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# The Yemeni Civil War: Territorial Partition as the Path to Peace

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## KEYWORDS

Yemen,  
Partition,  
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## ABSTRACT

*The Yemeni Civil War is a conflict that bears crucial regional significance due to its destabilising effect on the Middle East, with the country also being home to one of the world's worst humanitarian disasters. The conflict is characterised by a complex web of regional rivalries, sectarian tensions, and international interventions. This research paper offers a comprehensive assessment of the conflict by outlining its background, key actors and main conflict drivers, and hence proposes a theoretically, historically and contextually informed strategy for resolution- the peaceful territorial partition of Yemen into the historical entities of North Yemen and South Yemen. The paper outlines short-term, medium-term and long-term priorities that the ideal territorial partition plan would focus on, including and accounting for relevant primary, secondary and tertiary actors. The paper aims to showcase that through a nuanced understanding of Yemen's demographic dynamics and history, a roadmap to ending the conflict focused on territorial partition can be charted out in collaboration with regional actors and the international community, hence leading to stable Yemens that can heal from the humanitarian catastrophe caused by the conflict.*

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## Introduction

The Yemeni Civil War is a conflict characterised by religious sectarian tensions, holding crucial regional significance due to its role in perpetuating rivalries in the Middle East. Although direct hostilities between the main warring parties, the internationally recognised Yemeni government (Presidential Leadership Council) and the Houthi movement (Supreme Political Council) have reduced, a catastrophic humanitarian crisis is still ravaging the country, and a severe lack of food and supplies for basic survival is affecting at least 18.2 million people, half of which are children (UNICEF, 2024).

There have been multiple attempts at peace, but none of these measures have succeeded in stopping the fighting or alleviating the plight of civilians (Council on Foreign Relations, 2024). With peace nowhere in sight and a humanitarian crisis that continues to worsen, the urgency to find a viable solution to the conflict grows by the day, particularly considering Yemen's geostrategic significance as a crossroads of global trade routes, specifically the Red Sea, the Bab Al Mandab Strait and the Gulf of Aden.

This paper seeks to assess the Yemeni Civil War by understanding its roots, delving into key actors and their stakes in the conflict, and identifying the main drivers of the conflict. At the heart of this

paper lies a proposed solution to the Yemeni Civil War supported by a theoretical framework- the partition of Yemen to the pre-1990 borders of North and South Yemen, with necessary adjustments to account for large-scale community displacement as well as approximately equal distribution of oil reserves. The short-term, medium-term, and long-term measures required to successfully undertake and establish this partition will be explored, and any potential challenges and obstacles will be identified.

## Contextualising the Conflict

### 1) Background

The roots of the Yemeni Civil War stretch back decades, being based on the unification of North and South Yemen in 1990, two independent nations, as seen in Figure 1. The two former states had contrasting political systems, with North Yemen establishing a republic government inspired by Nasserism- the ideology espoused by former Egyptian President Gamal Abdel Nasser- while South Yemen was the only vocally communist nation in the Middle East at the time. Both countries dealt with unstable domestic political environments, but for the most part, reflected the market economy versus socialist economy dynamics that characterised the Cold War (Wenner & Burrowes, 2024).



*Figure 1: North Yemen (Yemen Arab Republic) and South Yemen (People's Democratic Republic of Yemen) prior to unification in 1990 (Nagi, 2022)*

These political differences also led to border disputes between the two Yemens in the 1970s, exacerbated by the internal divisions of both nations and oil discovery on the border (Wenner & Burrowes, 2024). The discovery of oil, combined with the collapse of the Soviet Union and communist regimes globally, incentivised North Yemen and South Yemen to consider unification to share the profits of oil rather than engage in costly conflict. This led to the merger of the two nations on May 22, 1990, with the terms calling for a multiparty democratic system and the declaration of North Yemen's Sanaa as the political capital and South Yemen's Aden as the economic capital (Wenner & Burrowes, 2024)

The main conflict began in September 2014 when Houthi forces took over Sanaa, which was followed by a rapid takeover of the government. In 2015, the Houthi-led Supreme Revolutionary Committee declared a general mobilisation to overthrow then-president Abdrabbuh Mansur Hadi and expand into southern provinces. Allied with the military forces who were loyal to the former Yemeni president Ali Abdullah Saleh, the successful Houthi offensive led to Hadi's resignation (Council on Foreign Relations, 2024).

A Saudi-led coalition intervened in 2015 to support the internationally recognised government of President Abdrabbuh Mansur Hadi, using economic isolation tactics such as blockades as well as direct force through air strikes. It included countries like the UAE, Senegal, Sudan, Bahrain and temporarily Morocco, Qatar and the USA through the military contractor Academi/Blackwater, now acting as mercenaries in the conflict (Issa, 2022). This intervention was triggered by fears of Iranian influence in Yemen through support for the Houthi rebels, hence setting up Yemen as a proxy conflict between Saudi Arabia and its allies against Iran, as well as along the greater Shia-Sunni religious divide (Council on Foreign Relations, 2024).

## 2) Humanitarian impact

Yemeni civilians have been subject to high food prices, import restrictions and fuel shortages. These were worsened dramatically by two cyclones in 2015, locust swarms in 2016, a cholera outbreak in 2017, the COVID-19 pandemic and skyrocketing global food prices as a result of the Russian invasion of Ukraine. Between 18.5 and 21 million people in Yemen need humanitarian aid, with 4.5 million people being internally displaced and approximately 17 million people struggling with hunger (World Food Program USA, 2024). Additionally, the United Nations has yet to officially declare the situation in Yemen as a famine despite the fact that it bears all the markers of one (Sarkar et al., 2022). The blockades imposed by the Saudi-led coalition, which have resulted in restrictions on the flow of humanitarian aid and essential goods, have played a significant role in worsening the current catastrophe (Human Rights Watch, 2017).

## 3) Key actors

### *Primary Actors:*

#### A. Houthi movement (Ansar Allah)

The Houthi movement, officially known as Ansar Allah or Supporters of God, was named in honour of a religious leader from the Houthi clan and was established in the late 1980s as a Zaydi Shia revivalist movement in North Yemen. The Zaydi Shias are a Muslim minority in Yemen but bear a majority presence in most parts of former North Yemen. Claiming their Supreme Political Council headed by Mahdi al-Mashat to be the legitimate government of Yemen, the Houthis essentially seek greater autonomy and political representation in the country, advocating against foreign interference in Yemeni affairs and opting for direct military force as a means of achieving their goal (Robinson, 2023).

#### B. Internationally recognised Yemeni government

The internationally recognised Yemeni government mainly refers to the Hadi administration and its successors. Abdrabbuh Mansour Hadi was sworn into a two-year presidency in 2012, wherein he ran unopposed, leading to criticisms of his election being undemocratic and his power being illegitimate (Haedelt et al., 2021). His mandate was extended by a year, citing security challenges because of the Houthis as well as delays in Yemen's democratic transition. Hadi stayed in power- albeit with



questionable authority- until 2022, when he finally resigned and transferred the role of president to Rashad al-Alimi, the former minister of interior (Haedelt et al., 2021).

Their main goals are essentially to regain control of the country, reestablish their domestic legitimacy, and maintain the status quo in terms of majority Sunni Muslim influence (Robinson, 2023). Figure 2 below shows the territorial control dynamics of the Yemeni Civil War, also including some secondary and tertiary actors that will be detailed in further sections.

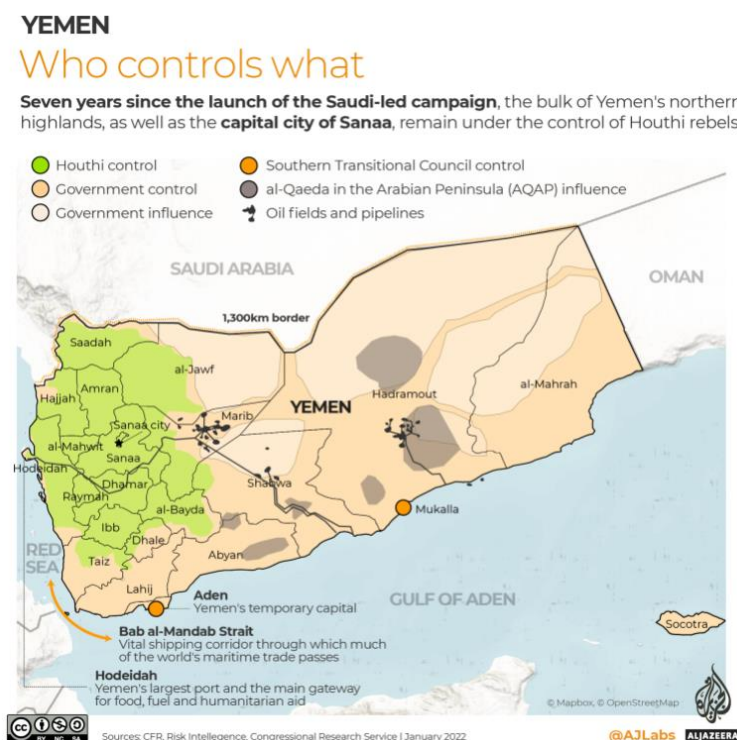


Figure 2: Yemen territorial control map (Haddad, 2022)

### Secondary Actors:

#### A. Southern Transitional Council

Established in 2017, the Southern Transitional Council started as a secessionist organisation in South Yemen, seeking the revival of South Yemen as an independent state but with a secular, non-theocratic government. It opposes the Houthis and briefly controls territory in Yemen on its own, but in 2022, it combined forces with the internationally recognised Yemeni government to promote a united front against the military activities of the Houthis. It still has main control over the port city of Aden as well as the city of Mukalla (ACLED, 2024b).

#### B. Saudi Arabia-Led Coalition

Saudi Arabia perceives the Houthi rebellion as a threat to its national security, fearing Iranian influence in its backyard and hence solidifying Yemen's role as a proxy conflict between Iran and Saudi Arabia (Robinson, 2023). The coalition aims to restore the Yemeni government and contain Iranian influence in the region. The Saudi-led coalition has conducted airstrikes against Houthi

targets and provided military support to Yemeni government forces (ACLED, 2024a). It also enforces a naval blockade to prevent arms shipments to the Houthis, which has contributed to the famine and worsened the country's humanitarian crisis. The effort in 2015 was initially named Operation Decisive Storm and was named that for three weeks until it was renamed Operation Restoring Hope (ACLED, 2024a).

The coalition has internal struggles, ranging from the suspension of Qatar in 2017 in the wake of its diplomatic crisis with Saudi Arabia and the UAE to periodically heightened tensions between Saudi Arabia and the UAE. This was particularly considered the UAE's military support of the STC even before its integration with the internationally recognised Yemeni government (ACLED, 2024a).

### C. Iran

Iran is the main backer of the Houthi movement, being the only major country to recognise the Houthi's Supreme Political Council as the government of Yemen. They have provided the Houthis with direct military support, hence feeding into the Saudi-led perception of the Houthis as an Iranian proxy seeking Shia Muslim dominance in the Middle East (Robinson, 2023). However, it is worth noting that although Iran has been vocal about their political support of the Houthis, they deny sending them military aid (Brouillette, 2022), although adequate evidence exists to prove the same, such as the USA's seizure of Iranian weapons en route to the Houthis (Lee, 2024). Regardless, it is difficult to assess the exact degree of influence that Iran has over the Houthis or in Yemen in general.

#### *Tertiary Actors:*

- A. Ansar al Sharia (AQAP- Al Qaeda in Arabian Peninsula)
- B. Islamic State- Yemen Province (ISIL-YP)
- C. United States of America

#### **4) Main drivers**

- A. Political instability- Yemen has long grappled with political instability, exacerbated by tribal, ethnic and religious rivalries, economic challenges, and weak governance.
- B. Sectarian tensions- The conflict has taken on sectarian dimensions, with the Houthi rebels, belonging to the Zaydi Shia sect, pitted against the Sunni-majority government and its Saudi-backed coalition.
- C. Regional power struggles- The involvement of regional powers, particularly Saudi Arabia and Iran, has fueled the conflict, reflecting broader geopolitical tensions in the Middle East
- D. Humanitarian catastrophe- The war has led to one of the world's worst humanitarian crises, with millions facing food insecurity, displacement, and damage to critical infrastructure, which has dramatically reduced access to healthcare and clean water.

### **Partition as a Solution- Theoretical Framework and Core Justifications**

So far, peace negotiations have made little to no progress in enacting ground-level change, with the terms of peace agreements such as the 2018 Stockholm Agreement seeing little success in the actual implementation of their provisions. Additionally, it can be argued that the friction between regional actors has worsened the conflict and hampered peace progress, partly due to Yemen's position as a

Saudi-Iran proxy conflict and partly due to the fact that Saudi Arabia’s attempts at mediating the conflict were bound to be unsuccessful due to evident bias (Robinson, 2023).

The failure of peace negotiations and the disastrous ramifications of military activities evidently call for a change in approach and the consideration of a potentially more drastic solution. Upon closer inspection of Figures 1 and 2 (combined side by side below into Figure 3 for ease of access), it can be observed that the areas majorly controlled by the Houthis and those controlled by the internationally recognised Yemeni government closely resemble the territories that once used to be North Yemen and South Yemen.

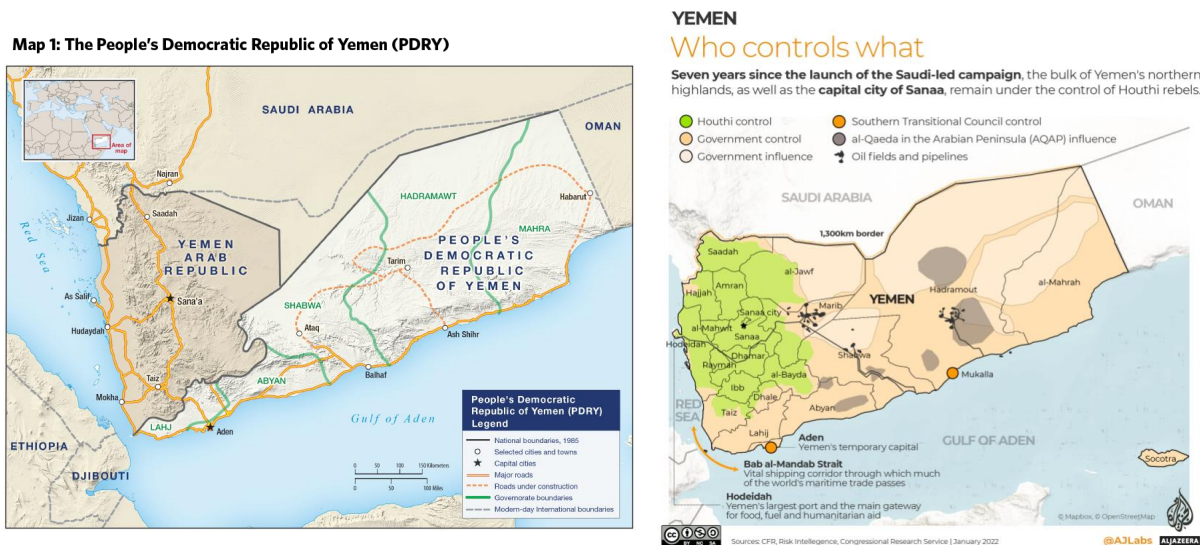


Figure 3: Figure 1 and Figure 2 Side by Side

By no means is this a coincidence- the information provided thus far has shown that the distribution of religious sects across Yemen is such that Shia Muslim communities are prevalent in the North, whereas Sunni Muslim communities are prevalent in the larger South. Given the current status of the conflict and the fact that there is not adequate common ground between the main warring parties, it is highly unlikely that typical diplomacy would lend a significant solution, only stalling a few Houthi attacks at best and potentially expanding the internationally recognised government’s authority into a few more areas.

Considering the factors at hand, it may be time to consider a drastic yet potentially highly effective solution to the problem- the partition of Yemen back to North and South Yemen, adhering to some semblance of the pre-1990 borders accounting for demographic shifts in some areas along the old border, as well as accounting for an attempted equal distribution of oil resources in the region. Yemen would not be a stranger to this concept- the existence of former North and South Yemen serves as historical precedent, and the very presence of the STC, combined with its support from the UAE, showcases the desire amongst some parts of the Yemeni populace to return to this state of being.

Partition has been used as a tool for conflict resolution in significant cases- the most popular being the partition of 1947 that carved a new Muslim nation out of India, now known as Pakistan. While it is no secret that the 1947 partition resulted in a loss of lives on both sides, as well as stark questions of identity, the result in the modern day is two independent nations whose populace and leadership

would scorn the idea of ever being unified again. The fact that partition had to be resorted to is considered, especially in South Asia, as a failure of communities to live in mutual respect for one another, let alone harmony (Manchanda, 2008).

However, this is not to say that peaceful partitions have not taken place- some scholars cite the separation of the Czech Republic from Slovakia. Regardless of these cases, however, partition as a tool for conflict resolution can be considered an option that is eyed warily by the international community (Manchanda, 2008). Additionally, inconsiderate partitions, such as those of Palestine, Ireland, and Cyprus, have left these places in a conflict that continues to this day. While this may deter policymakers from considering partition as a tool, it is worth noting that in these cases, the partitions were largely imposed with little to no consideration for the communities who would be impacted by it (Manchanda, 2008). It is evident that unification has not served Yemen well- leaders from the North and the South had been unable to integrate themselves sufficiently to create a strong state apparatus, resulting in a weak, corrupt government and a forced democracy that the country's new, larger populace was not ready for or entirely accepting of (Naqvi, 2019).

It has been argued that partitioning a war-torn multi-ethnic state can save more lives than attempting to restore it (Manchanda, 2008)- as seen so far in the case of Yemen, no substantial peace progress has been made, and while a gradual reduction in hostilities spells an improvement, it only reflects a stalemate, not a resolution. A stalemate does give breathing room to civilians from the fear of being bombed or attacked, but it does not necessarily translate to fewer people going hungry. The theory of partition hence suggests that if the main warring groups are given autonomy over a certain amount of territory, then the security dilemma is resolved, and the main militarised part of the conflict ends (Rose et al., 2003).

The following proposal for a partition of Yemen will begin with short-term priorities immediately upon the signing of a peaceful partition agreement between the Houthis and the internationally recognised Yemeni government- such an agreement would likely be accepted by both parties if it were to create a border that gives each side a portion of the oil resources in the area. Additionally, it is crucial that the agreement be mediated either by international organisations or by countries considered neutral parties to the conflict by the main warring actors themselves with only a humanitarian interest. This would completely rule out any mediation by Saudi Arabia or other regional actors with an active stake in the conflict, although they do bear the right to be observers in the mediation and peace agreement drafting processes if they wish to do so.

Furthermore, the agreement would use the official names of former North and South Yemen- unless any party favours a name change for stronger distinction or in order to revamp regional identity, in which case such a desire ought to be respected and upheld. The agreement would also ideally stipulate confidence and security-building measures that both parties could follow, such as prisoner exchanges, and pave the way for the establishment of direct lines of communication between the two new nations.

### **Short-term Priorities**

Priorities concerning the first 6 months after a peaceful partition agreement should be mainly minimalist in nature. This period would be extremely delicate for a new North Yemen and South Yemen- they would emerge from the agreement as fragile states that need significant international and regional support to stay afloat in the initial period.

First and foremost, international organisations need to involve themselves in the new Yemens to ensure the safe flow of humanitarian aid. The Saudi-led coalition's blockade needs to be lifted completely to allow for the unfettered flow of emergency humanitarian aid into the region, with a

focus on food supplies, clean water, and medical resources, particularly those concerning emergency care and disease control. Both Yemens would also need assistance with their fuel shortages and misallocations. Houthi forces have made up to US\$1.14 billion from fuel and oil distribution on the black market, and they are also using imported fuel for military purposes. Greater oversight into this aspect would allow for more careful allocation of fuel usage, focusing on its importance in pumping clean water, running hospital equipment, and safely storing vaccines (Human Rights Watch, 2017).

AQAP and ISIL-YP would jump at an opportunity to seize power from either party, but it is crucial that the international community, including regional actors, be involved in assessing these threats and monitoring their movements, considering that newly independent North Yemen and South Yemen would not have the resources or capability to do so on their own at this stage. The current internationally recognised Yemeni government would form an interim government in the South, while the Houthis would form an interim government in the North. Both these governments would lack a solid economic foundation- hence the importance of international economic assistance, particularly from organisations such as the World Bank, so as to prevent both governments from resorting to overtaxing their poor and hungry populations (Johnsen, 2023).

At this stage, there ought to be the establishment of a joint border committee, including government representatives from both countries with knowledge or experience regarding territorial conflict, border control, and natural resource distribution along the border, with potential representatives from neutral countries or international organisations acting as observers. However, the actual control of the border in the short term ought to be maintained and observed by UN peacekeeping patrol forces, whose sole responsibility will be to maintain security in this particular aspect and ensure that the details of the peace agreement are being followed.

### **Medium-term Priorities**

The medium-term refers to a period of approximately 2-5 years from the date of partition. During this period, it would be beneficial for North Yemen and South Yemen themselves to step up and create joint forces to deal with threats such as Al-Qaeda and ISIL-YP, considering that both sides would be against them. Considering that they are likely to still be struggling states at this stage, they will continue to require international assistance in this regard, but the gradual shift in control would enhance the sovereignty of the respective Yemens.

International actors, particularly the Western world, must restrain themselves from forcing countries to adopt democratic forms of governance if they want to prevent the country from spiralling into chaos again. After the short-term interim, both countries must adopt respective forms of governance that are suitable for their stability and economic progress- the North would most likely end up as a Muslim theocracy, while the South would attempt a secular democracy of their own will, although majority Sunni influence is unlikely to fade. During this stage, it would be important for North Yemen and South Yemen's joint border committee to revisit their border and identify solutions to any contested areas of control, as well as evaluate the positioning of smaller communities along the border and their protection. Assuming that there is unlikely to be an escalation of any violent clashes at the border, the UN peacekeeping patrol forces ought to consider a phased withdrawal from the region, with the timeline depending on assessments of the North and South Yemens' state capabilities.

### **Long-term Priorities**

In the long term, both North Yemen and South Yemen must focus on building themselves up as independent states, gradually decreasing their reliance on international assistance. The countries must develop models for developing national technical expertise and financial stability, and ideally,

they ought to move from focusing solely on survival to focusing on sustainable development and prosperity, emphasising investments in education, healthcare, agriculture, and other key sectors. At this point, a joint border committee would ideally not be necessary but should not be disbanded without adequate evaluations of the degree of border tension between the two countries.

### **Potential Challenges and Obstacles**

A major potential challenge would be border discontent- it is possible that one side, or both, could disapprove of the border arrangements and seek more land or oil reserves, hence prompting border skirmishes or territorial occupation similar to the Pakistani occupation of a section of Kashmir in India now known as Pakistan-Occupied Kashmir (POK) and the Chinese occupation of a part of Kashmir known as Aksai Chin. This threat hence amplifies the importance of rigorous border patrol assisted by international troops, preferably UN peacekeeping forces or those provided by a country capable of acting as a neutral party.

It is possible that one nation, or both, could struggle to stay afloat as independent, functioning states- a challenge that is expected in the short and medium term, but with the right international economic support and a stable government, ought to be more or less mitigated in the long term. South Yemen would likely receive support from Saudi Arabia, the UAE, and their allies, while North Yemen would receive support from Iran. This would likely still brew tensions between the Saudi bloc and Iran as Saudi Arabia would perceive North Yemen as an Iran-controlled state (Harb, 2019). Resolving this perception would be difficult; hence, it should only be observed by the international community with caution to ensure that those tensions do not escalate into armed conflict.

### **Conclusion**

Historical precedents show that partition is never easy, but it is important to remember that in Yemen's specific case, the idea of North Yemen and South Yemen isn't novel. Furthermore, Yemen has only been a unified country since 1990. These facts make Yemen drastically different from other popular cases of partition.

Although such a measure would be undoubtedly challenging to implement and would come with a myriad of complexities, a peaceful partition of the country serves as a pragmatic and realistic solution given the distribution of territory between the main warring parties at the current stage, as well as the sectarian demographics of the region. Through the careful and thought-out involvement of regional and international actors, North Yemen and South Yemen can develop into self-sufficient states with minimal internal conflict, hence contributing to the overall stabilisation of the Middle East.

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