

Resolving the Civil Conflict in Yemen

History of Yemen

Yemen was originally known as the Yemen Eyalet, a province of the Ottoman Empire. Eventually, there was a land reform in the Ottoman Empire and it became known as Yemen Vilayet. In the late 19th century, a group called the Zaidis led a revolt against the Turks in the area. Forcing the Ottomans to retreat and restore sharia law in Yemen.¹

After the collapse of the Ottoman Empire, part of the territory became known as North Yemen, while the British continued to occupy an area known as South Yemen, which was regarded as a part of British India until 1937.² During a Cold War proxy conflict, a South Yemeni insurgency revolted and the British withdrew, leaving it under control of the insurgency. The North Yemeni Civil War began in 1962 and continued until 1970. This became a proxy war since Egypt, which was closely allied with the Soviet Union at the time, sided with North Yemen while Saudi Arabia, which was allied with the United Kingdom and United States, sided with South Yemen.³ The war resulted in approximately 10,000 casualties and paved the way for North Yemen to reestablish their form of government, making it a republic.⁴ South Yemen, on the other hand, became a secular Marxist state ruled by, what was eventually called, the Yemen Socialist Party.² During the late 1980s, there was oil exploration on the border of these two countries and both realized that it would be in their best interest to work together. In addition to working together on this oil exploration, the two countries decided that they would also come together for unification talks.

In 1990, Ali Abdullah Saleh of North Yemen and Ali Salim al-Beidh of South Yemen jointly agreed to a draft unity constitution and the Republic of Yemen was declared on May 22, 1990. Ali Abdullah Saleh became president of a united Yemen. However, tensions arose among the previous southerners and northerners since many of the southerners felt that the northerners were still in control and the southerners did not have proper representation in the government. Tensions



¹ "Yemen." Encyclopedia Britannica. <https://www.britannica.com/place/Yemen>

² "South Yemen History." Global Security. <http://www.globalsecurity.org/military/world/yemen>

³ "How the 1967 War Dramatically Reoriented Saudi Arabia's Foreign Policy." Brookings.

<https://www.brookings.edu/blog/markaz/2017/05/30/how-the-1967-war-dramatically-re-oriented-saudi-arabias-foreign-policy/>

⁴ "North Yemen Civil War." The Polynational War Memorial. <http://www.war-memorial.net/North-Yemen-Civi>

persisted until 2002 when Al-Qaeda attacked and destroyed an oil tanker in the Gulf of Aden, which lost Yemen possible revenue, considering that oil accounts for the majority of Yemen's exports and a large amount of its annual revenue.⁵

Yemen was put under further strain in 2004 when the Houthi insurgency first began. During the summer of 2004, an insurgency led by Hussein al-Houthi killed hundreds in the north. In September of 2004, the Yemeni government captured and killed Hussein al-Houthi, yet his-followers continued to support him and fight his battle. In March of 2005, over 200 people were killed in a battle between the Houthi supporters and the established government. Fighting between Houthi rebel forces and the Yemeni government continued and has continued for over a decade.⁶ In 2011, the conflict truly grew into a full blown civil conflict. The Houthis used the 2011 Yemen protests in order to gain more support by using the outrage that many Yemeni citizens had begun feeling towards their government to their advantage.⁷

How the Civil Conflict Began

Hussein al-Houthi's main goal was to rebel against the government, and specifically President Saleh, whom he believed had betrayed the Shias. President Saleh was a Zaidi Shia himself and had told the Shia people that they needed to strengthen their forces so that they could stand and fight against the possible encroachment of Sunni-dominated Saudi Arabia. Hussein al-Houthi was running a school at that time and changed it from a religious school to a religious military academy. President Saleh was not solely responsible for the anger the Houthis felt, but they considered him an unfit leader.⁸ The goal of the Houthis became to get President Saleh out of power. The conflict officially began in 2011 when President Saleh said that he would resign and there would be a transition of power to his deputy, Abdrabbuh Hadi. In February of 2012, Abdrabbuh Hadi became the new president of the Republic of Yemen.⁹ Saleh did not leave Hadi with a stable country. Immediately, the new president was trying to find a way to keep both Al-Qaeda and the Houthis calm and to fend off their threats. Threats continued for years after this transitional government was put into place. No major battle occurred between any of the rebel forces and the government during this time.¹⁰

In early 2014, the Houthis stormed into the city of Sana'a and demanded that a "unity government" be negotiated. They proceeded to draft their own constitution which the government immediately rejected in January of 2015. A month later, the Houthis appointed their own presidential council to replace President Hadi. This council was led by Mohammed Ali al-Houthi, a relative of Hussein al-Houthi. Hadi fled to Aden shortly after the Houthis managed to gain control and declared that he still remains Yemen's legitimate president.¹¹ The poor transition of power in a time of political

⁵ "Yemen" OEC. <http://atlas.media.mit.edu/en/profile/country/yem/>

⁶ "Yemen profile - Timeline." BBC. <http://www.bbc.com/news/world-middle-east-14704951>

⁷ "Yemen Uprising." Encyclopedia Britannica. <https://www.britannica.com/event/Yemen-Uprising>

⁸ "The Rise of Yemen's Houthis." Al Jazeera. <http://www.aljazeera.com/blogs/middleeast/2014/02/98466>

⁹ "Yemen Election: One Person, One Vote, One Candidate." NPR. <http://www.npr.org/2012/02/21/1472055>

¹⁰ "Yemen crisis: Who is fighting whom?" BBC. <http://www.bbc.com/news/world-middle-east-29319423>

¹¹ "Abdu Rabbu Mansour Hadi, Deposed President, Returns to Yemen." The New York Times.

<https://www.nytimes.com/2015/09/23/world/middleeast/abdu-rabbu-mansour-hadi-deposed-president-returns-to-yemen.html>



tension gave the Houthis the advantage they needed. With more and more citizens noticing the hardships that the government was unable to deal with, they looked to the Houthis and were convinced by their ideas and mission.

Religious Conflict

Yemen is a predominantly Sunni Muslim country, as are most of the Arab League nations. The Muslim population in Yemen, specifically, is roughly 65% Sunni and 35% Shia.¹² Shia Muslims are regarded as “Zaydi Muslims,”; a sect of Islam that shares aspects of their beliefs with both Sunni and traditional Shia Muslims. The Shias predominantly live in northern Yemen and generally keep to themselves. Generally, there was not much conflict between them and the Sunni majority but the Shias still usually chose to seclude themselves within their tribe, especially for practicing their religious traditions, which still differed slightly from those of the Sunni Muslims.¹³ When the Houthis saw a surge in power in 2014, the leader was a Shia Muslim. He was able to draw and attract fellow Shia Muslims that had been the minority for the majority of their lives.

Although the Houthis originally consisted of predominantly Shia Muslims, it drew attention from the other citizens as well. The group was not afraid to demonstrate its opposition and anger at, what they considered unfair treatment by the government. Originally, the group felt that the Saleh government had been unfair and had been allowing other countries, such as Saudi Arabia and the United States, to influence how Yemen ran its government. These allegations were drawn from the extensive help that Saudi Arabia had been giving to Yemen at the request of President Saleh. Saudi Arabia had been forming closer economic ties with Yemen and the Houthis interpreted this as “meddling” and felt that Saudi Arabia had an ulterior motive.¹⁴ Other citizens were also opposed to the government for this very reason and felt that the Houthis gave them a voice. Again, this caused the Houthi group to grow in numbers and, in turn, strength. Over time, the Houthis grew more and more frustrated with the government.¹⁵

What Has Happened Since

Currently, the overarching issue is that the Houthis are fighting against pro-governmental forces. In 2014, the government cut fuel subsidies, accomplishing nothing other than angering the Houthis and driving them to organize mass protests in the streets.¹⁶ After these protests, the Houthis moved to seize Sana'a, the capital of the country, where they currently reside. A year later, the new president of Yemen asked various other Gulf States to intervene militarily. This intervention was expected to

¹² “Yemen International Religious Freedom Report.” *State Document*. <https://www.state.gov/documents/organization/2011524836191>

¹³ “Yemen’s Shia Dilemma.” *Al Jazeera*. <http://www.aljazeera.com/indepth/opinion/2011/05/2011524836191>

¹⁴ “The Rise of the Houthis.” *PRI*. <https://www.pri.org/stories/2015-01-22/rise-houthis-brief-history-yemens-history>

¹⁵ “Timeline: The Rise of Yemen’s Houthi Rebels.” *Al Jazeera*. <http://www.aljazeera.com/indepth/interactive/2015/01/timeline-the-rise-of-yemens-houthi-rebels/20150122104510111.html>

¹⁶ “Yemen concessions fail to end Houthi protests.” *Al Jazeera*. <http://www.aljazeera.com/news/middleeast/2014/12/yemen-concessions-fail-end-houthi-protests/20141208104510111.html>



last only a couple of weeks, but continues into 2019.¹⁷ Shortly afterwards, President Hadi fled to Saudi Arabia. In April of 2016, UN-sponsored talks began between the government and the Houthis, along with former President Saleh's General People's Congress (GPC). On the military front, in an effort to end the conflict, the Saudi and Emirati-led coalition have repeatedly blockaded the country and regions held by the Houthis, contributing to the humanitarian disaster. But the Houthis and terror groups have also been involved in rights violations by indiscriminating exploding bombs, preventing the arrival of humanitarian aid, and engaging in torture.¹⁸

The United Nations is still looking for a peaceful way to calm the situation down and keep it from escalating even more. In 2015, two rounds of peace talks were held in Switzerland. Talks have, so far, failed to bring a peaceful conclusion to the conflict. Even short-term ceasefires, such as the one agreed to in early December of 2018, quickly failed by January 2019.¹⁹

Furthermore, the World Bank is funding the Yemen Emergency Crisis Response Project (YECRP). The project aims to alleviate the pressure and impact put on local households by the crises in the area by providing short-term employment opportunities and aiming to revive a local, private sector. YECRP has been implemented and has spread across Yemen by the United Nations Development Programme (UNDP), which partners with the Social Fund for Development and the Public Works Project.

Role of the Arab League

The Arab League wanted to play a mediating role when the situation in Yemen first began. The countries in the Arab League feared that the destabilizing nature of the conflict could spread throughout the entire Middle Eastern region. In 2009, the Arab League Secretary General, Amre Moussa, requested that a national dialogue be held with the countries of the Arab League and Houthi representatives in order to try to calmly arrive at a solution. At the time, President Saleh declined this proposition and insisted that he could settle the conflict himself.²⁰

When the new president, Abdrabbuh Hadi, took over, he asked various members of the Arab League to intervene in Yemen militarily, as previously mentioned. After this request, Saudi Arabia led a military coalition to launch air strikes against Houthi forces in Sana'a and Sa'da. Fighter jets and ground forces from Egypt, Morocco, Jordan, Sudan, the United Arab Emirates, Kuwait, Qatar, and

¹⁷ "Yemen Crisis: Why is there a war?" BBC News. <https://www.bbc.com/news/world-middle-east-29319423>.

¹⁸ "Yemen: Events In 2018." Human Rights Watch. <https://www.hrw.org/world-report/2019/country-chapters/yemen>.

¹⁹ "Yemen Crisis: Why is there a war?" BBC News

²⁰ "Arab League promises victory in Yemen." Al Jazeera. <http://america.aljazeera.com/articles/2015/3/29/ara>

Bahrain also took part in the operation. Djibouti, Eritrea, and Somalia made their airspace, military bases, and various territorial waters available to the entire coalition.

Iran, unlike its many Arab League neighbors, has not joined the Saudi-led intervention in Yemen. Instead, Iran, a predominantly Shia Muslim nation, has allied itself with the Houthis, whom Iran believes are the legitimate rulers of Yemen. Up until 2015, there was no evidence that Iran had been assisting the Houthis.²¹ In 2015, however, it became apparent that the Houthis weapons were becoming more advanced and that they were clearly being helped by Iran. Iran denies these accusations but the clear advancement in the weaponry of the Houthis is enough to convince Western nations such as the United States and Arab nations like Saudi Arabia that Iran is supplying new and advanced technology to the Houthis.²²

The United States has sided with the Saudi when it comes to this conflict. The US has supported the Saudi-led coalition by providing targeting intelligence and refueling Saudi warplanes.²³ Trump has made foreign policy officials aware that he is looking into expanding US involvement in Yemen by giving it an offensive edge. Lawmakers within the United States are prepared to battle Trump when it comes to this issue, as they believe the last thing the United States needs is further involvement in the Middle East.²⁴

Humanitarian Crises



Citizens of Yemen are looking for any opportunity to flee the dangerous conditions they must face on a daily basis. Since the conflict began, nearly 8000 civilians have been killed and 3.3 million people have been forced from their homes.²⁵ This figure is minuscule compared to the 18.8 million people that the UNHCR has reported are in need. Presently, 10 million people are

struggling to have proper access to food and an additional 4 million do not have access to clean water. Various UN organizations have responded and warned that famine is a likely struggle that the citizens of Yemen will have to face in the upcoming year. Overall, the conflict has left 70% of the population

²¹ "If Yemen's Houthis Weren't Iranian Proxies Before, They Could Be Soon." *PRI*. <https://www.pri.org/stories/2017-03-25/if-yemens-houthis-werent-iranian-proxies-they-could-be-soon>

²² "Iran Steps up Support for Houthis in Yemen's War." *Reuters*. <http://www.reuters.com/article/us-yemen>

²³ "How the U.S. Became More Involved in the War in Yemen." *New York Times*.

<https://www.nytimes.com/interactive/2016/10/14/world/middleeast/yemen-saudi-arabia-us-airstrikes.html>

²⁴ "Trump Administration Weighs Deeper Involvement in Yemen War." *The Washington Post*.

https://www.washingtonpost.com/world/national-security/trump-administration-weighs-deeper-involvement-in-yemen-war/2017/03/26/b81eecd8-0e49-11e7-9d5a-a83e627dc120_story.html?utm_term=.0ed41edb7f52

²⁵ "UN and partners to hold conference seeking urgently needed funds to save millions in Yemen from 'horrific' plight." *UN News*. <https://news.un.org/en/story/2019/02/1033401>

in need of aid.²⁶

Since so many people have been deprived of necessary resources, health facilities and other businesses are quickly being shut down. Children are severely malnourished and are not able to get help. The most pressing issue many Yemeni children are currently facing is the recent cholera outbreak. The outbreak has been deemed the worst in history, with hundreds of thousands of Yemeni civilians contracting cholera within the past few months. The infection can be contracted by ingesting food or water that is contaminated with the cholera bacterium.²⁷ The Hadi government is primarily focused on defeating the Houthis and is not concerned as much as it should be with its citizens. President Hadi himself is rarely in the country out of fear of being hurt by the rebels.

The war, therefore, has not only led to instability in the Yemeni government, but has left the people of Yemen weak and desperate. They are unable to access the necessary and basic resources needed to survive. Cholera has been responsible for 1700 deaths solely within 2 months. Reportedly, there are 320,000 suspected cases and an average of 5,000 cases are recorded each and every day.²⁸ While the UN and NGOs are doing as much as they can to aid the conflict, soon it will not be enough.

Questions to Consider

- Were the Houthis justified in trying to draw attention to the unfair treatment they believed they were facing in Yemen?
- Is there any way that the Houthis and the government could possibly come to an understanding?
- Should Arab League states be encouraged to disengage themselves? Or should they try to help find a solution?
- Although peace talks have been going on for a year now, the war is still ongoing. Should the Arab League take further steps at this point? Should the UN intervene further?
- If a peace agreement is reached, how can the Arab League ensure that peace will not be short lived in Yemen?

²⁶ “Yemen Global Focus.” UNHCR. http://reporting.unhcr.org/node/2647#_ga=2.20916536.1244492032.

²⁷ “Yemen Conflict: A Nation’s Agony as Cholera and Hunger Spread.” BBC. <http://www.bbc.com/news/world-middle-east-39483110>

²⁸ “Yemen: ‘World’s Worst Cholera Outbreak’ mapped. Al Jazeera.

<http://www.aljazeera.com/indepth/interactive/2017/06/yemen-world-worst-cholera-outbreak-mapped-170627110239483.html>