



"Why did the transition process in Yemen fail?"

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Why did the Transitional Process in Yemen fail?

There is a growing consensus among Yemen experts that the transitional process of 2011–2014 failed because of the gap in policy-makers' understanding of Yemen, the country's generally lower order priority as opposed to seemingly more urgent conflicts in the region, and a grave mismatch between the needs of the Yemeni people and the priorities of the transition's foreign sponsors. In 2014, Yemen was referred to as one of the success stories of the Arab Spring, today, it is dubbed "the world's newest failed state" that is under threat of becoming little more than a country defined by its geographical borders and in which no single group wields the balance of power. Within months, a Northern rebel group known as *Ansarullah* (the Houthis) seized the capital Sana'a, which launched a protracted conflict that has since transformed into a civil war, involves a Saudi-led intervention, and has developed to an extent that it has become difficult to imagine a return to any peaceful settlement.

As the conflict defies easy categorization, it is inadequately portrayed, particularly in Western media, in a reductionist fashion, as a mere Sunni-Shi'a proxy war wielded by the regional powers of Iran who backs *Ansarullah* and Saudi Arabia who counters Iranian meddling in its Yemeni backyard. This narrative largely discounts the complexity of the conflict, the multiplicity of local actors involved and is simply unfitting. Many overlapping regional and international issues, particularly in the later stages of the conflict, did indeed contribute to a collapse; the Saudi-Iranian power struggle and opposing attitudes to the regional strengthening of Muslim Brotherhood, are certainly part of the equation. Similarly, the importance of sectarian aspects of the conflict - a new phenomenon in Yemen - has increased with regionalization. Nevertheless, the fact that the conflict has been exacerbated by regional power contests does not mean that the roots of the conflict can meaningfully be attributed through this lens; in essence, the conflict in Yemen was home-grown and non-sectarian. A closer look reveals that the onset of the crisis is mainly driven by local factors, a power struggle between the prominent elites and the lack of adequate political and economic reforms along the transition process following the popular uprising of 2011.

This paper takes the view that Yemen's crisis is a product of misconceived local and national dynamics, that interacted with, and ultimately constituted the reasons behind the failure of the UN Security Council and European Union-backed Gulf Cooperation Council Initiative (GCC Initiative) put forward in April 2011 to end Yemen's political crisis. To this end, this paper purposely excludes closer analysis of the arguably less potent regional dimension of the conflict, and focuses on its evolving local power dynamics. First, the regime constellation and its evolution until the outbreak of the revolution in 2011 will be elaborated on; subsequently the focus shifts to the transition process intended to end the crisis and how elite power dynamics specifically interplayed and obstructed this transformation until its ultimate failure. In doing so, this paper aims to contribute to the understanding of the conflict by building a narrative account of the run-up and the aftermath of the 2011 popular revolution to the outbreak of Yemen's 2015 civil war.

Introduction:

If receiving any media attention at all, Yemen is usually associated with terrorist haven portrayals, in which Western (mainly U.S.) counterterrorism efforts and illegal drone strikes appear as the exclusive prism through which the country is viewed. When coverage extends beyond the realm of terrorism, the nationally widespread narcotic stimulant *qat*, child marriages, and the country's severe water shortages occasionally make it into the news. This mirrors the predicament of outsiders attempting to understand the many layers of events in Yemen and translates into a general absence of a nuanced analysis on the political situation in the country. Yemen's popular uprisings in 2011 represented an opportunity to undo this trend, and indeed, Yemeni politics and its people's daily grievances briefly entered the spotlight. Despite Yemen having by far witnessed the largest pro-democracy protests during the Arab Spring, mainstream media footage of its revolution remained scarce. It follows that there has always been a lack of awareness, understanding or interest in the Middle East's poorest nation, which partially explains the miscalculations on behalf of the international community to respond to Yemen's crisis with an inadequately-managed transition process that contributed to the country's descent into a civil war it intended to prevent.

When protests erupted in January 2011, the Yemeni people hoped for meaningful political change and an improvement to their livelihoods. Today, after the collapse of the political transition, followed by years of fierce on the ground fighting and continuous Saudi-led airstrikes since March 2015, much of the country's urban areas¹ and cultural heritage has been destroyed², over 3 million have become internally displaced, more than two thirds of the country is in immediate need of humanitarian relief³, several provinces are on the brink of famine⁴, and residents continue to live under siege-like conditions as they are effectively trapped under a naval and air blockade⁵. The U.N. has recently referred to the situation in Yemen as the world's worst humanitarian crisis⁶.

Arguably, the current situation in Yemen stems directly from the systematic, conceptual, and political failures of those who designed and administered the plan for a managed transition from the regime of former president Ali Abdullah Saleh under the rubric of the Gulf Cooperation Council (GCC) initiative. Granting Saleh immunity and keeping the old elites in power, this initiative contradicted the primary goals of the revolution, and after 11 months of continuous protest, Yemenis were tied to a transitional agreement designed by a coterie of monarchs to protect the vested interests of a plutocratic elite⁷. It is safe to say that six years onward, the GCC transition has indefinitely failed, for reasons that will be discussed in what follows.

¹ HRW, (2015). Targeting Saada: Unlawful Coalition Airstrikes on Saada City in Yemen. *Human Rights Watch Summary Report*: United States.

² UNESCO, (2016). *Satellite-Based Damage Assessment of Cultural Heritage Sites 2015*. Summary Report of Iraq, Nepal, Syria & Yemen.

³ OCHA, (2017). *Humanitarian Bulletin: Yemen*. Issue 22, April 14.

⁴ WFP, (2017). *Yemen Needs Urgent Assistance to Prevent Famine*. Emergency Food Security and Nutrition Assessment: Yemen.

⁵ HRW, (2017). *Yemen: No Accountability for War Crimes. Saudi-led Coalition, Houthi-Saleh Forces Abuses Persist*. Online Report.

⁶ U.N., (2017). *World faces worst humanitarian crisis since 1945, says UN official*. The Guardian press release.

⁷ Al-Muslimi, F., (2015). *Why Yemen's Political Transition Failed*. Carnegie Middle East Center: Lebanon.

Internal power dynamics up to the 2011; the Saleh regime

The escalation of political instability in 2015 must be understood against the backdrop of the Yemeni uprising in 2011 and the failure of its subsequent negotiated settlement. The events leading up to 2011 were a product of complex local dynamics that had been decades in the making, and the resultant civil war had been predicted long before these uprisings were triggered by the Arab Spring. Given the complexities of the conflict, efforts to properly summarize it are often lacking in important detail, the following is nevertheless a modest attempt to provide an adequate picture on local dynamics and how elite-level fault lines emerged and interplayed with the failure of the transition process.

To explain how these dynamics emerged and interacted with the transition process, a brief recap of Yemen's political inner workings leading up to the revolution is necessary. The roots of the conflict date back to at least the years around the 1990 merge between the Southern People's Democratic Republic of Yemen (PDRY) and the Northern Yemen Arab Republic (YAR) into a unified Yemen. In 1978, the young military commander Ali Abdullah Saleh assumed the presidency of North Yemen and subsequently of a unified Yemen (at least on paper), during which he embarked on a decades-long project of extending and consolidating his control⁸. He built up a cooperative network among key powerbrokers in Yemen's north-western highlands, his inner circle consisting of loyal kin and communal groups in charge of sensitive security and military positions. More precisely, in the decades prior to the 2011 uprising, the Yemeni regime was based on the triumvirate alliance between Saleh, Ali Mohsen, and the Ahmar families⁹, together with their respective networks¹⁰.

Vis-à-vis the tribes, Saleh allied with the paramount Sheikh Abdullah al-Ahmar of the *Hashid* confederation (until his death in 2007 when his son Sadeq succeeds him), Yemen's most powerful tribal network. While militarily, he allied with General Ali Mohsen al-Ahmar, member of Saleh's own *Sahan* clan (part of the wider *Hashid* confederation), and commander of the First Armoured Division (FAD), the country's most powerful army unit. An informal agreement referred to as "the covenant" (*al-ahd*) is said to have been concluded between these actors, with the understanding that in exchange for the freedom of the Sheikh's and Commander's tribal and military constituencies to run affairs, economic empires, and access to patronage links, the tribes would stand together under the leadership of Saleh, and Ali Mohsen would be the next in line for succession¹¹.

The regime's core political center from the 1990s was an alliance between Saleh's General People's Congress (GPC) and the Yemeni Congregation for Reform known as *Islah*. The GPC constituted the dominant political force and parliamentary party, of whom tribal allies simultaneously served as MPs, and his family neatly overlapped with military and security apparatuses. Initially a centre-right alternative to Socialist and Islamist poles, the GPC eventually lost its ideological significance and served as a mere patronage system to the Saleh

⁸ Burrowes, R. D., (1991). Prelude to Unification: The Yemen Arab Republic, 1962-1990. *International Journal of Middle Eastern Studies*, 23(4):483-506.

⁹ Transfeld, M., (2014). *Yemen: GCC Roadmap to Nowhere Elite Bargaining and Political Infighting Block a Meaningful Transition*. German Institute for International and Security Affairs: Berlin.

¹⁰ Transfeld, M., (2016). Political bargaining and violent conflict: shifting elite alliances as the decisive factor in Yemen's transformation, *Mediterranean Politics*, 21(1):150-169.

¹¹ Phillips, S., (2011). Who Tried to Kill Ali Abdullah Saleh? The hidden feud behind the revolution in Yemen. *Foreign Policy*, June 13.

regime, particularly to ensure support from the major tribal confederations (*Hashid* and *Bakil*)¹². *Islah*, the Yemeni equivalent of the Muslim Brotherhood and Yemen's second party, consisted of *Salafists*, Afghan returnees and conservative business- and tribal leaders¹³. It was a spin off from the GPC, established in the context of the country's formal North-South unification trajectory, multi-partyism having been a democratic effort for the first unified parliamentary elections in 1993¹⁴. The representation of two northern political parties – *Islah* being an “Islamist” alternative¹⁵ - was meant to ideologically counterbalance the Southern Socialist Party (YSP)¹⁶.

Outcomes of the 1993 elections reflected regional divisions with the Northern parties dominating the northern districts, and the Socialist party prevailing in the former South. A population skewed in favour of the North guaranteed a North-Western regime victory that catalysed the devastating 1994 civil war¹⁷, from which Saleh equally emerged as victor. Saleh sustained unity by force, diluted Southern power through the decimation of southern institutions, purged Southern military personnel, and marginalized the Socialist Party - creating lasting grievances among Southerners. This sowed the seeds for the anti-establishment Southern independence movement *al-Hirak*, which demanded redress for the marginalisation of the former South Yemen during Saleh's rule and developed into a fully-fledged secessionist force by 2007. It joined the 2011 protests against the hitherto unchallenged Northern elite¹⁸. The "Southern question" became particularly potent to Yemen's future integrity¹⁹ and its insolvability was a contributing factor to transition failure.

Besides its tribal connections, the Ahmar family network was thus politically represented via *Islah* headed by Sheikh Abdullah al-Ahmar, and due to al-Ahmars' close relationship with Saleh, *Islah* continued as a partner in the GPC's governing coalition, with these parties working *de facto* in concert until the mid-2000s²⁰. Followingly, the *Islah* political arm was part of the wider *Islah* network that is tribally sponsored through the powerful *Hashid* confederation, and militarily through the strongest security apparatus, the First Armoured Division commanded by Ali Mohsen²¹. These political and network alliances constituted the power locus over the coming decades, allowing Saleh to control the main centres of influence: the tribe, the state and the military. Saleh's increasing appropriation of power however, developed into unreconcilable fissures to the elite cohesion in this inner circle, which were brought to a breaking point in the political crisis of 2011.

Saleh begins to gradually undo the established power dynamics that, through patronage and the distribution of key security apparatus positions across the multiple competing communal

¹² Alley, A. L., (2010). The Rules of the Game: Unpacking Patronage Politics in Yemen. *Middle East Journal*, 64(3): 385-409.

¹³ Schwedler, J., (2004). The Islah Party in Yemen: Political Opportunities and Coalition Building in a Transnational Polity, in Wiktorowicz, Q., (2004). *Islamic Activism: A Social Movement Theory Approach*, Bloomington: Indiana University Press.

¹⁴ Whittaker, B., (2009). *The Birth of Modern Yemen*. Al-bab E-Book.

¹⁵ Yadav, S. P., (2011). Antecedents of the Revolution: Intersectoral Networks and Post-Partisanship in Yemen. *Studies in Ethnicity and Nationalism*, 11(3): 550-563.

¹⁶ Transfeld, M., (2016). Political bargaining and violent conflict: shifting elite alliances as the decisive factor in Yemen's transformation, *Mediterranean Politics*, 21(1): 150-169.

¹⁷ Sadiki, L., (2009). *Rethinking Arab Democratization: Elections without Democracy*. Oxford University Press: New York.

¹⁸ Carapico, S., (2014). Yemen Between Revolution and Counter-Terrorism, in Lackner, H., (2014). *Why Yemen Matters: A Society in Transition*, 29-49. Saqi Books: London.

¹⁹ International Crisis Group, (2013). Yemen's "Southern Question": Avoiding a Breakdown. *Middle East Report*, 145:1-27.

²⁰ Ghafarzade, B., (2016). Yemen: post-conflict federalism to avoid disintegration. *Journal of International Law and Politics*, 48(3):933-1006.

²¹ Salisbury, P., (2016). Yemen: Stemming the Rise of a Chaos State. *Chatham House Report*.

groups, ensured loyalty to the ruling regime. Once Yemen's economic pie shrank due to falling gas and oil revenues (despite contributing 75% of the central government's revenues these were never high in Yemen)²², Saleh, who in the past had to work consultatively with tribes to maintain power balances, now concentrated the diminishing centralized revenue stream around his immediate circle. Saleh solidified shadow structures tied directly to the president and embarked on the destabilizing trend of narrowing his patronage distribution, consolidating power around himself and his family, and gradually cutting out regime partners²³. Followingly, the fissures occurred for two main reasons which contradicted the aforementioned *ahd*; with the Ahmar family due to predominantly economic and political alienation, and with Ali Mohsen due to Saleh's manoeuvres to groom his son as successor and attempts of military weakening.

Particularly in the 2000s Saleh begins to perceive the core regime threat to be internal and increasingly assigns his son and nephews to top military, security and intelligence positions²⁴. Once Saleh's iron fist, Ali Mohsen was now an obstacle to his plan to anoint his son Ahmed Ali for succession. What follows is a series of politically aggressive constitutional amendments to extend his presidential term, and other coup-proofing tactics²⁵ such as the creation of parastatal military and security units that, in time, were brought under family control²⁶. His bolstering of the Republican Guard soon rendered it the best-equipped and trained military force in the country, and headed by Saleh's son Ahmed, it intended to directly parallel al-Ahmar's FAD²⁷. The formation of competing family-led institutions largely contributed to the alienation of General Ali Mohsen, which proved to be Saleh's costliest step. In this vein, another source of resentment were the six military campaigns against *Ansarullah* insurgencies (commonly known as the *Houthis*) in the Northern province of *Sa'ada* between the years of 2004-2010²⁸. These were led by Ali Mohsin, and the tactic to solve the regime's problems by military means was interpreted as yet another move by Saleh to weaken his internal opponent's military might²⁹. Like the "Southern issue" this conflict known as the "Sada'a issue" was a contributing factor to the failure of the transition process. *Ansarullah*, similar to *al-Hirak*, were frustrated by the monopolization of power in Sana'a and the lack of economic development in their region, but also sought to protect their Zaydi identity (a form of Shi'ism distinct from the Iranian 12er Shi'ism and often dubbed "the closest Shia sect to Sunnism") that they felt threatened by the activities of *Salafists* in their area³⁰ and which had been supported by Saudi Arabia in the past.

Growing elite fissures were evidenced in a leaked U.S. cable in 2009 that revealed Hamid al-Ahmar's plan - son of the paramount sheikh Abdullah al-Ahmar, thus key figure of the al-Ahmar-clan and *Islah* - to "organize popular demonstrations aimed at removing the President from power, unless he guaranteed the fairness of the 2011 parliamentary elections, formed a

²² Schmitz, C., (2011). Crisis in the Yemeni Economy: A Troubled Transition to Post-Hydrocarbon Growth. *Scholar Policy Paper*, Middle East Institute: Washington DC.

²³ Gaub, F., (2015). *Whatever happened to Yemen's army?* European Union Institute for Security Studies.

²⁴ International Crisis Group, (2013). Yemen's Military-Security Reform: Seeds of New Conflict? *Middle East Report*, 139.

²⁵ Makara, M., (2013). Coup-proofing, military defection, and the Arab spring. *Democracy and Security*, 9(4):564-76.

²⁶ Salisbury, P., (2016). Yemen: Stemming the Rise of a Chaos State. *Chatham House Report*.

²⁷ Knights, M., (2013). The military role in Yemen's protests: civil-military relations in the tribal republic, *Journal of Strategic Studies*, 36(2):261-288.

²⁸ Winter, L., (2011). Conflict in Yemen: Simple People, Complicated Circumstances. *Middle East Policy*, 18(1):102-120.

²⁹ International Crisis Group, (2009). Yemen: Defusing the Saada Time Bomb, *Middle East Report*, 86.

³⁰ Winter, L., (2011). Conflict in Yemen: Simple People, Complicated Circumstances. *Middle East Policy*, 18(1): 102-20.

unity government with leaders from the Southern Movement, and removed his relatives from positions of power”³¹. This rift was prompted both by the growing dismay in the South that politically manifested itself in the YSP’s 1997 election boycott as well as the system’s favouring of Saleh’s GPC party that consequently dominated parliament, and which created tensions between GPC and *Islah*. The latter ended up forming a joint opposition with YSP and other smaller parties under the “Joint Meeting Party” (JMP) in 2005³². Constitutional amendments in 2010 that abolished a presidential term for Saleh exacerbated this tension, and resulted in the JMP formally joining the youth protests in 2011.

It is important to keep in mind that the popular youth protests that erupted in 2011 were genuine and called for broad political and economic reform, an end to corruption and new leadership. Importantly, protests demanded a new technocratic government that opposed not only Saleh, but the two concerted networks that had been ruling the country for over three decades. The peaceful populist uprising thus gave rise not only to violent conflict between traditional elites, but constituted their window of opportunity to re-position themselves for a seemingly inevitable post-Saleh power redistribution. In practice, the revolution was hijacked as political elites defected and co-opted the revolutionary movement.

A commonly mentioned breaking point came on March 18, 2011, when the Saleh-regime used live ammunition against peaceful demonstrators in the capital Sana’a³³, after which Ali Mohsen and the Ahmars formally defected to the opposition and sided with the protesters³⁴. Yemen’s security apparatus thus split along the communal rivalries in which it was embedded; tribally, the *Hashid* confederation (al-Ahmars), and militarily, the First Armoured Division (Ali Mohsen), both of which constituted the cohesion of loyalist forces necessary for Saleh to defend his presidency. In other words, the regime split ended a three-and-a-half-decade alliance that had provided Yemen with a modicum of stability, and open fighting erupted between tribal and military forces loyal to the respective factions. International concerns over Yemen heightened, albeit mainly for fear that instability would allow the transnational Islamism network al-Qaeda in the Arabian Peninsula (AQAP) to take over the country in the event of a civil war power-vacuum. The ongoing confrontations reached a stalemate; both regime factions were equally matched and by mid-2011, Saleh’s inner circle came to recognize that neither side could secure an out-right victory.

The fracturing of the regime had a second-order effect of giving rise to marginalized groups; the previously-suppressed *Ansarullah* network operating in the north-west of the country, separatist *al-Hirak* in the South, tribes in resource-rich parts of the country who had been excluded from this wealth, as well as AQAP. Just as the stalemate prompted traditional networks to sustain the *status quo* and to reposition themselves post-revolution, these grassroots movements, excluded from the Saleh patronage paradigm³⁵, had been working actively against the state since years. The regime, although stronger than other factions, had no monopoly over violence, it was unable to singlehandedly project force across the country. Thus, once the regime split and turned in on itself, inter-regime rivalry created a power vacuum

³¹ Wikileaks, (2009). Hamid al-Ahmar tries his hand at coordinating Houthi, Southern movement efforts.

³² Seitz, A. C., (2014). *Ties that bind and divide: the “Arab Spring” and Yemeni civil-military relations*, in *Why Yemen Matters; A society in transition*, SOAS Middle East Issues.

³³ International Crisis Group, (2011). Popular Protest in North Africa and the Middle East (II): Yemen between Reform and Revolution.

³⁴ Fielding-Smith, A., (2011). Feared general regarded as kingmaker. *Financial Times online*, March 21.

³⁵ Alley, A., L., (2010). The Rules of the Game: Unpacking Patronage Politics in Yemen. *Middle East Journal*, 64(3): 385-409.

that allowed for these non-state actors to thrive; the *Hirak* movement in the South became more prominent and began to use more militant tones, the Houthi network finally had the opportunity to avenge six gruelling government counter-insurgency campaigns against it and began upping its military game in the north, and AQAP began to seize territory in the South and probed itself in local governance.

The fear that Yemen would collapse under these pressures and allow AQAP to expand even further, promoted a diplomatic response to the crisis from the GCC, the U.N. and Western powers. With the regime factions, having reached a stalemate and following the pragmatic tradition of mediation in Yemen, in November 2011, the Saleh and *Islah* networks' decision was made to accept the deal proposed by the UN-brokered GCC deal, which would trigger Yemen's managed transition process. The transition process ran in effect from November 2011, when Saleh finally agreed to step down, until September 2014, when *Ansarullah*, aided by the previously adversarial Saleh network, seized the capital.

The Transition Process and its Failures

While rhetorically responding to the people's political and economic aspirations, at a practical level, the transitional process was a security-driven project³⁶ that focused on high politics and aimed to prevent further escalation of violence among the rival factions of the old regime and the further disentanglement of the state³⁷. It follows that in order to prevent further fissures in the political sphere, the international community under the GCC Initiative sought to mediate the rivalry between the elite players, while transitioning to a more participatory system of governance. This meant that the transitional deal was to be negotiated among the traditional power brokers - Saleh, Ali Mohsen, the Ahmars, the GPC and JMP, but excluded *Ansarullah*, the *Hirak* and the protesters. In such a framework, the GCC did not overhaul the rules of the game, but guaranteed the role of existing political elite, while reshuffling the structure of its competition.

The ruling bargain and intra-elite power struggles remained intact as the balance within the elite was changed. Vested elite-level interest dynamics continued to run parallel to the transition process, while lingering issues of historically marginalized groups of southern separatists and *Ansarullah* remained unresolved as the security and economic situation worsened. As the transition process did not halt the power struggle within the old elite, and the weak state failed to address the collapse in services and security that affected the population, the situation was exploitable by the marginalized groups, particularly *Ansarullah*, as it vied for public support while furthering its agenda of territorial expansion. In what follows, several steps of the GCC Initiative's transition process will be highlighted, in which key shifts in Yemen's power dynamics were crucial in paving the way towards civil war.

Transition Phase One/Granting Saleh Immunity/Military Restructuring

The transition process consisted of the agreement for the Yemeni crisis to be solved under the GCC Initiative and its actual Implementation Mechanism; in the first phase this included presidential handover of power, the formation of an interim government and the restructuring of the security/military sector³⁸. When on November 2011 then-President Ali Abdullah Saleh

³⁶ Carapico, S., (2014). Yemen Between Revolution and Counter-Terrorism, in Lackner, H.,(2014). *Why Yemen Matters: A Society in Transition*, 29-49. Saqi Books: London.

³⁷ Salisbury, P., (2016). Yemen: Stemming the Rise of a Chaos State. *Chatham House Report*.

³⁸ United Nations Department of Political Affairs, (2011). United Nations Peacekeeper, 'Agreement on the implementation

signed the GCC agreement, it triggered the irrevocable transfer of powers to consensus candidate and former Vice-President Abdu Rabbu Mansour Hadi who was then approved through an uncontested ballot in February 2012³⁹. Hadi led a newly-structured interim national unity government divided equally between the GPC and *Islah*-led JMP. Saleh signed the agreement in exchange for immunity, which in turn did however not require him to abandon politics; he consequently retained his influence through the GPC party and among military loyalists that had been propped up by Western powers for decades during their counterterrorism efforts in Yemen. Through its immunity provision, the GCC deal equally reinforced the culture of unaccountability and inadvertently creating the perception of an incentive system that if it did not sanction, rewarded the use of violence as a political tool.

While mandating a military restructuring, the transition agreement offered only vague guidelines on the process, and focused primarily on the army – the central locus of hard power and inter-elite competition⁴⁰. Followingly, the Initiative's military restructuring process had the result of shifting the power balance within the elite. Hadi necessarily entered an alliance with Ali Mohsen and the Ahmars, as restructuring essentially translated into purging the Saleh family from the sector⁴¹. It was arguably only with their counterbalancing support that Hadi could carry out the agreement's mandate to reform the fragmented Yemeni security apparatus and simultaneously ward off Saleh's resistance during military restructuring⁴². This however did not overcome fragmentation, since the Saleh network split essentially weakened the capacity of the security apparatus. Curbing Saleh's influence was partially effective within the upper military echelons⁴³, but continued loyalty was an obstacle to its actual and full subsidence as the army and security services in Yemen were built not on professionalism but according to tribal and party affiliation. In this later respect, both the loyalty that remained along traditional lines and incentivizing immunity provisions granted to Saleh, played out in a transition sabotage campaign. As it turns out, the international community's reluctance to remove Saleh and his family from the Yemeni political scene released his hand to spoil the transition as he continued to draw on his resources and loyalty of parts of the security forces.

As mentioned previously, the first phase of the transition process - that is, the formation of a national unity government and military restructuring, essentially excluded both *al-Hirak* and *Ansarullah*. *Ansarullah* viewed the military restructuring, essentially the removal of Saleh loyalties, as a privatisation of the military to benefit *Islah*, because the former president's waning influence translated into the relative strengthening of the positions of Ali Mohsen and *Islah* throughout the process⁴⁴. Considering Ali Mohsen formerly headed six rounds of military campaigns against *Ansarullah*, their opposition was not unwarranted and made the demands of them relinquishing their weapons in support of restructuring efforts improbable, particularly in the absence of a durable political solution to the *Saada* issue. Battles between Sunni Islamists in *Saada* and its neighbouring provinces had been a constant source of resentment amongst *Ansarullah*. Their intensity had increased over the course of the transition, for which *Ansarullah* had blamed the *Islah* network of supporting the recruitment of Sunni Islamist fighters to the area; the shifting powers through military restructuring heightened tensions

mechanism for the transition process in Yemen in accordance with the initiative of the Gulf Cooperation Council (GCC).

³⁹ Finn, A., (2012). Abd Rabbu Mansour Hadi Who? *The Guardian online*.

⁴⁰ International Crisis Group, (2013). Yemen's Military-Security Reform: Seeds of New Conflict? *Middle East Report*, 139.

⁴¹ Transfeld, M., (2014). *Yemen: GCC Roadmap to Nowhere Elite Bargaining and Political Infighting Block a Meaningful Transition*. German Institute for International and Security Affairs: Berlin.

⁴² Transfeld, M., (2016). Political bargaining and violent conflict: shifting elite alliances as the decisive factor in Yemen's transformation, *Mediterranean Politics*, 21(1):150-169.

⁴³ Gordon, S., (2013). A New Wave of Military Restructuring Decrees in Yemen; Critical Threats.

⁴⁴ Ibid, note 40.

between *Islah* and *Ansarullah*, and prompted the entering into a marriage of convenience with former president Saleh, that gave the transition its final blow.

Transition Phase Two: Federalism/NDC fails to resolve “Southern Issue”

Once the initial power transfer had been completed, the second phase of the GCC initiative mandated the new national unity government to convene an inclusive two-year National Dialogue Conference (NDC) among Yemen’s competing identities (including the Southern Movement and the Houthis), which consisted of a series of peace talks held between March 2013 to January 2014 to address Yemen’s internal conflicts. The NDC outcomes were meant to feed into the Constitution Drafting Committee (CDC) to produce a constitution draft subject to referendum approval, subsequent to which new presidential and parliamentary elections were to be held⁴⁵. While none of the traditional elites participated in the NDC directly, the Ahmars and Ali Mohsen were represented via *Islah* and Saleh through his extended GPC network; neither Saleh nor the Ahmars and Mohsin constituencies had however much to gain from this process, that is - significant changes in state–society relations would potentially weaken the tribal influence on which the Ahmars and Ali Mohsin relied just as much as Saleh had during his reign, while increased transparency would have threatened their patronage networks⁴⁶. The members of the elite who split from Saleh in the wake of the popular uprising still maintained a vested interest in the perpetuation of the old order⁴⁷ and thus, their representatives attempted to obstruct this process internally despite formally declaring their support.

The latter dynamics most evidently manifested themselves through the lack of compromise in regards to the pertinent issue of southern secession and federalism that led to a breaking point in the NDC and the transition process. The GCC Initiative’s stipulation that the “Southern issue” would need to be resolved within the framework of a “united Yemen”. Federalism was heralded as a solution to the secessionist conflict with *al-Hirak*, as well as more Houthi autonomy in the North. While federalism was an alternative to secession, regional division nevertheless touched on the distribution of resources and power, rendering both secession as well as a single Southern federal region unacceptable to the northern elite who feared economic and resource losses located in the South. The “Southern issue” was a major obstacle to adopting a future federal structure and proved unsolvable in the framework of the formal transition process. Hadi consequently established a unity government committee (essentially the Northern elite) external to the NDC which adopted a controversial six-regional solution. While this external procedural move circumvented a NDC deadlock, it did cast a shadow over the legitimacy of the transition process, and was objected by both *al-Hirak*- and *Ansarullah*. Just as *al-Hirak*’s opposition, *Ansarullah* viewed the six-region federal design as separating them from their resources and historic sphere of influence⁴⁸. In sum, one of the most pivotal issues that the NDC was meant to resolve in a consensual fashion, was instead imposed from above in accordance with elite preferences, and this is a major point that sparked the current conflict.

⁴⁵ Ibid, note 38.

⁴⁶ Transfeld, M., (2016). Political bargaining and violent conflict: shifting elite alliances as the decisive factor in Yemen’s transformation, *Mediterranean Politics*, 21(1):150-169.

⁴⁷ Juneau, (2014), in Kamrava, M., (2014). *Beyond the Arab Spring: The Evolution Ruling Bargain in the Middle East*. Oxford University Press.

⁴⁸ Thiel, T., (2015) Yemen's Imposed Federal Boundaries. Middle East Research and Information Project.

The Exacerbation of Economic and Security Deterioration/Houthi Takeover

Although the NDC succeeded in bringing together a large spectrum of Yemeni society, it failed to resolve major internal issues and was increasingly perceived by the public as a distraction from the actual negotiation proceeding among the elites. As a corrupt and increasingly weak central state was unable to enforce its will beyond the cities, the already precarious security and economic situation worsened⁴⁹, which rendered the rhetoric that hailed the transition process and NDC as the beginning of a bright new future scarcely credible. While conversations at the NDC in Sana'a focused on democracy, governance, and the economic future of the country, the already poor governance in Yemen was atrophying, and people had less access to basic services and security than ever before. The transition process appeared ever more detached from the worsening situation on the ground, federalism, a major element of the transition plan, came to be viewed as a red herring and a symbol of division and the transition government's inefficiency. In this context, and at the worst possible time, the controversial decision was made to cut fuel subsidies; this drove up prices to punitive levels, and resulted in escalating public discontent that transformed into agitations against the government and the transition, that *Ansarullah* would exploit to advance its own agenda of seizing control.

Ansarullah forces who had already regained full control over their northern governorate *Saada*, increasingly exploited the deteriorating situation to gradually expand beyond the movement's territorial stronghold. The expansion of the movement led to frequent clashes with factions of the army and tribes loyal to *Islah* and the Ahmars in the governorates adjacent to Saada, Amran province being the heartland of al-Ahmars and the wider *Hashid* tribal confederation⁵⁰. This led to frustration within the transitional government alliance; While members of the *Islah* network lamented Hadi's lack of military action to the Houthi expansionary threat, this move may be explained away twofold: it was thought that either, the President was hoping to spark an *Islah-Houthi* conflict that would weaken both factions and thus consolidate his own power, or, to mount a *Houthi* insurgency with a fragmented military where a united military under the Saleh-regime had previously failed, would simply be an exercise in futility.

Nevertheless, this strained the relation among the Hadi alliance, while Saleh saw the *Ansarullah* advances as a grand opportunity to weaken his main opponents – the Ahmar family, Ali Mohsin and *Islah* – in addition to undermining Hadi. Thus, although it may appear incongruous for Saleh to join forces with the Houthis so soon after his army had waged several wars against them, Saleh has made a career of pragmatically shifting alliances⁵¹, and this was simply another opportunity for him to reinsert himself in the power-brokering game⁵². Followingly, pro-Saleh tribes began to flip and *Ansarullah* quickly entered Amran Governorate, the power base of the Ahmars and the tribal force that underpins *Islah*. This was facilitated by the defection of pro-Saleh *Hashids*, but also by *Islah*'s loss of Saudi support, as Saudi Arabia felt regionally threatened by the Muslim Brotherhood of which *Islah* was the Yemeni equivalent.

⁴⁹ Salisbury, P., (2016). Yemen: Stemming the Rise of a Chaos State. *Chatham House Report*.

⁵⁰ International Crisis Group (3024). The Huthis: From Saada to Sanaa. *Middle East Report*, 154.

⁵¹ Ghafarzade, B., (2016). Yemen: post-conflict federalism to avoid disintegration. *Journal of International Law and Politics*, 48(3):933-1006.

⁵² Kirkpatrick, D., & A1-Batati, S., (2015). Ex-Yemeni Leader Urges Truce and Successor's Ouster, New York Times Online, March 28.

As *Ansarullah* was advancing towards the capital, pressure from the World Bank and the IMF forced Sanaa to lift subsidies on fuel, sparking a new wave of countrywide protests against the transitional *status quo*⁵³. While demonstrators took the streets to protest the rise of living costs, Abdul Malik al-Houthi, leader of *Ansarullah*, appeared on television calling for an uprising to overthrow the government if fuel prices were not reduced. Finally, the Houthis, supported by the Saleh-network managed to take over Sana'a, and the Ahmar-Mohsin-Islah alliance with Hadi was weakened dramatically and lost its influence among the northern tribes and the military. Most importantly however, Hadi's strongest resource, the political process and the backing of the international committee had become irrelevant as with the heating of the conflict, the political transition was pushed to the side-lines⁵⁴.

Hadi fled to Aden and the government was subsequently exiled to Saudi Arabia. Once in Saudi Arabia, the government pleaded for a foreign military intervention against the Houthi-Saleh forces, which triggered the Saudi-led airstrikes campaign that continues as of April 2017 and which has pushed the region's poorest country into the worst humanitarian crisis. Opposition to the Saleh-Houthi movement grew, particularly in central and southern Yemen, when forces entered traditionally Southern areas, which eventually triggers the civil war. This development was not going to be short-lived, as *Ansarullah* had been fighting this war for decades, and Saleh, who had always considered Yemen his personal fiefdom, was not going to be halted⁵⁵. In the meantime, AQAP has gained strength, the South is demanding immediate secession, and international patterns have been unable to urge all parties to the conflict to find a political solution. This has led to the ongoing fragmentation of the State and further escalation of violence that continues to this day.

Conclusion

This paper aimed to demonstrate how the GCC initiative's transition process gave rise to the circumstances that led to the outbreak of the civil war. It essentially prioritized short-term stability to avoid a civil war and dealt with the established political actors, while neglecting to address the major underlying causes and conditions of the conflict in Yemen. The component of granting unconditional immunity to Saleh proved particularly significant, it meant that the transition's transfer-of-power deal handed over presidency, but not power. Against this backdrop, remnant forces loyal to the previous Saleh regime whom the initiative allowed to remain part of the political game, allied with the Houthi rebels to enable a takeover of the capital and other districts in Yemen, that brought the transition to a halt. Similarly, the NDC did not achieve its goal of reconciling conflicting groups, and grassroots movements continued to distrust the process, particularly due to their exclusion of a power-sharing deal, and the process' failures to implement a census-based federal map for the future structure of the country. The above suggests that rather than aiming for a genuinely inclusive system that would have been required for a roadmap of a democratic transition, international engagement was essentially an attempt to contain the threat of further destabilisation that would allow AQAP to expand.

⁵³ Abdullah, K., (2014). Army breaks up protests as Yemen raises fuel prices. Reuters Online.

⁵⁴ Transfeld, M., (2016). Political bargaining and violent conflict: shifting elite alliances as the decisive factor in Yemen's transformation, *Mediterranean Politics*, 21(1):150-169.

⁵⁵ Danish Institute for International Studies (2016). The future of Yemen Global, regional and national dimensions.

The current war has since transformed into a multiplicity of wars in which a volatile combination of local, regional, and international actors, all of whom are armed and hold competing interests in the country's future, is playing out. These different groups are driven by various motives, sectarian reasons to a lesser extent and mainly for control over their local territory linked to historical animosities between different regions. Further factionalism among these individual groups is evident, with tribes fighting to protect their lands and few viewing President Hadi, or those negotiating on his behalf, as representative of them⁵⁶. International efforts thus far have resembled elite pact and power-sharing deals excluding those fighting for local territory who have built up constituencies and are willing to fight for their cause. Were a deal to be reached, it may put the macro-level conflict to an end, but it would serve elite-level interests and exclude the localized drivers of conflict; the core issues of governance and justice are not going to be resolved through such a deal.

There are many things needed in a complex country like Yemen, where different interest groups hold different agendas. For a sustainable peace to be built, local grievances, and how governance can be adopted to meet the needs of the Yemeni people, must be addressed. While a top-down approach in the form of a peace deal between the elite is vital, it must be paired with a much more involved and granular grassroots approach⁵⁷. As with the GCC deal, pretending that a peace agreement reached in the capital will end conflict, is futile. What we are seeing in the meantime is a general radicalisation trend; *Islahis* are becoming *Salafists*, *Salafists* part-time AQAP, AQAP is now ISIS, pro-Saleh are now Houthis and socialists have turned into hard-core separatists⁵⁸. While short wars change regimes, long wars change societies; the Yemeni people will need to re-identify with one another in an attempt for nation-building. In 2011 the GCC deal came into reality because the international community had leverage, today, they are part of the problem and there seem to be no more brokers or dealers to end the crisis⁵⁹. The longer this war continues, Yemen is further slipping down the Syrian route of multiple factions fighting on the ground for different reasons.

⁵⁶ Safeworld (2016). Federalism, conflict and fragmentation: An interview with Peter Salisbury.

⁵⁷ Ibid, note 56.

⁵⁸ Carnegie Endowment for International Peace, (2016). Panel: The War in Yemen: Is There an End in Sight?

⁵⁹ Ibid, note 58.

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