

Yemen in the International Security Agenda: The Context of Tribalism, Sectarianism, and Intervention

HAKAN KIYICI

Turkish National Police Academy

ORCID: 0000-0001-5655-8060

Tribes and Politics in Yemen: A History of the Houthi Conflict

By Marieke Brandt

New York: Oxford University Press, 2017, 472 pages, \$45.00, ISBN: 9780190673598

Yemen Endures: Civil War, Saudi Adventurism and the Future of Arabia

By Ginny Hill

New York: Oxford University Press, 2017, 391 pages, \$23.30, ISBN: 9780190842369

Global Responses to Conflict and Crisis in Syria and Yemen

By Amanda Guidero *and* Maia C. Hallward

Chan: Palgrave Macmillan, 2019, 118 pages, \$46.79, ISBN: 9783030027889

Insight Turkey 2020

Vol. 22 / No. 1 / pp. 237-244

Received Date: 01/04/2020 • Accepted Date: 02/28/2020 • DOI: 10.25253/99.2020221.11

The effects of the Arab Spring of 2011 have continued to change the contemporary colonial, political, social, economic and territorial sub-religious contexts, theories and paradigms in the Middle East. In December 2010, Mohammad Bouazizi's self-immolation in Tunisia and his protest style not only inspired the Tunisian public, it also succeeded in triggering expanding social uprising waves in the region. In the conclusion of massive demonstrations, the most important autocratic key figures were dethroned, namely Tunisian President Zine al-Abdine Ben Ali, Egyptian President Hosni Mubarak, Libya's Muammar al-Qaddafi and Yemeni President Al Abdullah Saleh. These social upheavals not only brought about regime change, but also sparked global level security problems. With the collapse of the old political order, a new political vacuum appeared, and local non-state armed actors and their proxy alliances sought to set up like-minded regimes in war-torn areas. The power gap emerging from the civil wars of Libya, Yemen and Syria have nourished transnational terror networks, waves of mass immigration, the spread of pandemic diseases and human-made calamities. Hence, the current condition of the Arab Spring can be recognized as an 'Arab Winter,'¹ because of the return of ex-authoritarian regimes re-imposing political order. Yemen is the most dramatic example of this condition.

Following the resignation of Yemen's authoritarian leader Abdullah Saleh, the new independent regime ruled by

Abdrabbuh Mansour Hadi's government has yet to establish any political stability in the country. President Saleh had governed Yemen since 1978, and had succeeded in fostering reconciliation among different ethnic and sectarian actors. The unification of separate parts of the country, the Zaydi-led Yemen Arab Republic (North Yemen) and the Sunni-led People's Democratic Republic of Yemen (South Yemen), was a case in point. This merger was one of the most crucial political effects of Saleh's legacy for Yemen. Following the establishment of the new Yemeni state in 1992, President Saleh continued his mediator role within the military-led patronage network system. Thanks to this system, President Saleh's governance was accepted by different social, political and sectarian actors in Yemen. However, political stability broke down with the democratic protests that started in 2011, and which evolved into disorder for the country. The new President Hadi has sought to set up political stability without Saleh's patronage network legacy since 2014. Although the first days of his government succeeded in ceasing the demonstrations in the country, Yemen's fragile political condition quickly transformed into even deeper political, social and religious conflicts. In 2014, rebellious groups of Houthis took control of Yemen's capital city, Sanaa, and brought Hadi's political power to an end.

As a result of these developments, Yemenis have had to face great human-made calamities, which have placed the country atop the list of the

world's most grievous emergency humanitarian crises today. According to some indicators in the overview of the United Nations Office for the Coordination of Humanitarian Affairs (UNOCHA), an estimated 80 percent of Yemen's population, around 24.1 million people, have had to rely on international aid in Yemen.² In addition, the last update of the United Nations Refugee Agency (UNHCR) estimates that approximately four million Yemenis have been displaced since 2015 and more than 80 percent of these people were displaced in one year.³ In 2017, the UN Humanitarian Chief, Emergency Relief Coordinator Stephen O'Brien, cynically highlighted that "a child under five dies of preventable cause every ten minutes."⁴ In addition, Yemen has suffered from famine and drought conditions, which provide fertile ground for cholera and other viruses to attack the population, and death rates may increase in the coming years due to lack of international aid.

What are the key historical, political and religious references, the optimal analytical framework, and the most relevant themes that can be employed to make sense of the current situation in Yemen? In addition, how can we decode the positions of conflicting actors and determine which perspectives are helpful? Three major works that aim to answer these questions are reviewed in this article. They help to clarify the effects of the internal (political, social, religious) and external (counterinsurgency operations, military interventions) dynamics of the Yemeni conflict. Marieke Brandt's

Tribes and Politics in Yemen: A History of the Houthi Conflict is one of them. It is composed of two main parts and seven chapters, all of which are systematized through Brandt's social anthropological methodological perspective. Part I deals with Yemen's social, political and traditional legacies from 1962 to 2004. These dates are of crucial importance to understanding the current political turmoil in Yemen. Part II focuses on the dynamics of sectarian conflict; Brandt reckons that the Houthi conflict emerged from the conflict between tribes and sects as well as external influences on the country. Ginny Hill's *Yemen Endures: Civil War, Saudi Adventurism and the Future of Arabia* is another significant book published in 2017. The book is composed of fifteen chapters. The chapter titled "An Illusory State: Parliamentary Politics and Presidential Patronage" deals with Yemen's post-Saleh period which could not achieve stability because of the legacy of Saleh's patronage structure. Hill enriches *Yemen Endures* with accounts of her face-to-face encounters with ordinary Yemeni people. Hence the book subtly reflects the Yemenis' main political perspectives regarding the current situation in their country. The last book reviewed here is Amanda Guidero and Maia C. Hallward's *Global Responses to Conflict and Crisis in Syria and Yemen*. This volume focuses on counterinsurgency operations and military interventions in two civil war areas in the region: Syria and Yemen. The main premise of Guidero and Hallward's book is that the Syrian conflict has been covered more extensively in the

media, despite the similar human-made disaster in Yemen. According to the authors, the situation in Yemen should be dealt with through a more critical perspective due to the role of external actors who have been playing more destabilizing roles when compared to foreign actors in Syria.

Based on the review of these three books, current trends in the conflict in Yemen demonstrate three dynamics: First, the nexus of tribalism, sectarianism and political issues in Yemen is tightly connected. The social, political and administrative institutions of the country have been distributed among tribes and sectarian groups. These actors have deep historical roots in Yemen's political system, especially following the country's independence from the Ottoman Empire, and these actors have played decisive roles in nearly all of Yemen's internal conflicts (1962-1994-2014). Second, President Saleh's patronage network system has been analyzed by many pundits as one of the most crucial trigger factors of the current conflict in Yemen. His patronage has been re-shaped, despite new internal and external dynamics, and the situation has contributed to his legitimacy in the country. Lastly, the involvement of external actors in Yemen's internal affairs has exacerbated the situation. Their counterinsurgency operations based on military intervention strategies comprise the third dynamic. The involvement of regional powers such as Saudi Arabia and the United Arab Emirates (UAE) in the conflict on behalf of the regime forces, and Iran and Lebanon

(Hezbollah) on the side of the rebellious opposition groups has increased the carnage and destruction in war-torn Yemen. The conflict in Yemen has also escalated due to the position of transnational actors, mainly the United States and its regional rivals, Russia and China, which have taken more initiative in military assistance and have penetrated into the war zone along with their like-minded local proxies. These external actors have sought to engage in the conflict zones through pragmatic partnerships with non-state local actors.

The Roles of Tribalism and Sectarianism in Yemeni Politics

As significant social structures, tribes have been essential institutions in the creation of the current states of the Middle East and North Africa (MENA). Hence, they have been essential components of any level of analysis of the region since the time of Ibn Khaldun (1332-1406). Khaldun's political theory on the state is systematized with the concepts of *asabiyyah* and *umran*, which indicate that the legitimacy of state power has to be recognized by the tribes. His theoretical framework has continued to inspire modern social sciences, particularly sociology, anthropology and political science. Marieke Brandt's *Tribes and Politics in Yemen: A History of the Houthi Conflict* is one of the newest socio-anthropological contributions to such studies. According to Brandt, Yemen's socio-political structure has a close connection with the tribes. Unlike the central and southern

parts of the country, Yemen's extreme north (Sādah, al-Jawf, northern 'Amram) is dominated by tribal norms and customs (p. 15). Hence the current political position of the rebellious groups should be analyzed with this framework.

Brandt reckons that the concept of 'tribe' is one of the most disputed issues for scientists, because it has been ideologically charged instead of reflecting the political dynamics throughout MENA. According to Brandt, "in colonial times, in sub-Saharan Africa the concept of tribe contributed to the portrayal of indigenous populations as primitive, which in turn helped to justify misions of development and civilization. During decolonization, therefore, this classical anthropological evolutionism collapsed" (p. 15). In the context of Yemen, the tribe is the locus of one of the country's deepest, historically rooted socio-political dynamics, one which has determined the current conflict situation in the state. Yemeni society is composed of different social strata, including but far from limited to tribes. As Brandt rightly argues, "Yemen's growing urban and peri-urban areas, large parts of central and southern Yemen, and even parts of the rural, peasant north do not (any longer) consider themselves tribal societies" (p. 18).

Further, within this governance framework, Shaykhs (as leaders) have played leading roles; their mission is to protect the honor (*sharaf*) of the tribes, and their sectarian identity has been nourished from religious norms,

values and paradigms. The protection of honor is tantamount to preserving the sectarian perception of the tribes, and this situation has required collectivism or solidarity among groups. The Shaykhs also play the role of lawmakers who can regulate values and norms for sectarian issues vis-à-vis newly emerging socio-political developments. Their roles have been recognized in Yemeni law as part of:

the tribal customary, law, Islamic law (sharia) and state's judiciary. In the rural areas of Upper Yemen, *urf* (traditions) and sharia law are in many ways complementary and thus coexist. They are, however, represented by different social strata: *urf* is promoted by the Shaykhs, whereas a sharia judge belongs to one of two groups: the *sadah* (descendants of the prophet, sing. *sayyid*) or the *qadis* (hereditary jurist-administrators of tribal descent) (p. 20).

However, these judicial rights have not been controlled by a central power, and their sanction power on the population has been neglected by the rulers. This situation has decreased the legitimacy of a central power; tribalism and sectarianism have forged patrimonial structures in Yemen, and these structures have sparked deep social and economic inequalities for Yemenis. Brandt focuses her attention on the close relationship between tribalism and sectarianism and the patrimonial system, and its role in the Houthis-led civil war. In her reading, "in conjunction with the weakness or even absence of state institutions in Ye-

men's north, a patrimonial structure emerged in which political power was bound to persons, rather than institutions" (p. 345). Brandt concedes that nothing is really new about her argument, but argues that there has been a lack of emphasis on the crisis zone's local population. She highlights the government's mismanagement of the war, which has caused an increasing drain toward the Houthi forces, and argues that the rebellion has benefited enormously from this fragmentation and the lack of unity or concerned action among its opponents (pp. 353-4).

The Patronage System of President Saleh

Until the resignation of President Saleh in 2017, Yemen's patrimonial structures sought to integrate statehood with his patronage network system. President Saleh was a powerful actor in Yemen, and his political position provided advantage in his grip on the institutions of security and the economy. State actors constituted the main pillar of his patronage network system, which contributed to his ability to keep tribes, sectarian groups and even extremist organizations such as al-Qaeda in check. President Saleh's patronage network system was mostly nourished by patrimonial structures, whose members did not accept doing obligatory army service or paying taxes. Denied these vital sources, the governing capacity of the President Saleh was set up on corruption and bilateral relations with external actors. Hence, his pa-

tronage networks functioned as an illusory state for Yemen.

President Saleh ruled the country for over twenty years, from Yemen's unification in 1990 to his resignation in 2017; during that time, his flexible network succeeded in establishing stability for Yemen. In *Yemen Endures: Civil War, Saudi Adventurism and the Future of Arabia*, Ginny Hill picks up on the link between patrimonial structures and President Saleh's patronage network system in Yemen. Hill highlights that "the parallel shift towards commercial extraction of oil allowed Saleh to establish a quick-fix patronage structure that distorted party politics, leaving the system vulnerable to manipulation" (p. 52). Hence, "the distribution of oil rents enabled the president to establish and manage a shifting his patronage structure, governing tribal sheikhs through a system of direct subsidies" (p. 53). The President's patronage networks had emerged from these distribution lines, and he had stabilized a multi-dimensional patrimonial structure in the country. Yemen's two main oil fields in Marib and Masial in particular contributed to Saleh's political legitimacy, having provided up to 90 percent of Yemen's export earnings and making up 75 percent of the government's revenue. However, in the midst of 2000 these fertile grounds dried out. Quoting from one Yemeni political analyst, Hill details Saleh's patronage network with the "TAPE B" formula, which points to Saleh's governance capacity over the rival actors in the country: "That's T for the tribes, A for the army, P for political

parties, E for extremists and B for the business families” (p. 55). Hill engages with this formula by acknowledging that “Saleh’s removal would create a power vacuum” and notes that fears “that genuine reform might unleash forces that would undermine destabilize, marginalize, destroy or kill the relevant political actors were ever-present” (p. 56).

President Saleh’s TAPE B patronage system brought stability to the fragmented societal structure of Yemen; thus the balance of the system was interlinked with his governing legacy. Upon his resignation, the TAPE B actors began to seek to establish new local-level network systems. Saleh’s death triggered a power vacuum in which TAPE B actors increased their proxy relations with external influencers. However, Saleh’s patronage legacy was neglected by these actors, and the country devolved into the greatest human-made disaster area of the region. Both the pro-Iran Houthis and al-Qaeda have flourished in the post-Saleh power gap and have been vying to take control of some city centers in Yemen. Their land reclamation struggles have led to the increased intervention of external actors in the ongoing conflict.

External Actors in Yemen’s Conflict

One of the most alarming developments of the Yemen civil war, from the perspective of international security, was the Saudi-led military intervention (also known as the Arab

Coalition) in 2015. In September 2014, the Iran-backed Houthi forces captured the capital city of Sanaa; President Hadi’s government collapsed and he was exiled to Riyadh. Following these events, the Saudi-led coalition initiated a military intervention, Operation Decisive Storm, in order to restore Hadi’s legitimacy over Yemen based on the UN Charter, citing Chapter VII, Article 2(4) of the Charter, which forbids the use of force against the ‘territorial integrity or political independence of any state’ with the exception of self-defense (covered article 51). However, the coalition air strikes neglected both local dynamics and President Saleh’s patronage legacy, and the proxy war between Iran and Saudi Arabia has added a new dimension to the ongoing conflict.

This is where Amanda Guidero and Maia Carter Hallward’s *Global Responses to Conflict and Crisis in Syria and Yemen* makes a crucial contribution to the field. The second chapter of the book, titled “International Laws and Norms and Intervention in Syria and Yemen,” is of critical importance in understanding the current conflict in Yemen, as it delineates all types of intervention conditions, i.e. intervention by invitation, intervention for international responsibility and intervention for humanitarian purposes in Syria and Yemen. In the context of intervention by invitation, “a common argument made by states justifying intervention in the affairs of another state is that they are acting by invitation and therefore by consent of another state, despite the fact that intervention by invitation is not

codified in international law” (p. 18). The most dramatic example of this situation was realized in Yemen. In 2005, the new president Hadi called in Saudi Arabian military forces in order to push Houthi groups out of Sanaa, the capital city of Yemen. The Saudis immediately accepted Hadi’s call, but the Houthis were also taking aid from their sectarian supporter, Iran. At this point, the Saudi-led coalition started to implement a second intervention framework, with the so-called aim of contributing to international peace and security. Unlike previous intervention typologies, it had a legal foundation in Chapter VII, Article 51 of the UN Charter, which specifies that states have a right to self-defense, “if an armed attack occurs” (p. 20). An intervention for humanitarian purposes (R2P) is less justifiable under international law, given that Article 2(4) of the UN Charter is “understood as forbidding unilateral action except in self-defense” (p. 22). However, this issue has not been taken into consideration to cease the conflict. When the first two interventions increased Yemen’s power gap, the need for R2P also increased. According to the Yemen Data Project, current civilian casualties have reached 18,350.⁵ The Armed Conflict Location & Event Data Project (ACLED) has recorded more than 100,000 fatalities in Yemen since 2015, including over 12,000 civilians who were killed in direct attacks.⁶ These numbers indicate that the political conflict in Yemen cannot be easily resolved by local and/or external actors. Both Brandt and Hill have indicated that Yemen’s conflict condi-

tions have been nourished by deep historical and religious dynamics, which, as Guidero and Hallward’s argue, have been neglected by external actors trying to establish order and ceasefire in Yemen. Undoubtedly, this situation might make a deep wound for Yemenis and for the stability of the country. It seems likely that both intergovernmental organizations and non-governmental institutions will focus increasingly on Yemen as one of the most critical sites of international security issues as the conflict unfolds. These three titles contribute immensely to our knowledge of Yemen and its collapsing state which has worsened over the past nine years to become one of the most severe international security and humanitarian concerns in the Middle East. ■

Endnotes

1. J. H. Wiarda, “Arab Fall or Arab Winter?” *American Foreign Policy Interests*, 34(3) 2012: 134-137; D. Mihaylov, “Why the Arab Spring Turned into Arab Winter: Understanding the Middle East Crises Through Culture, Religion, and Literature,” *Israel Journal of Foreign Affairs*, 11(1) 2017: 3-14; N. Feldman, *The Arab Winter: A Tragedy*, (New Jersey: Princeton University Press, 2020).
2. UNOCHA. (2018). “2019 Humanitarian Needs Overview Yemen.” Retrieved September 12, 2019 from: https://reliefweb.int/sites/reliefweb.int/files/resources/2019_Yemen_HNO_FINAL.pdf.
3. UNHCR. (2020). “UNHCR Operational Update Yemen.” Retrieved September 12, 2019 from http://reporting.unhcr.org/sites/default/files/UNHCR%20Yemen%20Operational%20Update%20-%2016JAN20_0.pdf.
4. <https://www.unocha.org/es/story/yemen-child-under-age-five-dies-every-10-minutes-preventable-causes-un-humanitarian-chief>
5. <https://www.yemendataproject.org>
6. <https://www.acleddata.com/2019/10/31/press-release-over-100000-reported-killed-in-yemen-war/>