rates have declined 5% in both groups. Deterioration in the fields of economy and education is increasing the tribal leaders’ influence over their tribes and the central government. President Saleh is aware of this fact, and is transferring money to tribal leaders to keep them within the system in regions where the government is weak.²³ In this context, the decrease in state income and the deterioration of living conditions may cause further instability in Yemen.

Significant steps were taken in year 2000 in order to keep the tribes within the system where the central government is weak. In this context, President Saleh took the social structure into consideration and laid the ground for the establishment of local councils in twenty provinces (San’a is considered a separate electoral district). The local councils will cooperate with the governor, and its members will be directly assigned by the President. Actually, the decision to establish local councils and hold elections to them was made in the first years of the

Political Parties	1993	27 April 1997	January 2002, Seats	27 March 2003
GPC	123	189	223	238
Islah	62	52	64	46
YSP	57	-	2	8
Baath	7	2	2	2
Nasserist Parties	4	3	3	3
Independents	47	54	7	4
Unknown	1	1	-	-
Total	301	301	301	301

unification government, but the plan was later cancelled. The issue was brought up in the parliament again in February 2000 and was settled. It is certain that the local councils in Yemen will play a significant role in strengthening the democracy, but since the local council chairmen have limited power, and are directly assigned by the president himself, the local councils are under the president's control.²⁴

In February 20, 2001, one year after the legal arrangements were completed, the first elections for local councils were held. Election turnouts were high in the local council elections, despite the limited authority they confer. Afterwards it was claimed that the Supreme Elections Committee rigged the elections. After significant amendments to the local election system were made in April 2008, the GPC candidates won in the elections of May 2008. In both elections, opposition parties boycotted the elections, claiming that the government parties, the GPC in particular, made use of the media and state opportunities while other parties were left short.²⁵

The Islah Party and the YSP also blamed Saleh, who has governed the state since 1978, for dragging the country into a one-party system and boycotted the elections. In the 2001 elections, citizens also voted for the constitution amendment package that provided President Abdullah Saleh with broader authority. Saleh's amendment package covers the extension of the president's and parliament member's office terms, increases the numbers of supreme council members, who are assigned by the president, from 60 to 111 and makes it a sub-parliament with a right to legislate. The package extended the presidential term from 5 years to 7 years and enabled the president to be elected twice. This way not only was the Islah Party blocked, conditions that enable Saleh to govern the state until 2013 were also put in place. The referendum results enabled Saleh to extend his presidential term another 2 years until 2006.

The new constitution also increased the supreme council member's numbers to 111. But

the authority distribution among the supreme council whose members are assigned by the president and the parliament whose members are chosen by the citizens were not clearly defined in the new constitution. Still, so much is clear that President Saleh has dramatically increased his control over the parliament through the supreme council²⁶.

In the elections held on September 22, 2006, Abdullah Saleh received 77% of the overall votes and again became president. The opposition candidate, Faysal Bin Shamlan, received 21%. Despite all the criticism, Saleh is guaranteed to remain as president until 2013. Still, there are different scenarios for the post-Saleh period. Saleh's desire to make his son and commander of the Republican Guards, Ali Saleh, president causes reactions among the army members and opposition groups.²⁷ In August 2009, Hussein Hamid al Ahmar, leader of the Islah Party and the Hashed Confederation, criticized the president for handing over his authority to his son and family members. Ahmar asked the president to resign and hold a new presidential election.²⁸ That is why the government transition in Yemen is expected to be more painful than those in Syria or Jordan.

The First Round of Civil War in Yemen: The Coup of 1962 and the Overthrow of the Imams' Regime

The conflict that erupted between the Houthis and the government in 2009 actually dates back to the coup of 1962. In 1962, the coup led by Colonel Sallal put an end to the Imams' regime but the new republican regime did not bring stability. Yemen was drawn into a bloody civil war whose effects are still tangible.²⁹ Imam Bedr was in the palace during the coup, but managed to escape, and started an uprising which grew quickly. As a result, Yemen was drawn into a civil war which is still lasting. After the coup Imam Bedr was harbored in Saudi Arabia and opposed the new Egypt-supported Yemeni government from there. Until 1967, Yemen became an inter-Arab battlefield be-

tween the republicans, supported by Egypt and radical Arab nationalist states, and the Imamists, supported by Saudi Arabia and the oil-rich monarchist Arab States. Just after the coup, Egypt sent troops to Yemen in order to support the republicans. Saudi Arabia supported the Shiite Imams for the time being. In Colonel Sallal's first statement released after the coup, he stated that the aim of the coup was to overthrow the Imams' regime, to bring justice and to put an end to tribal privilege. But the influence of Egypt caused opposition to the new regime among regional states. With the support of Egyptian troops Colonel Sallal maintained control for a while, but the Imamists took control over the rural and mountainous districts near the Saudi Arabian border. Unlike the Iranian Shia, Yemeni Shiites believe that an imam from the blood line of the Ehl-I Beyt is supposed to rule. That is why the uprising among the Shiites in the north spread quickly. The tension between Egypt and Saudi Arabia increased simultaneously, and Egyptian planes bombed Saudi Arabian territory at one stage. Between 1962 and 1967, unsuccessful attempts were made to end the conflict between the government and the Shiite militia and to resolve the issues between the sides. The breakthrough for the North Yemen Civil War was Egypt's defeat in the Egyptian-Israeli War. The Nasser Regime had to cease its support to the republicans, and the republican soldiers had to make a deal with Saudi Arabia. Soon after the Imamists and Republicans agreed to share the new government, Saudi Arabia and the monarchist states officially recognized North Yemen.³⁰ Although the conflict between the imamists and government forces ceased in North Yemen, tension and distrust between the sides lasted in the post-1967 period. The government's attempts to strengthen the central army, recruit Sunni groups and reduce the influence of the Shiite tribes have increased the tension in the region. In 1977, President Colonel Hamdi attempted to reduce the influence of the Shiite tribes and was assassinated for that reason.³¹ Reunification policies became popular in the

1980s and 1990s, and national reconciliation initiatives and democratization attempts reduced the internal tension in Yemen. During this period Shiite religious figures who were members of the Houthi family and hundreds of thousands of regime opponents who had taken refuge in Saudi Arabia were allowed to return.

In early 90s, when political parties' activities were permitted for the unification of the North and the South, which had been separate for almost 150 years, some Shiite clerics, including Majd Al-Din al Muayiddi and Seyyid Hussein Badreddin al-Houthi, established a group called the "Young Believers." Badreddin Al-Houthi began intensive education activities, including summer courses, in order to protect Shia in Yemen. Similarly, the Shiites have established a party named "Al Hak" against the Saudi-backed Salafite movement. Although the Shiite organization failed to achieve much success in the elections of 1993, Hussein Houthi and his friends managed to get in the parliament. Between 1993 and 1997, Hussein Houthi struggled against discrimination in the parliament regarding the Shiite regions. In 1997 he resigned and went to Sudan to receive religious education. After living in Sudan for 2 years, Houthi came back to Yemen and led the Young Believers movement.

Houthi supporters adopted a more radical approach towards relations with the US and Israel after they came back to Yemen, and have also criticized Abdullah Saleh's relations with the US and Saudi Arabia.³² Tension have further increased between the Shiite groups and the government when Abdullah Saleh, a Shiite himself, established closer relations with the US after the 9/11 incident and the US invasions of Iraq and Afghanistan.

Renewed Conflict in Yemen: The Shiite Uprising

In January 2003, President Saleh made a pilgrimage to Mecca, Saudi Arabia. At the same time he also paid a visit Sa'ad as well. Saleh

planned to participate in the Friday prayers at the famous Imam Hadi Mosque in Sa'ad and to make a speech there. However, when he attempted to make a speech after the prayer service an anti-Israel anti-American group began to shout slogans and he was forced to leave the mosque.³³ The demonstration at the Imam Hadi Mosque triggered the conflict. Demonstrations spread quickly. The government blamed Hussein Houthi and the Young Believers for the demonstrations. The tension that started between the Shiite groups and the government in 2003 increased rapidly, and the Shiites blamed the government for its sectarian discrimination, for not investing in Shiite regions, for collaborating with the US and Saudi Arabia, and for supporting Saudi Arabia's sectarian political activities. The Saleh government the blamed the Houthis and the states that support them for destabilizing Yemen. The demonstrations intensified after January 2003, and the government warned Seyyid Hussein al-Houthi to end the demonstrations. But Saleh's attempts to end the demonstrations failed. In 2004, the government released an arrest warrant for Houthi and the demonstrators. Houthi blamed the government for collaborating with Saudi Arabia and decided to engage in military struggle. Armed conflict between the Houthi supporters and the government went through a critical phase when Hussein Houthi was killed on September 10, 2004.³⁴ After Houthi's death, the government declared a unilateral ceasefire and that the civil war was over.

Hussein Houthi's brothers Abdul-Malik and Yahia Houthi took leadership after their brother's death, and refused to compromise with the Saleh government. The second round of the conflict began when Shiite groups attacked the security forces in Sa'ad in March 2005. As the conflict intensified in Spring 2005, security forces took Hussein Houthi's eighty year old father, Badreddin Houthi, into custody. Badreddin Houthi blamed the government for fueling the conflict, and stated that his son, who was killed together with his wife and children, did

nothing but defend Islam. Saleh's government blamed the Hak Party and United People's Forces Party for participating in the conflict. Meanwhile militants of the Young Believers Movement took control of the Sa'ad region near the Saudi Arabian border, causing uneasiness in the Saudi Arabian regime. After air-raided supported operations, the government declared victory again in May 2005, and decided to cease military operations, but the government was unable to take control of the Houthi occupied areas³⁵.

Although the extent of the conflict has been reduced, tension between the sides has not ended. In 2005 conflict between pro-government tribes and pro-Houthi tribes spread quickly and led to conflicts between the Houthis and the security forces. These conflicts are considered the third round of conflicts and lasted until early 2006. Conflicts ended when Saleh declared amnesty for Hussein Houthi's brother and many others and established dialogue with the insurgent groups in order not to overshadow the 2006 elections. However, the civil war began again for the fourth time when dialogues failed after the elections and the Houthis began to threaten the Jewish groups in Yemen. Conflicts lasted until May 2007. In order to end the instability in Yemen, Hamad Bin Khalifa Al Thani, the Sheikh of Qatar, came to Yemen in May 2007. The conflicts ended with the mediation of the Qatari government and as a result of promises to provide economic support to Shiite groups. Following the ceasefire of June 16, 2007, the Sheikh of Qatar succeeded in bringing the sides together in Doha on February 2, 2008. The Sheikh also decided to donate 300-500 million dollars to the insurgent groups in Sa'ad who were harmed in the civil war and helped the government of Yemen to get the Houthis to lay down their weapons. Military operations and conflicts stopped with the efforts of the Sheikh, but the atmosphere in the region was still tense.

Despite Qatar's efforts, the essential issues be-

tween the government and the Houthis were not resolved, and conflicts began again in March 2008. Each side held the other one responsible for the renewal of conflict, but disagreement about how the Qatari donation should be distributed, whether or not the Houthis should maintain their military status, and the Saudi-Qatari rivalry are considered to be the main issues.³⁶ President Saleh's attempt to use some tribes from the Hashed Confederation has intensified the conflicts. While the Bakil Tribe Confederation, one of Yemen's most influential tribal confederations, sided with the Houthis, the Hashed Confederation took sides with the government. There is a blood feud between the two confederations. As a result, the vendetta between the Shiite tribes came up again when the Hashed confederation tribes were driven to the front. In fact, the renewal of civil war for the fifth time was caused by local conflicts between the Hashed and Bakil confederations. The conflicts ended when President Saleh declared that he cares about peaceful initiatives on July 17. Conflicts stopped during July and the first weeks of August, but hopes for solution were soon replaced by doubt and mutual distrust.³⁷

The Sixth Round of Civil War: Instability and the Return of the Conflict Cycle

Conflicts between the Houthis and the government stopped when President Saleh declared that he cares about peaceful initiatives on July 17. In July, air and land operations were suspended and negotiations to end the civil war were initiated despite the Houthis' control over the majority of Sa'ad. Despite the settlement of partial resolutions, distrust and intertribal tension and the power struggle between government units, tribes supporting the government, Salafite groups and the Shiite militia triggered the conflicts again. The government decided to relaunch operations on August 11, 2009. Hundreds of civilians died in military air and land operations at the Sa'ad region.³⁸ Thousands left their homes to live in tents and refugee camps. The Saleh government decided to use excessive

force to remove the Houthi "cancer." So they recruited thousands for the militias that they mustered from Shiite tribes and drove them to the front to fight against the Houthis. In an article published in the Egyptian newspaper, *Al Ahram Weekly*, Nasser Arabi claimed that both Hashed and Bakil leaders will fight alongside with the government forces against the insurgents.³⁹ However, contrary to the Egyptian newspaper's report, the government was supported by the Shiite Hashed tribe, which is in turn engaged in a power struggle against the Bakil tribes. In July 2009 when the ceasefire was in effect, President Saleh met with the anti-Houthi tribal leaders and formed an army of twenty-seven thousand soldiers. It is also said that many anti-Houthi tribe members volunteered to fight along with the government forces.⁴⁰ The government declared its terms for a ceasefire on August 22, immediately after the conflicts began. The conditions consisted of six demands, and rather than setting terms, it simply demanded the unconditional surrender of the insurgent groups. The Houthi groups were ordered to withdraw from the Sa'ad region and other regions which they held under control, the militia in the mountains were ordered to quit the insurgency and disarm, to surrender their weapons and all kinds of ammunition, to cooperate with the government regarding the kidnapped foreigners, surrender kidnapped persons and deliver them to Sa'ad, and not to interfere with the local authorities under any circumstances.⁴¹ The government declared that the operations would continue until the insurgent groups accept the terms.

Abdul-Malik Houthi immediately refused to surrender unconditionally. In early September he declared that Saleh's terms are a nothing but a deception, aiming to manipulate the international community, and that his forces have the power to fight far longer than the government predicts. He said that they would expand the struggle with governmental forces on every front.⁴² The Republican Guards, led by Ali Abdullah Saleh, the son of Abdullah Saleh,

have expanded their military operations in the region. The government declared that Republican Guards equipped with modern Russian tanks will continue operations until the insurgent groups surrender. Abdullah Saleh, who visited the Republican Guards' base in Tarik, explained that he trusts the Republican Guards and that they will fight until all insurgents are in the Sa'ad region are wiped out.⁴³ On September 11 the government forces declared that the Harf Sufian district of the Amran province has been retaken from the Houthi insurgents and that the operations in Sa'ad were continuing successfully. The Houthis declared that they can keep Sa'ad under control and that government forces have suffered great loss in the recent conflicts.⁴⁴ Despite Islah Party leader Hussein Al Ahmar's initiatives to establish dialogue and find a peaceful resolution, the government refused to negotiate with the insurgents.⁴⁵ The Islah Party is the prominent opposition party in Yemen and is backed by the Sunni Islamists.

As the conflicts escalated and spread to the Sana'a and Amran provinces, Yemeni opposition groups invited the government and the Houthis to declare an immediate ceasefire and launch mechanisms to send humanitarian aid to those who were harmed in the conflicts. They also stated that they were ready to mediate for a peaceful resolution if sides would agree, but Saleh said that opposition parties are not capable of resolving the dispute and that all they were doing was deepening the crisis.⁴⁶ In the zones restricted to the press and humanitarian aid organizations, it has been claimed that thousands of people trying to escape the war are in need of clean water and basic needs. International aid organizations are concerned that the humanitarian conditions in the region are deteriorating and reaching critical levels.⁴⁷ The insurgent Houthi groups do not have any social support. Most of the Houthi leaders are leading the war from outside of Yemen. Regional states are expected not to stand idle in the civil war and will side with one side or

the other. Especially Saudi Arabia and Iran are thought to pursue active policies regarding the conflict in Yemen. Yemeni experts believe that the conflicts will not end any time soon for this reason.⁴⁸

The Regional Impact of the Conflicts in Yemen: The Saudi Arabian-Iranian Rivalry

Although the conflicts in Yemen have a sectarian, historical and political background, some hold Iran, Libya and/or Saudi Arabia responsible for the reemergence and intensification of the 2004 civil war. The use of heavy weapons in the recent conflicts and the Shiite groups' demonstrations against Saudi Arabia, Israel and the US are remarkable. State spokesman Hassan Ahmad al-Levzi released a statement in August 2009 after the outbreak of civil war blaming foreign powers for supporting the insurgents financially and politically, without naming names. It stated: "Religious authorities are attempting to interfere with our internal affairs. The authorities are supporting terrorists economically and politically and they are destroying stability in Yemen and in Sa'ad in particular."⁴⁹ It also stated that the ambassador of an unnamed state had been summoned to the Foreign Ministry and warned not to interfere in Yemen's domestic affairs.

In August, the government of Yemen regarded it necessary to give notice to the Iranian Embassy because of the news in the Iranian media. Abu-Bakr al-Qirby, Yemen's Foreign Minister, explained that he gave notice to the Ambassador of Iraq and added that mutual relations will be affected negatively if news coverage supporting the insurgents continues to be broadcast in the Iranian media. The minister also stated that the government of Yemen might have to make decisions that would damage relations with Iran irreparably.⁵⁰ The news in the Arabic El-Alem newspaper in Iran stated that Yemeni government forces launched operations with Saudi Arabia against Shiite militants. Following the news, authorities declared that Iranian

made short range missiles and automatic weapons were captured during operations in Sa'dah and Amran on August 21, 2009.⁵¹

The tension between Yemen and Iran increased when President Saleh accused Iran and the Sadr Group in Iraq of supporting the Shiite militia in Yemen in an interview on the Qatar based Al-Jazeera TV Channel.⁵² With these statements, the government of Yemen officially blamed Iran for interfering with Yemen's internal affairs and backing the insurgents that they define as terrorists. In another statement Saleh claimed that two of the captured insurgents admitted that they had received 100,000 dollars from Iran.⁵³

When tensions increased, Iran declared that they support stability in Yemen and that they are ready to discuss any issue to strengthen mutual relations. Iranian Foreign Minister Mottaki had a telephone conversation with the Foreign Minister of Yemen and stated again that they believe that conflicts and blood will not serve the interests of Yemen and its people. He added, "Iran is a friend of Yemen who believes that Yemen can resolve its own issues through dialogue and with no need for foreign interference."⁵⁴

Despite Iran's initiatives Yemen and regional states believe that Tehran and the Hezbollah in Lebanon are supporting the Shiite militants. In fact, a short while after the meetings, President Saleh declared that they are not directly accusing the government of Iran, but from Iran's mediation attempts they figured out that Tehran had contact with the insurgent groups. He also mentioned some proofs about Iranian groups supporting the insurgents.⁵⁵ Saudi Arabia, on the other hand, is disturbed by Iran's increasing influence in the Middle East since 2003. Saudi Arabia is concerned that Shia will gain strength in the region. A Hezbollah-like Shiite organization across the border is perceived as a threat by Saudi Arabia. According to the Hak Party in Yemen, Saudi Arabia is disturbed by the Shi-

ite movement at the border. Yahia Houthi also claims that Saudi Arabia is disturbed by the Shiite movement in Yemen and puts economical and political pressure on the Saleh government to make it fight against the Shiite groups.⁵⁶ Osama Nuggali, the Saudi Arabian spokesman for the foreign ministry says, "Stability in Yemen is important for Saudi Arabia and regional countries."⁵⁷ While Saudi Arabia and the government of Yemen blame Iran for supporting the Shiite militia, the Shiites blame Saudi Arabia for interfering in the conflict. A declaration by the Shiite militia on August 31 stated that Saudi jet planes have launched air operations to the regions under militia control.⁵⁸

The intensifying conflicts in Yemen have re-awakened sectarian tension and Saudi Arabian-Iranian rivalry again. Other than Iran, Bahrain and Iraqi Shiite groups have also declared that they support the Houthis. This shows that the Shiite-Sunni tensions will continue to increase in the region. In his speech on August 16, Iraqi Parliament Foreign Relations Commission Chairman Sheikh Hammam Hamaudi asked Baghdad to open a bureau for the Houthis in return for Yemen's support to the Baath Party.⁵⁹ Thus he indirectly offered Baghdad's support for the Yemeni Shiites in return for Yemen's support for Sunni Arabs. Besides Saudi Arabia, all anti-Iranian states in the Middle East support the Saleh government in the war. Such attitude may increase the Shiite-Sunni tension in the Arab Peninsula.

Turkey-Yemen Relations and Ankara's Approach Towards the Civil War

Like other regional countries, the civil war in Yemen influenced Turkish-Yemeni relations as well. Developments in Turkish-Yemeni relations go back five hundred years, making it necessary to emphasize the historical background again. Turkey-Yemen relations were the subject of touching Turkish folksongs beginning with Sultan Selim I's campaign to Egypt. When the Ottoman Empire, the greatest Islamic power of the era, launched a campaign to Egypt, Ye-

men was ruled by the Caucasian Emir Iskender, a dependent of the Sultan of the Mamelukes. Emir Iskender was sent to the region after Emir Bersebey was killed by insurgents. Emir Iskender quickly reestablished order in Yemen. When Sultan Selim defeated the Mamelukes in 1517 and took control of Cairo, the Circassian Emir Iskender chose to obey him. Thus Yemen indirectly became a part of the Ottoman Empire, but Emir Iskender's loyalty to Sultan Selim was intolerable to the Shiite tribes and a great uprising began under the leadership of Imam Sherafeddin.⁶⁰ The anti-Ottoman Shiite insurgents won control over most of Yemen. This ended when Hadim Suleiman Pasha, the governor of Egypt, launched the Indian campaign and Ottomans took control over Yemen again. In 1540, the Ottoman Empire elevated the status of Yemen to a provincial government and assigned Gazza Flag Officer Mustapha Pasha as governor of Yemen.⁶¹ While the Ottomans tried to strengthen their hand in Yemen, Imam Qasim rebelled in 1595. Imam Qasim's uprising was backed by the Zaidi tribes and lasted until 1635 when the Ottoman influence in Yemen declined again. Yemen was left to the rule of the Shiite Imams. Although the Ottoman Empire no longer had connections with Yemen, these lands were seen as the part of the empire. As a matter of fact, when the English wanted to establish a coal depot in Yemen in the 1840s they asked the Ottomans for permission. In this era, first the Portuguese and then the French, the English and the Germans tried to strengthen their influence in Yemen. These attempts had a great impact on the Ottoman Empire's Yemen policies. The empire watched the power struggle over Yemen with great concern and finally in 1849 it launched a campaign to Yemen, led by Tefvik Pasha the Cypriot⁶². The campaign proved to be a success. The Shiite uprisings lasted until 1872 when San'a was taken under control as well. In early 1900s the Shiite groups of Yemen rebelled again, this time under the leadership of Imam Yahya. The incidents lasted until 1911 when an agreement was signed between Izzet Pasha and

Imam Yahya. In this agreement the Ottoman Empire supported Imam Yahya's claims over Southern Yemen which was under British control. In return, Imam Yahya pledged loyalty to the Ottoman Empire. Thus the Shiite uprisings ended.⁶³ The war with the Shiite militia against the British occupation forces lasted until 1914. In 1914 the Ottoman Empire and England signed a treaty and the Ottomans recognized British rule in the south, but when WWI began, the Ottomans launched joint operations with Imam Yahya's militia against the British. The Ottoman Empire had its 7th Army Legion established in San'a. The Ottoman 7th army quarter is still used as the State Guesthouse of the defense Ministry in Yemen.⁶⁴ The Ottoman Military Headquarters are also used as the Presidency of the General Staff and the President's office.

The war in Yemen lasted until 1918. After the war, Imam Yahya sent a letter to the Assembly of the Republic of Turkey in 1921 and declared his loyalty to the new Turkish Republic. This loyalty officially ceased with the Treaty of Lausanne signed on July 24, 1923.⁶⁵ Today, on the epitaph of the Ottoman Martyrs' Tomb in San'a it states: "Here lie the Ottoman heroes who fought along with the Holy Imam Yahya in the name of Islam."⁶⁶ The government of Yemen allowed the building of a Turkish cemetery in this area and donated the land to the Republic of Turkey.

Although the Ottoman Empire withdrew from Yemen after WWI, some bureaucrats and soldiers remained there. They chose to settle in Yemen. Dr. Gedikli's researches in Yemen show that there are more than 10,000 Turks living in Yemen today. There are 6,000 Turks living in San'a. There is a neighborhood in San'a whose headman is of Turkish origin. Bir-ül Azap is another Turkish neighborhood in San'a. Some Yemen citizens who learned Turkish from their grandfathers are able to speak Turkish. Relations between Turkey and Yemen improved after PM Erdogan's visit to Yemen in 2005. After

that, the government of Yemen permitted a Turkish school in San'a. In March 2009, Koksalsal Toptan, Chairman of the Turkish Grand National Assembly (TBMM) at the time visited the school and its 550 students. His visit was highly acclaimed.⁶⁷ There are also villages and smaller settlements where lots of Turks live. The Ethemogullari village is one of them. Mahmud Nedim Pasha, the Ottoman Governor of Yemen at the time was among those who chose to stay in Yemen. Interestingly, he continued to serve as the governor of San'a during Imam Yahya's reign.⁶⁸

Imam Yahya benefited from the experience of Ottoman bureaucrats and soldiers who remained in Yemen in the post-Ottoman period. The first units of the regular army were composed of Ottoman soldiers. With the 300 Ottoman soldiers that remained in Yemen, Imam Yahya built the core of the modern Yemeni Army. He chose his foreign affairs advisors from the Ottoman bureaucrats. Among these Ottoman bureaucrats, Mohammed Ragip served as Foreign Minister of Yemen for a long time. Ragip served as an advisor to Imam governments until 1960. He was also the father in law of Imam Ahmed.⁶⁹ His car is still on exhibit at the entrance of the Military Museum of San'a.⁷⁰

Despite the Ottoman heritage, Turkish-Yemeni relations showed no improvement until the late 1980s. After PM Turgut Ozal's visit to Yemen on December 20, 1986, the Turkish Embassy in Yemen was opened in 1988. After the unification of North and South Yemen in 1990, the Turkey-Yemen relations were barely maintained. Mutual relations began when the then Turkish Foreign Minister Abdullah Gul visited Yemen as a part of the OIC meetings in July 2005. After that Abdulqadir Bajammal, PM of Yemen, visited Turkey and Turkish PM Erdogan paid a visit to Yemen in 2005. Thus mutual relations came to a head. In this context, Ali Abdullah Saleh, the President of Yemen, held a top level visit to Turkey as the guest of President Abdul-

lah Gul. In this first presidential level visit, both sides exchanged opinions regarding political, economic, cultural, regional and international subjects. Before Saleh's visit, the Third Term Meeting Protocol of the Turkey-Yemen Joint Committee which was signed on September 7, 2005 in Ankara was approved. The protocol agreed upon mutual cooperation in fields such as trade, culture, energy and health.⁷¹ Also in 2009, mutual visits to develop relations have been held. In this context, Foreign Minister Ali Babacan made an official visit to Yemen in February 2009. A short while after Babacan's visit, Turkish National Assembly Chairman Koksalsal Toptan and a delegation of parliament members were officially invited to Yemen.

The rapidly developing relationship has also affected Turkey's policies regarding the violence in Yemen. The Turkish Foreign Ministry made a press release after the civil war in Yemen has started and clearly stated that Turkey supports the territorial unity of Yemen. When tension between the government and the Shiite forces led to conflict on June 18, 2009, the Turkish Foreign Ministry released a statement: *"Turkey supports Yemen's national unity, territorial integrity and stability. Turkey enjoys exemplary relations with Yemen based on a long and deeply rooted common history, and views the acts of violence targeting the political stability of this friendly and brotherly country in the past months with concern. Yemen's stability is important for the whole region's peace and stability."*⁷² As the incidents continued, the ministry released another statement that stated: *"It is our sincere hope that the problems Yemen faces can be resolved immediately through peaceful means based on Yemen's national unity and territorial integrity."*⁷³ Turkey solidified its support for Yemen by making a donation of 100 thousand US dollars in cash as a response to the World Food Program's international aid call. It is remarkable that Turkey supports the San'a government in the civil war. In this context, Turkey is supporting the Arab thesis advocated by Saudi Arabia.

Conclusion

The civil war in Yemen began anew in August 2009 and grabbed the attention of the international community. The background of the tensions between the Zaidis (a Shiite sect) and the government forces in Northern Yemen since 2004 actually go back to the coup of 1962. Although the Imam regime was overthrown by the coup of 1962, the country drifted into civil war until 1967. The war ended as a result of the reconciliation between the government and Shiite groups. In early 2000s, a new uprising began against the Abdullah Saleh government. With the influence of the increasing sectarian struggles in the Middle East after the US occupation of Iraq in 2003, the Shiite insurgency against the government flared up again in Yemen. The Shiite tribes' main objectives are to protect their autonomous state in their region and to oppose the government's diplomatic and political relations with western states, particularly with the US. The tension in Yemen turned into an armed struggle in August 2009. We are concerned that the civil war may fuel Sunni-Shiite strife in the Middle East and rivalry between Iran and Saudi Arabia. As a matter of fact, both countries are attempting to inter-

ferre with the conflict in Yemen through different means. Turkey, on the other hand, supports more peaceful and dialogue-based policies for the solution of Yemen's issues. Turkey attaches exclusive importance to the protection of Yemen's territorial unity and political stability. The civil war deepened humanitarian problems in Yemen. In Yemen, one of the poorest countries on earth, 150 thousand people were forced to leave their homes as a result of the conflict between the government and the Houthis. Economic and humanitarian issues worsened in the Sa'ada region which was once the best developed region in Yemen. There are many arguments about the causes of the conflict. Some analysts put an emphasis on the intensifying competition between Iran and Saudi Arabia in the Arabian Peninsula, while others indicate the inter-tribal conflicts in Yemen, the Shiite-Sunni tension, the power struggle of the Zaidis and the potential power struggles of the post-Saleh period expected to begin in 2013 when his term will expire. Here, one should mention that that to some extent all these elements played a part in leading to civil war. Therefore, we can assume that the civil war in Yemen will not cease any time soon and will trigger further conflict dynamics in the region.

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