

Civil War Duration and the Yemeni Conflict

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### Prompt 1

Nearing three years of ongoing conflict, the Yemeni civil war has today become the site of some of the world's worst humanitarian disasters. The country faces massive shortages of food and medicine, what the World Health Organization describes as the worst cholera epidemic in recorded history, massive internal displacement, and a litany of one-sided violence against civilians, all driven by a fractured, internationalized war that shows no signs of ebbing in the near future (The Economist 2017; Lyons 2017; Dehghan 2018). The clashes between the forces of President Hadi and the northern Houthis have only become more complicated as alliances shift and third-parties becoming increasingly involved. In an attempt to understand the conflict better, this paper will be considering some the factors which have contributed to making it so long-lasting in order to see how closely they align with theoretical expectations from the literature. I plan to do this in three areas: that of information problems, of third-party intervention, and of the role of terrorism in civil war.

First, let us examine some of the basics of the information problems that leads to bargaining failure during civil war. Walter (2009) breaks down information problems into two subsets: (a) uncertainty regarding opponent capability; and (b) willingness to fight, which could also be called resolve. Because an actor does not possess perfect information about an opponent, there will always be a measure of uncertainty that muddles the bargaining range; at the same time, however, conflict tends to reveal capability. Over time, both groups would likely come to hold somewhat accurate ideas of what the other is willing to fight for or would be willing to compromise on, creating room for the creation of a settlement. In order to explain long-lasting

warfare, we might expect that either alliances, and thus the dynamics of the the war, continue to shift, or that at least one group is engaging in guerilla warfare, which tends not to reveal much information, propagating bargaining failure. At the same time, while a government may have more or less willingness to fight, there are many scenarios in which they would do anyway in order to signal resolve and build reputation. As pointed out by Walter (2003; 2006), there are certain scenarios under which a government may fight, even when it would cost less not to—her research indicates that government tend to take the long view, which is to say that if a government thinks it may encounter future challengers, it may try to develop a reputation for toughness to deter them. This is to say that a government which is destroying its own country to win a war is not necessarily just engaging in poor strategy.<sup>1</sup> We tend to see this in countries with large minority populations, especially ones which are geographically concentrated or are collectively pursuing particular goals. So, the question remains, does this match up with the reality of Yemen? In short, yes. Working back to front, we do know that Yemen is a country divided by concentrated groups who are pursuing particular goals: the Houthis' current campaign is driven by their dissatisfaction with the governing of President Abd Rabbo Mansour Hadi; the Southern Transitional Council (STC), a southern Yemeni separatist group, recently broke with Hadi's forces and seized the souther city of Aden; and at the same time, there has been an outbreak of Al-Qaeda in the Arabian Peninsula and ISIS activity in the region (Al Jazeera 2016; Beckerle 2018). This is the long way of saying that the Hadi government has more than enough reason to suspect that acquiescence to a single group might lead to concessions with others. Land

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<sup>1</sup> Though this certainly could be the case. Building on her former work, Walter and Tingley (2011) ran an experimental test to see how and if players built reputation in order to better their position in a game; at the end of the test, they did find a subset of players who stuck to a rigid plan of short-term gains, apparently unable or unwilling to recognize the benefits of alternate methods.

is a limited resource; it can only afford to give so much away (Walter 2003). As for the first point, while it is true that the civil war in Yemen is not a guerilla conflict, there is no small amount of alliance shifting. Internally, there has been the aforementioned STC betrayal of the Hadi government as well as the attempted defection of ex-President Ali Abdullah Saleh—who turned office over to Hadi during the Arab Spring then later joined forces with the Houthis as he became increasingly unsatisfied with Hadi—which ended in his death (Hussain 2017). This is to say nothing of the third-party intervention, which has itself become split. While the majority of Arab states are members of the Saudi coalition, which back the Hadi government, the UAE has thrown their support behind the STC, assisting them with airpower and troops (Al Jazeera 2018; Human Rights Watch 2017). If any side was approaching an accurate understanding of the limitations of their opponent before, they have almost certainly been set back a number of squares. It is these kind of on-going shuffles that continually lower the likelihood of negotiating a settlement. This is not the only way that third-party intervention changes the balance of power and lowers the likelihood of settlement.

Though it may seem obvious on its face that third-party intervention on multiple sides decreases the likelihood of the domestic actors coming to a peace agreement, it is worth examining the exact reasons for why this happens.<sup>2</sup> Cunningham has laid a fair amount of theoretical groundwork which will here be separated into (a) veto players; and (b) third-party side-demands. The veto player, stripped down to its most basic definition, is “an individual or collective actor whose agreement...is required for a change in policy,” (Cunningham 2006). As the number of veto players increase, the smaller the bargaining range shrinks, and vice versa.

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<sup>2</sup> As Balch-Lindsay, Enterline, and Joyce (2008) have demonstrated, there is evidence to support this idea. Although the observation may make enough sense, there is no point in pursuing such data-based analyses if such assumptions remained unexamined.

This is where third-parties begin to grow important. It is possible here for a state to play kingmaker, so to speak. A group which might otherwise not have the capability to carry out significant military actions might be able to get into the arena with the support of a third-party, growing the number of veto players and, statistically, the length of the conflict. Additionally, Cunningham's (2010) later research also suggests that states often begin supporting a side in a civil war not as an end-in-itself, but as a means to a related goal—and, in cases where extra reasons for intervention were identified, conflicts tended to last much longer. This is, as Cunningham (2010) posits, not only because it adds extra conditions to termination of the civil war, but because third-party states also stand to gain much less from negotiated settlements and pay very little cost to keep the war going.<sup>3</sup> So from this we might expect that third-parties in Yemen have empowered groups who might otherwise not have been able to fight for so long or have another objective which might be achieved only with the victory of their side. Take the STC and UAE, for example. In the past years, the UAE has begun building bases in nearby Eritrea, training loyalist forces in Southern Yemen, created a shadow prison system, and supported the STC's recent military actions with airpower and tanks (Stratfor 2016; 2018; Human Rights Watch 2017). Though there is not enough evidence to conclusively prove that the STC would not occupy this position without the UAE, it does show that the UAE has put no small amount of effort into empowering the southern separatists. Why the Emirates are throwing so much support behind the group is a harder question to answer. Partrick (2017) makes the argument that this is part of their designs to grow as a regional power as their role in Red Sea security grow. Again, from the outside, educated speculation is sometimes the best of the limited

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<sup>3</sup> E.g. while a state may lose some of the military or monetary assistance it provides, it is unlikely to pay a cost in citizen life or infrastructure as the country in conflict will.

resources available; if we assume it is that case, though, that the UAE is trying to grow their security presence in the region, then it would not be unfair to apply the general expectations of reputation building to them. Returning to Walter (2006), governments are more likely to engage in conflict that they don't believe is necessary when they expect future challengers, and would thus like to reinforce their reputation for being tough.

Finally, we come to one of the most difficult aspects of the war to assess. One-sided violence against civilians is, unfortunately, not an uncommon tactic; even worse, perhaps, is that its use and effects are predictable enough to fit a model. However, here lies something of a gray area. Some aspects of civilian targeting here fit existing models, some do not, and some acts have not been taken into serious consideration. In Yemen, it seems to be the case that rebel behavior is as expected. For example, according to Wood, Kathman, and Gent (2010), violence may be used against a civilian populace under the protection of an opponent in order to shake their confidence in their protectors. This is in line with the Houthi rocket and artillery attacks on Yemeni and Saudi civilian targets (Human Rights Watch 2017). There is also the matter of Houthi mistreatment of civilians in their own territory, including a swath of illegal, arbitrary detentions and enforced disappearances, as well as the confiscation of essential goods and supplies (Human Rights Watch 2017). For this Wood et al. (2010) makes the point that groups sometimes begin to use violence against populations under their control as a short term tool of control for a lack of genuine benefits to offer, and Salehyan, Siroky, and Wood offer evidence that rebel groups backed by third-parties are more likely to abuse such populations. Given that the Houthis are backed—to an unknown degree, admittedly—by Iran and are currently on the defensive, this also makes sense (Allen 2017; Al Jazeera 2018). However, the models are far less

equipped to deal with the swath of one-sided third-party violence committed by Saudi Arabia and the UAE. Of the little literature that tangentially addresses the topic, Eck and Hultman (2007) come to the conclusion that governmental one-sided violence committed by governments tended to be by autocratic nations.<sup>4</sup> While this may be true, it still leaves a large gap in our ability to expect the actions and results of third parties who run large parts of a domestic actor's military actions. This is a serious blind eye. We may be able to understand the state of a rebel actor by how and if they engage in one-sided violence—Thomas (2010) was even able to pull together how likely such violence was to result in negotiations—but are left largely without theoretical direction in assessing third-party violence.

Though this analysis of the Yemeni civil war was rather brief, I am confident that further comparison would result in much the same conclusion. The expectations of bargaining failure caused by asymmetric information and third-party intervention literature matched the reality about as well as could be hoped for. There was, of course, the slight hiccup of the civilian targeting models, but the issues with that could all be attributed to the scarcity of literature addressing the topic of third-party one-sided violence, which could perhaps form the focus of a future study. Such violence is obviously much less common than other forms, but the above examples clearly show that the utility does exist.

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<sup>4</sup> Although this error could entirely be of my own making in simply not being able to find the appropriate literature. Such a result would not for lack of trying, however.

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