

Chapter 38

Yemen, the Wound that Still Bleeds in the Gulf and Beyond



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Abstract This chapter addresses the causes and reasons for continuation of Yemeni civil war. In 2011, Yemenis mobilized to demand the departure of President Abdullah Saleh and the establishment of a better society. After thirty years in power, Saleh signed his resignation and began a political transition that was initially promising. This chapter argues that the absence of real change and the complexity of Yemeni society undermined the process, leading to civil conflict. In addition, the turbulent Yemeni reality was intertwined with dark regional geopolitics, marked by sectarianism and competition between Saudi Arabia, Iran, and United Arab Emirates. This chapter suggests that the war eventually turned into a brutal fight, which has been qualified as *The century's worst humanitarian crisis*.

38.1 Introduction

The United Nations (UN) has qualified Yemen's conflict, which started in 2015, as *The century's worst humanitarian crisis*. However, paradoxically, in 2011–2012, after the Arab Spring, the Yemeni Republic was going through a relatively peaceful and democratic process of political transition and was considered an “example to follow” for other Arab countries. So, why did this initially “successful” process have such a tragic ending? How did series of peaceful demonstrations by university students end in a regional war?

As a hypothetical answer to these questions, we consider that in Yemen, an “*internal dynamic*,” in which different Yemeni actors fight for the control of the State apparatus, has been intertwined with a “*regional dynamic*,” in which external actors fight for the hegemony in the region, intervening in different ways in the conflict and forging pragmatic and conflictive alliances with local actors.

At the same time, Yemen has not been exempt of the COVID-19 Pandemic. In this regard, we consider that the Pandemic has had a catastrophic impact in the field

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of health care, but it has also affected the level of engagement of the external actors, who were constrained by the effects of the virus in their own territories.

Temporally speaking, our work will be circumscribed mainly to the 2011–2020 period. Firstly, we will develop the characteristics of the *internal dynamic*, analyzing some historical interaction patterns that formed the singular Yemeni identity, and the dramatic changes and power disputes that started in 2011 as a result of the ex-President Ali Abdullah Saleh's resignation.

In second place, we will see how in 2015 this conflictive dynamic became intertwined and fed back with the *regional dynamic*, becoming an international war where Saudi Arabia (SA), Iran, the United Arab Emirates (UAE), and other regional powers intervened based on their own interests. Finally, we will analyze the Pandemic's impact in the healthcare field and also in the conflict's dynamic.

Every event of international impact must be explained by a conjunction of material and immaterial factors. This means that the geopolitical and economic aspects play an important role, but they must be combined with ideological and identitarian aspects. The latter will occupy a central place in our work, because they are fundamental in the region of Middle East and North Africa (MENA), where multiple identities coexist, determining the behavior of actors.

From the perspective of constructivism, Alexander Wendt (1992) affirms that identities are socially built, and are "inherently relational" (Wendt, 1992, p. 397), that is to say that the actors intersubjectively build their identities and perceive themselves and others through reciprocal interactions. Although the identity structure can be changed by changing the bonding pattern, change can be very difficult when these have been consolidated and institutionalized.

These identities are the "basis of interests," since "actors do not have a "portfolio" of interests they carry around independently of the social context" (Wendt, 1992, p. 398), and "people act toward objects, including other actors, on the basis of the meanings that the objects have for them" (Wendt, 1992, pp. 396–397).

By applying these concepts to international politics, Wendt (1992) criticizes Waltz's neorealism, showing that neither the anarchy of the international system,¹ nor the different distributions of material resources between the actors explain their actions. To Wendt (1992), these are determined by "the intersubjectivity constituted structure of identities and interest in the system" (Wendt, 1992, p. 401).²

Anarchy and the distribution of power are insufficient to tell us which is which. US military power has different significance for Canada than for Cuba, despite their similar "structural positions", just as British missiles have a different significance for the United States than do Soviet missiles. (Wendt, 1992, p. 397)

¹ "Anarchy" meaning the non-existence of a supranational power that acts homogeneously to that of national states within their territory.

² Waltz affirms that international structure is the one that determines the actions of the units, which has three dimensions: the constitutive principles (anarchy), the interacting units (states), and the distribution of material capacities. Wendt (1992) must add a "fourth dimension" which is "the intersubjectively constituted structure of identities and interest in the system" (Wendt, 1992, p. 401).

At the same time, in order to refer to the alliances that occur in the conflict, we will use Soler I Lecha's (2017) concepts of "liquid alliances" and "solid alliances." The author explains that in the MENA region:

There are no solid blocks and when an alliance is forged it is not based on a common identity or project, but in fear. The perception of what or who represents a threat changes depending on specific events and this is how single subject alliances proliferate which usually have an expiration date. They are liquid alliances that adapt to circumstances. (Soler I lecha, 2017, p. 148)

This implies that many rivalries are liquid too, so that "actors traditionally estranged make common front in a specific issue without thereby recognizing themselves as allies" (Soler I Lecha, 2017, p. 148). However, "the liquid has been winning over the solid without fully replacing it," so there are actors who maintain constant rivalries and also seek to form solid alliances. Rather, "in the alliance and in the rivalry the solid coexists with the liquid" (Soler I Lecha, 2017, p. 155).

38.2 The Internal Dynamic

38.2.1 *Yemeni Identity*

Below, we will briefly develop some historical processes and interaction patterns that shaped the Yemeni identity and that will allow us to elucidate how the interests and objectives of each one of the actors have been built.

Constant foreign interference: Its geographical position, close to one of the most important trade routes, was a strategic point for different global powers. The Ottoman Empire, Great Britain, and the Soviet Union, in different moments and intensities, had a strong influence in the formation of modern Yemen (Ferreira Bermúdez, 2017). However, Saudi Arabia's interference deserves a special section. For the Saudi Monarchy, Yemen is a potentially threatening nation, one that must remain weak and under their sphere of influence (Clausen, 2015). This view resides in various factors: Demographically, it is the only country in the Peninsula to numerically match it; its people are fierce; it is the only republic in the Peninsula; and it has been a wedge through which Republicanism and Marxism have entered the Gulf.

North-south division: This is one of the most conflictive cleavages in Yemen, which has divided the country politically, economically, and religiously. While the north obtained its formal independence with the Ottomans Empire's fall, the south emancipated itself from the British in 1967 and became part of the socialist block. The 1990's unification was pragmatic and disorderly, motivated among other things, by the discovery of oil fields in the common border areas. The north, in a stronger position, co-opted the majority of the economic resources and the most important political positions, which motivated a short secessionist war in 1994. Still today, the southern groups, like al-Hirak, claim to have been colonized by the north.

Tribalism vs. Nation State: Yemeni civilization is one of oldest in the world, and since forever it has been a tribal one (Ferreira Bermúdez, 2017). Although the relationship between the central power and the tribes has been tense, Manea (1996) affirms that in different periods, the imamates and the central government managed to cooperate effectively with tribes, providing governance; and Bawazir et al. (2017) affirm that current chaos would be worse without the contribution of tribal legal systems in those places where the sovereignty of the State is almost absent. Even so, the concept of Nation State has not been integrated into the Yemeni identity.

(..) Yemenis find it difficult, especially in tribal and remote areas, to accept the concept of a Sovereign State. For them, there is no connection between their national identity and a state that claims to represent that identity. These are two separate issues. As far as they are concerned, the state is a mere synonym of the political elite who holds the power in Yemen to the detriment of the country. (Manea, 1996, p. 7)

Religious sectarianism: In Yemen, the different interpretations of the Quran have lived together harmoniously (Brehony, 2015). Even though the majority belong to the Sunni Shafi'i branch, in the north there is an important attachment to Zaidism, belonging to Shiism,³ in approximately 30% of the population.

It was not until the 1990s that Islamist parties appeared, with the creation of al-Islah party, which included sectors of the Muslim Brotherhood and salafists (Brehony, 2015), and the Ansar Allah—or Houthis, in honor to its fundator, Al-Haouti—movement, principally zaidi from the northern province Saada, who reacted to the rise of Saudi's Wahhabism, the economic and social marginalization, corruption, and the alignment with US foreign policy (Brehony, 2015; Dip, 2020a, 2020b). In 2004, the Al-Haouti headed an uprising against the central government, starting what was known as “Saada wars,” a succession of six armed conflicts between 2004 and 2010.

Finally, Al Qaeda also emerged in the Arab Peninsula (AQAP). In fact, the organization's first attack against the USA was in October 2000 in Yemen, against the US Navy destroyer USS Cole, which was anchored in Aden (Osman, 2015).

38.2.2 *The Yemeni Spring: Alí Abdullah Saleh Fall*

Another characteristic of Yemen's political identity has been the elitism of its leadership. Comins (2013) defines the Yemeni political system before 2011 as a “political-tribal-military based on patronage order” (p. 4). The ex-president, Ali Abdullah Saleh, was the leading figure, who was in power for over thirty years. Coming from the influential northern tribal Confederacy Hashid, he received part of his legitimacy from it, while placing his close relatives and friends in key places of the administration and the Army. With wide pragmatism, he co-opted political support of other leaders and influential sectors, while the General People's Congress (GPC) Party was the basis for his personal projection in power (Brehony, 2015).

³ However, Zaydism is a different version of Twelfth Shiism practiced in Iran.

However, in January 2011, inspired by the Jasmine's Revolution, started a series of demonstrations led by young professional and university students—who were not affiliated with the traditional political elites. Although in the beginning, there were isolated demonstrations, after Hosni Mubark's fall in Egypt, demonstrators took the streets massively with a clear objective: the undisputed removal of Saleh and his family from power.

The roots of this process are in the Yemeni economic and political systems (Clausen, 2015). Historically, the State was unable to provide the minimum social services, becoming the poorest country of the Arab world. Although Yemen had a multiparty system, elections, and relative press freedom, Saleh managed a sophisticated network of nepotism and corruption, by which he controlled the opposition parties and the tribal elites (Comins, 2013). But, the catalyst factor was when the GPC stated that it was willing to move forward on a bill that would not only allow Saleh's re-election in 2013, but also would allow him to be in charge for life.

While the young took the streets peacefully, the traditional opposition maintained a cautious attitude. The Join Meeting Parties (JMP), formed in 2005 by al-Islah and other smaller parties, put their bet on negotiating a progressive transition. But March 18 was a key day, when the government attacked the demonstrators in the squares, resulting in 52 deceased. Just a few days later, the main General Ali Mohsen, the most important leaders of the Hashid Confederation, and al-Islah party, declared their support to the demonstrators.

Ironically, the most powerful supporters of the democracy movement are veteran regime insiders. Defections did not result from a democratic enlightenment within the elite, but are emblematic of Saleh's failed alliance policy. The increasing concentration of power around his immediate family breached unwritten power-sharing agreements within the regime's inner circle. (Thiel, 2012, p. 45)

At the same time, the Houthis and al-Hirak secessionists joined the protests. It was from this point that the young claimed that their revolution had been *kidnapped* by old personalities who had nothing to do with their demands (Comins, 2013; Zahonero, 2013).

As expected, the unleashed instability set off alarms in Riyadh and the other Gulf capitals. Then, the Gulf Council Cooperation (GCC), through the Gulf Initiative, started to negotiate with Saleh and the JMP. The monarchies were worried about the vacuum of power in his neighboring country, but especially feared the Houthis' empowerment. Due to their political-religious similarity with Iran, they feared that they were used as a wedge through which Teheran could establish its influence in the Arabian Peninsula. We must not forget that in the Saada wars, Riyadh supported Saleh against the Houthis, alleging that the northern rebels were supported by the Islamic Republic.

Finally, after long months and strong international pressure, Saleh agreed to leave the presidency in exchange for immunity. From there on, a two-year process of transition will finalize in the final holding of elections. The one chosen by consensus to occupy the executive position in that period was his vice president, Abd Rabbuh

Mansur Hadi. However, this transition was destined to failure because it was negotiated only between the CPG and the JMP. The young, Houthis and Southerners, were not included. Clausen (2015) synthesizes it very well:

The Yemeni transition was triggered by the youth-led protests and a strong demand for real political change. Yet, it ended up as an elite-led political bargain, better described as a reshuffling of elites than as fundamental change. It is important to highlight that this was facilitated by the UN and the Gulf states, which prioritized short term stability and dealt with established political actors. (p. 20)

38.2.3 Failed Transition: From the National Dialogue Conference to the Armed Conflict

Part of the transition process consisted of a broad call to all the social forces to elaborate a new constitution. Thus, President Hadi announced the holding of the National Dialogue Conference (NDC) which would become the “foundation stone” of a new Yemen (Lackner, 2016, p. 42).

However, once again the dynamics that shaped Yemeni identity were reflected. While the NDC was taking place in a luxury hotel in Sana, the people were starving in other parts of the country, and crime, murders and terrorist attacks multiplied. At the same time, Saleh was responsible for hindering and obstructing the negotiations; the Southerners threatened to leave the conference if they were denied secessionism; and the Houthis claimed that the small number of representatives they had been given reproduced a historical discriminatory dynamic. Inevitably, the NDC didn’t reach any consensus on the key issues.

In April 2014, Hadi formed the National Authority for the Implementation of the Outcomes of the NDC. However, by then, the tension between the Houthis and Hadi’s government was high, and while Houthis’ representatives were negotiating in the NDC, they continued fighting in the Northern provinces to consolidate their presence (Lackner, 2016).

In that context, something unexpected happened: the alliance between the Houthis and Saleh. Clearly, this was a liquid alliance, highly pragmatic, based only in the rejection of Hadi, and Saleh’s desire of keeping his power. With the support of the armed forces loyal to Saleh, the Houthis began to descend toward the south, and in September, they reached Sana. After a few days of fighting, they managed to obtain the prime minister’s resignation and made a new government agreement.

However, instability continued, and in January 2015, the Houthis took control of the Government Palace and Hadi was forced to resign. Nevertheless, the president could escape and take refuge in Aden, from where he denounced the Houthis’ coup d’État. More and more militarily entrenched, the Houthis descended further south, encircling the new capital. Back then, Hadi made the decision to fly to Saudi Arabia and ask the GCC to take steps to reinstate him in government.

38.3 The Regional Dynamic

38.3.1 *Internationalization of the Conflict*

The CCG's request for intervention marked the definitive intertwining of the conflict with regional dynamics. In March 2015, Saudi Arabia decided to lead a military coalition of mainly Sunni-Arab countries and intervene in Yemen in order to reinstate President Hadi. According to Riyadh's official version, Iran was behind the Houthis, and wanted to undermine regional stability and expand its influence. Therefore, they were acting in "legitimate defense" against Iranian aggression.

On March 26, Saudi Arabia with the United Arab Emirates, Qatar, Morocco, Bahrain, Kuwait, Sudan, Egypt, Jordan, and Senegal launched the operation *Decisive Storm*. According to what was planned, it would be brief and its objective was to clear the rebels from the capital, destroy their heavy weaponry, and redirect the Initiative process (Dip, 2019). This was an unprecedented decision in Saudis' foreign policy, traditionally reactive and slow. This is part of a new, more personal, active, and aggressive orientation of Crown Prince Mohamed Bin Salman (MBS), with the perception that the *status quo* was no longer favorable and that doing nothing implied greater losses (Kinnimont, 2017; Serr, 2018; Soler I Lecha, 2018).

38.3.2 *Hegemonic Dispute*

Once again, we must see the *regional identities structure* to understand this new stage of the conflict. Between the Gulf monarchies, there is a shared vision of two greater threats: the Iranian presence and the political Islam of the Muslim Brotherhood and its branches. However, each one has its own interest, and they differ in the perception of which of these two threats is most pressing.

However, the rivalry between Iran and Saudi Arabia occupies a prominent place. Intersubjectively, antagonistic and conflicting identities have been formed between Riyadh and Tehran, based on a series of factors: "religious (Wahhabi-Shiite), ethnic (Arab-Persian), political (monarchy-theocratic republic), and economic (around the oil policy)." In turn, "both countries perceive themselves as regional powers that seek to expand and consolidate their influence" and took advantage of the fronts opened by the Arab Spring for that (Dip, 2019, p. 3).

As Wilf (2017) and Serr (2018) say, Yemen, similar to Syria, Iraq, and Libya, has been transformed in a battlefield, where geopolitical regional interests are being settled, and the regional powers instrumentalize the "loyalty to religion, sect, ethnicity, tribe and nation as well as the ability to forge ever-shifting alliances in the service of specific goals" (Wilf 2017, p. 12). But Sana is "the geographical, social and political Achilles' heel of the Arabian Peninsula" (Wilf, 2017, p. 11), so that for Riyadh, it takes on a much greater importance.

38.3.3 Iranian Proxy War and Saudi Coalition Breakdown

In the internationalization of the conflict, two antagonistic factions were conformed that could be qualified as two *liquid alliance groups*: On the one hand, Hadi's internationally recognized government, along with al-Islah, the southerner separatists and the Arab coalition led by Riyadh, on the other hand, the Houthis with Saleh and Teheran.

Although the Persians denied their engagement in the conflict, evidence proves that they intervened in favor of the Houthis in at least three ways: funding, training, and providing weapons (Akin, 2019; Dip, 2019; Serr, 2018; Sharp, 2019).⁴ This coincides with what Munford (2013) defines as *proxy war*:

Proxy wars are the product of a relationship between a benefactor, who is a state or non-state actor external to the dynamic of an existing conflict, and the chosen proxies who are the conduit for the benefactor's weapons, training and funding. In short, proxy wars are the logical replacement for states seeking to further their own strategic goals yet at the same time avoid engaging in direct, costly and bloody warfare. (p. 40)

However, Teheran has avoided getting involved directly, since it has more urgent geopolitical interests that demand its forces, for instance, the Syrian conflict (Zahonero, 2018a, 2018b). At the same time, it is conscious of the importance that Yemen has for the Saudis and the probable rise of violence and tension that a direct intervention could have generated. Being the main referent of Shiism, a great part of its regional projection has been based on the "defense" of Islamic Shiite minorities (Hernández López, 2018; Serr, 2018:5; Wilf, 2017). However, the relationship between the Houthis and Iran has a great dose of liquidity, since rebel leaders have not followed all Iranian guidelines, and they have their own interests (Dip, 2019).

Unlike its rival, Saudi Arabia decided to intervene decisively in its neighboring country for two reasons: the strategic weight for its national security and its intentions of regional leadership. KSA deployed more than 150.000 troops, 100 war-planes and mobilized its Navy. Its allies made smaller contributions, but they supported Riyadh: Egypt mobilized Navy units; UAE provided 30 jets along with Bahrain and Kuwait 15, Qatar 10, Jordan 6, Morocco 6, and Sudan 3 (Dip, 2019). After blocking the rebels by air and sea, the coalition actions were based mainly on air airstrikes, and financing the Yemeni troops. Riyadh and Abu Dhabi also deployed soldiers, but then opted to hire mercenaries. It is estimated that the Saud monarchy spent approximately between 5 and 6 billion dollars per month on the conflict (Hernández López, 2018).

Like Teheran, Riyadh appealed to a sectarian speech to unite positions (Zahonero, 2018a, 2018b). According to Wilf (2017) and Soler I Lecha (2017), the Saud family wants to unite the Sunni world under their leadership, and seek to create a "Sunni block" with the objective of counteracting Iran, softening their position against the

⁴ This help support assistance was granted through unofficial channels, which makes it hard to keep a reliable record of its dimension. However, Dip (2019) and Serr (2018) propose as evidence of this help the interception of Iranian ships with weapons and the use of sophisticated weapons by the Houthis, such as drones.

Muslin Brotherhood⁵ (Soler I Lecha, 2017). In turn, Hadi himself assumed a sectarian discourse, since in this way he obtained some legitimacy and managed to homogenize positions within the fragile alliance (Hernández López, 2018).

However, the results of the intervention were not as expected (Hernández López, 2018). Prince Salman trusted his Army excessively and downplayed the Houthis' fighting ability. Little by little, the conflict transformed into a close fight, and due to the Saudis' lack of experience, the mistaken bombing over civilian positions, such as schools and hospitals, multiplied (Serr, 2018).

38.3.4 *Yemen in Flames: Dissolution of Liquid Alliances, Extremism, and Humanitarian Crisis*

Throughout 2016–2017, the coalition handled in a disorderly way the disputes between its own members and continued with the fight with the Houthi rebels, who demonstrated great resilience, thanks to their alliance with Saleh and indirect Iranian support (Hernández López, 2018).

After a failed peace dialog meeting promoted by the UN in Kuwait, the rebels launched a missile attack into Saudi Arabia. As an answer, Riyadh decided to tighten the air and maritime blockades. This worsened people's condition, since it made the entrance of humanitarian aid extremely difficult (Hernández López, 2018; Sharp, 2019).

On the rebels' side, in 2017 the *liquid alliance* between the Houthis and Saleh was dissolved. This “marriage of convenience” (Serr, 2018) ended when Saleh, once again, changed his position and announced that he was ready to negotiate with the Saudis the cessation of fighting. The Houthis saw this as treason and in an unclear episode decided to kill him (Hernández López, 2018). With this decision, they obtained a wider room for maneuver, but they further pushed the possibilities for a peaceful solution away and gained a new enemy: Saleh's loyal troops (Akin, 2019; Hernández López, 2018).

On the official side, *liquid alliances* also entered into contradiction, reflecting the role of identities and how the internal and regional dynamics are intertwined. This time, the break was in the coalition between Saudi Arabia and the UAE, and it was related to the al-Islah party, main support for Hadi, and the southerners separatist.

In 2017, arguing to be excluded from Hadi's government, al-Hirak, and other southern secessionist groups formed the Southern Transitional Council (STC). While Riyadh, fearing Hadi's weakening, showed its rejection, Abu Dhabi expressed its support for the southerners, whom it had already been supporting and financing (Akin, 2019). This fracture reached such a point that during 2018–2019, both factions, supposedly “allied”, fought each other repeatedly (Akins, 2019; Hernández López, 2018).

⁵ This could be seen reflected in the attempted dialogue with Hamas and with the support of al-Islah.

There are many reasons that explain Abu Dhabi's behavior. We must not lose sight of the fact that, despite its low profile, it has become an increasingly important power. *Little Sparta*, as former US Defense Secretary James Mattis described the UAE, is the second largest economy of the Arab world and has invested more than 5% of its GDP in defense (Soler I Lecha, 2018). It has acquired military experience in UN peacekeeping missions and the fight against the Jihadist in Syria (Akin, 2019; Serr, 2018). Geopolitically, the Bab al Mandab strait and Africa's Horn are strategic because of the important trade routes. Having an independent South Yemen close to its interests becomes functional (Zahonero, 2018a, 2018b). Clearly, the UAE has its own strategic objectives and wants to act autonomously from Riyadh (Fabbani, 2020; Hernández López, 2018; Soler I Lecha, 2017).

However, we should not underestimate the close ties of al-Islah with the Muslim Brotherhood. The "Brothers" have been a source of conflicts between the Gulf monarchies, and Qatar's support to this movement caused a relationship breakdown with its neighbors and the blockade since 2017. Although Doha retired itself from the coalition, and al-Islah renounced formally to the Brotherhood, to the UAE, it is still a threat (Espinosa, 2020; Soler I Lecha, 2018; Zahonero, 2018a, 2018b).

The clashes within the anti-Houthi coalition clearly reflect how the *liquid alliances* work and its contradictory coexistence with the *solid alliances*. The relationship Riyadh-Abu Dhabi is perhaps one of the most stable in the region, and both have worked together at different moments.⁶ Nevertheless, in spite of recognizing themselves as allies, they are at the same time funding and supporting conflicting factions in Yemeni territory. Furthermore, the Emirati behavior significantly affects its Saudi ally, weakening and undermining its international projection (Hernández López, 2018).

AQAP took advantage of the power vacuum. The prevailing chaos was extremely functional for them and allowed them to increase their influence in main areas of the Yemeni territory, to the point of forming a mini-caliphate in the port city of Mukalla. From there they took control of part of the Yemeni Central Bank reserves and exported oil illegally (Hernández López, 2018). Again, the Saudis' and Emiratis' acts were controversial at that point. On the one hand, AQAP presence legitimized their intervention and allowed maintaining USA' support. While, on the other hand, the Sunni jihadists have fought the Houthis for belonging to Shiism, many voices denounced a certain degree of tolerance of the coalition troops (Zahonero, 2018a, 2018b).

This is why Akin (2019) talks about three wars inside Yemen: the Houthis against the official alliance; Hadi against the STC southerners; and the war against extremism. But the most harmed have been Yemeni civilians. The international blockade, the destruction of the infrastructure, and the violation of Human Rights committed by every faction involved have caused hunger, lack of water, and disease became

⁶ Both monarchies share goals and threats, and the personal relationship between MBS and Mohamed Bin Zayed (MBZ) is excellent, to the point that the Emirati leader is regarded as a mentor for his young Saudi neighbor (Soler I Lecha, 2018).

common currency, affecting principally the most vulnerable, women and children (Hernández López, 2018).

38.3.5 2020: COVID-19 Pandemic, Geopolitical Readjustment, and Deepening of Humanitarian Crisis

The 2020 started with a series of events that caused upheaval in the region, such as the advance of the Syrian government over Idlib, and the murder of General Soleimani. But few minds imagined that 2020 would be the scenario of one of the most important Pandemics in history, whose impact and effects cannot still be dimensioned. However, as Zaccara (IREMAI-GEMO, 2020) says, Middle East geographical position, between China and Europe, inevitably made it a region strongly affected by COVID-19 Pandemic, and “despite the fact that no region in the world has remained immune, the detection of the first cases of the virus (...) was the prelude for a great sandstorm that approached covering everything” (Paredes Rodríguez, 2020, p. 129).

Paredes Rodríguez (2020), following Rosenau (1997), stated that the Coronavirus produced a “fragemegration” situation, which means the conjunction of integrating forces with fragmenting forces. In this way, little by little, all the states of the region were affected by the spread of the virus and were integrated under a common threat, for which they had to cooperate and introduce similar measures. But at the same time, the conflictive and convulsive dynamics underlying the region provided a strong complexity, fragmenting, and re-editing conflicts.

Although it was one of the latest countries to register cases, “worrying but inevitably” COVID-19 arrived in Yemen. Even though on April 10 “0 case” was detected, specialists believe that probably the virus was already in the country, but that it could not be reported because of the scarce testing capability of the Yemeni healthcare system (Doctors without Borders, 2020).

38.3.6 Reorientation of actor’s Positions

The main foreign actors involved in the conflict were quickly affected by the effects of the virus. The most affected was the Islamic Republic of Iran, which on February 19 detected its “0 case” in the city of Qom. But a few days later, the first cases in the Gulf monarchies slowly started to be reported. In this context, fearing what could happen with de COVID-19 Pandemic in the conflict areas, UN’s General Secretary, Antonio Guterres demanded the international community a great ceasefire that allowed refocusing on the fight against the virus: “that is why today, I am calling for an immediate global ceasefire in all corners of the world. It’s time to put armed conflicts in lockdown and focus together on the true fight for our lives” (United Nations, 2020a, 2020b).

The answer of the Gulf States was initially positive. Qatar and UAE cooperated in the healthcare field, and Saudi Arabia, echoing Guterres's request, unilaterally declared a two-week ceasefire in Yemen, which was extended for another thirty days, with the aim of fostering negotiations for a definitive ceasefire (Niño, 2020). However, we must consider the situation that the Saudis were facing. After more than five years, the war in Yemen was a complete failure. The areas controlled by the rebels were almost in the same situation as before the intervention and the coalition was involved in strong internal disputes. Besides, the multimillion-dollar cost of maintaining daily operations was draining the coffers of the Monarchy, while its international image was getting worse due to the terrible reports of Human Rights violations and war crimes.

In addition, the international oil demand fell drastically due to the Pandemic to the point that on April 20, in an historical fact for capitalism, crude futures prices were negative (Dip, 2020a, 2020b). In a context in which Riyadh dealt simultaneously with the economic crisis, the rivalry with Iran, the blockade to Qatar, and the war in Yemen, it was necessary to "close the tap" and stop the economic drain (Zaccara in IREMAI-GEMO, 2020). The COVID-19 Pandemic became an excellent opportunity to withdraw itself from its neighbor, without signifying a formal defeat.

But the Houthis saw that Saudis were using the Pandemic to "save the face" of its military failure (Espinosa, 2020) and declared that they did not accept the unilateral ceasefire. They presented a very high series of demands as a condition to leave the fighting and continued with their expansion to the Marib province, which is rich in oil resources and that has maintained itself relatively away from the war. In addition, after a brief truce by the end of April, the STC declared the self-government of their controlled southerner areas. It was one step away from declaring its effective independence and reviving the fights within the coalition.

In the following months, there were no substantial changes in the situation. While the STC left for the moment the self-government, and the Saudis tried to revitalize the agreement achieved with them at the end of 2019, in September the southerners withdrew from the talks because of the "irresponsible behavior of the parties" (Al Jazeera, 2020). On their part, the Houthis are strongly consolidated in the northwest of the country and have obtained International Community recognition as legitimate actors.

Aware of MBS's desire to withdraw from the conflict, they have approached him with ceasefire proposals, which have been described as "positive" by the Saudis (Barrington et al., 2020). However, mistrust is still great, and the end of the conflict still seems far away.

38.3.7 Deepening of the Humanitarian Crisis

Although the impact of the Pandemic on the positions of the actors is not still clear, its effects on the healthcare and humanitarian aspects were catastrophically evident from the beginning. To fully understand the effects of the COVID-19 Pandemic, we

must bear in mind that at the moment when the Virus was detected, the country was on the brink of total collapse after five years of war.

After years of bombing, all kind of infrastructure is demolished. Without flights, and with communication channels destroyed, mobility and humanitarian aid distribution find serious obstacles. Only half of the health infrastructure is working, two out of three Yemenis do not have access to basic medical care, and half the population has serious difficulties in accessing drinking water. According to the World Bank, there are three doctors and seven beds for every 10,000 people (Lootsma, 2020).

According to the United Nations High Committee for Refugees (UNHCR, 2020), 80% of the population needs humanitarian aid to survive, 4 million people have been forcibly displaced from their homes and there has been an increase in child marriage as a method of survival for girls. In addition, 12 million people face serious risk of starvation, signifying “the worst famine in 100 years in the region.” For its part, due to the destruction of infrastructure, Yemen had the biggest cholera outbreak of the last times, with more than 1 million cases and 2300 deaths since 2017. At the same time, because of the low vaccination level, poliomyelitis has reappeared (Naranjo, 2020; UNHCR, 2020).

In this context, the COVID-19 Pandemic became the *coup de grace* for thousands of Yemenis’ lives. Although about 2000 cases were officially reported, due to the low testing capacity, the UN’s General Secretary stated the true number could be more than 1 million, and the mortality rate could come to 30%, far exceeding the world average (United Nations, 2020a, 2020b).

But the economical crisis also seriously affected the humanitarian crisis. Most countries have cut their budgets, and resources destined for humanitarian aid were one of the first to be adjusted. In a country like Yemen, where more than 80% of the population needs international aid, this has meant a severe blow. Much of the UN-sponsored programs have been severely curtailed, and many hospitals had to be closed due to lack of funds.

38.4 Conclusion

Throughout this work, we could verify the importance of analyzing the Yemen conflict through a doubled optic, conjoining the domestic aspects with the international ones. Every analysis that excludes any of these dynamics will fall on simplifying an extremely complex phenomenon. Even though its roots are clearly in the political and economic system, its following evolution and its aggravation must be understood by also considering the regional geopolitical interests.

A conflictive internal dynamic, charged of political and tribal rivalries, elitism, nepotism, and corruption, has been intertwined and fed back with a regional dynamic marked by the hegemonic dispute between rival powers, such as Iran and Saudi Arabia, but also by other actors that play a low profile role, but have great impact capability, and accept an unstable order to protect their interests. In the last group, we can find the United Arab Emirates and a non-state transnational actor as AQAP.

In turn, we have proved the importance of identities as the base of the actor's interests and actions. Without this perspective, it would be impossible to understand how each part involved perceives itself, its vision of others, and what each one considers the most serious threat. This allows us to understand the depth of Saudi-Iranian rivalry, in which the slightest concession is seen as lost ground in an existential fight. But it also helps us to see the fracture within the anti-Houthi coalition, in which both the different perceptions about al-Islah and the Muslim Brotherhood come into play, as well as the historical claim of the southern sectors.

The COVID-19 Pandemic generated changes, especially on the external intervening actors. Mired in a costly and exhausting war, the Pandemic was the necessary incentive and excuse for the Kingdom of Saudi Arabia to withdraw, even though without much conviction. However, the changes have been driven by need and have not been so deep that could direct the process toward a clear solution.

Finally, the impact on the humanitarian dimension has been terrible. Being one of the poorest countries before the Arab Spring, the peoples' living conditions have come into open decline. With a destroyed healthcare system and high malnutrition rates, the Coronavirus has spread without limitations. If the numbers exposed by the UN are true, we are talking about the country with the greatest amount of COVID-19 deaths in the world, with approximately 300.000 deceased.

With little certainty about the future, the only thing that will surely remain constant in Yemen will be the suffering of its population. Even if the war ended today, it would take years to rebuild the country. Wrapped up in two convulsive and infamous dynamics, there is a high possibility that *the century's worst humanitarian crisis* will end up becoming *History's worst humanitarian crisis*.

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