

Yemen: Anatomy of a Forgotten War

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Introduction

This book is an anatomy of a war too often reduced to clichés or eclipsed by louder crises. Yemen’s conflict is not a single story but an overlapping set of histories, frontlines, and survival strategies that reach from highland villages to global shipping lanes. It is a struggle over the state and its rents, over identity and representation, and over the geopolitics of the Arabian Peninsula. It is also, most starkly, a

humanitarian calamity that has pushed millions to the edge of famine, shredded public services, and exposed civilians to compounding risks of displacement, disease, and violence. The purpose of this volume is to integrate those dimensions into a coherent, accessible narrative that clarifies what has happened, why it persists, and how to open credible pathways toward peace.

We begin with political history because the war's drivers are rooted in the making—and unmaking—of the Yemeni state. The legacies of the Zaydi imamate, Ottoman and British rule, republican revolution, and national unification formed the ground on which later contests unfolded. Patronage networks, center-periphery bargains, and uneven development shaped who wielded power and who felt excluded. The 2011 uprising, the Gulf-brokered transition, and the fragile coalition politics that followed did not erase these structures; they exposed them. Understanding this genealogy is essential to understanding why institutions collapsed so quickly and why competing projects—northern insurgency, southern self-rule, and localized autonomies—could claim legitimacy.

The book then turns to the conduct of the war itself: the military geography of the northern highlands, the energy-rich east, the Red Sea coast, and the beleaguered urban centers where sieges and snipers have defined daily life. We trace the evolution of airpower, ballistic missiles, and drones; the contest for air defense and command of the skies; and the emergence of a maritime theater in which the Bab al-Mandab strait and Red Sea shipping lanes became vulnerable to blockades, interdictions, and asymmetric threats. Parallel to these conventional fronts, jihadist actors exploited security vacuums, while counterterrorism campaigns sought to contain them—often intersecting awkwardly with the civil war's local logics.

War is also economy by other means. As formal revenue streams fractured, a war economy bloomed: taxation without representation, checkpoint rents, fuel arbitrage, currency fragmentation, and the repurposing of public institutions into instruments of extraction. These practices have sustained armed actors even as they have starved civilian systems of resources. Governance under de facto authorities has become patchworked, with courts, ministries, and municipalities improvising service delivery amid scarcity. For ordinary Yemenis, survival has demanded reliance on remittances, aid, and informal networks—strategies that are rational at the household level but corrosive to national cohesion.

Humanitarian analysis runs throughout this book, not as an appendix to politics but as a central thread. We examine food security, health, water and sanitation, protection risks, and education, bringing together quantitative indicators and ground-level reporting to specify where needs are most acute and which interventions move the needle. Rather than treating aid as a neutral technocratic enterprise, we interrogate access negotiations, diversion risks, and the ethics of operating in fragmented sovereignty. From cholera waves to pandemic shocks, from malnutrition to the

invisible toll of trauma, the humanitarian landscape is mapped with an eye to practical entry points that can save lives now while supporting recovery later.

No account of Yemen's war is complete without the regional overlay. Saudi Arabia, the United Arab Emirates, and Iran are not monoliths; their policies reflect shifting coalitions of interests, institutions, and threat perceptions. We analyze how security doctrines, border anxieties, counterterrorism agendas, port competition, and regional signaling have interacted with Yemen's internal dynamics. External support has changed battlefield incentives and bargaining positions, but it has also created opportunities for de-escalation when regional calculations align. Recognizing both the leverage and the limits of outside actors is key to designing a peace process that is Yemeni-owned yet regionally guaranteed.

Finally, this book is unabashedly pragmatic. It advances a sequenced approach to end the war and rebuild legitimacy: localized ceasefires that knit into national arrangements; humanitarian access deals that reduce civilian harm; confidence-building steps such as prisoner exchanges and revenue-sharing for salaries and services; security sector reform and disarmament, demobilization, and reintegration to tame the militia marketplace; and economic stabilization to reunify monetary policy and reopen trade. None of these measures is sufficient alone, but together—anchored in inclusive talks that give voice to women, youth, the displaced, and historically marginalized regions—they can change incentives and widen the space for a durable settlement. Yemen's future will be decided by Yemenis; the task of this book is to illuminate the choices before them and the pathways that lead from catastrophe to an inclusive peace.

Chapter One: Yemen in Historical Perspective: Imamate, Colonies, and Republic

Yemen's story is a deep cut into the historical tapestry of the Arabian Peninsula, a narrative woven with threads of ancient kingdoms, religious dynasties, and the relentless tides of empires. Before the modern divisions, the land often dubbed *Arabia Felix* (Fortunate Arabia) by the Romans due to its prosperity, was a cradle of sophisticated civilizations. Around 1000 BC, the region saw the rise and fall of powerful trading kingdoms such as the Minaeans, Sabaeans, and Himyarites, whose wealth flowed from the lucrative frankincense and spice routes. The legendary Queen of Sheba, for instance, hailed from the Sabaeen kingdom, famous for its advanced irrigation systems, including the ancient Marib Dam.

These early Yemeni societies, with their elaborate temples and inscribed histories,

thrived on controlling vital trade arteries that snaked through the desert. However, as maritime trade routes in the Red Sea gained prominence, particularly after the Roman occupation of Egypt in the 1st century BC, the overland caravan routes diminished in importance. This shift gradually chipped away at the economic foundations of these southern Arabian kingdoms, leading to a period of decline and increased vulnerability. Foreign powers began to cast their gaze upon Yemen, marking the beginning of centuries of external influence and intermittent occupation.

The arrival of Islam in Yemen around 630 CE, during the lifetime of the Prophet Muhammad, marked a profound transformation. Yemen rapidly and thoroughly converted to Islam, with Yemenis playing a significant role in the early expansion of the Muslim territories. For centuries thereafter, Yemen was nominally a province within larger Islamic caliphates, such as the Umayyad and Abbasid dynasties. However, the actual control of these distant caliphates often barely extended beyond certain cities, allowing local leaders and minor dynasties to assert considerable autonomy.

A pivotal development in Yemen's historical trajectory was the establishment of the Zaydi imamate in the northern highlands in 897 CE. Founded by Yahya ibn al-Husayn, a scholar and a descendant of the Prophet Muhammad, the imamate was a unique blend of religious and temporal authority. Zaydi Islam, a branch of Shia Islam, emphasized the presence of an active and visible imam who was knowledgeable in religious scholarship and capable of leading the community, even in battle. This religious-political structure, initially centered in Sa'ada, would endure in various forms for over a thousand years, shaping the identity of the northern highlands.

The Zaydi imams faced numerous challenges, including rival local dynasties in the southern and coastal regions, who often adhered to the Shafi'i school of Sunni Islam. This religious divergence contributed to a long-standing division between a predominantly Zaydi northern, mountainous part of Yemen and a predominantly Sunni southern, coastal part. The constant struggle for control and influence between these different entities defined much of medieval Yemeni history, preventing long periods of unified rule.

The early 16th century brought new external pressures with the arrival of European powers in the Red Sea, particularly the Portuguese, who sought to control lucrative trade routes. Following them, the Egyptian Mamluks made an attempt to take power in Yemen, though they ultimately failed to secure Aden. It was the burgeoning Ottoman Empire, having conquered Egypt in 1517, that successfully brought most of Yemen under its control by 1538. This first period of Ottoman rule was met with significant resistance, particularly from the Zaydi imams.

The Zaydi imamate, under leaders like al-Mansur al-Qasim, rallied local tribes and eventually expelled the Ottomans in the early 17th century, establishing an

independent and expansive Zaydi state. This Qasimid state, as it became known, ruled over a broad territory, even extending its influence into parts of South Yemen and further east. The coffee trade, with the port of Mocha becoming globally significant, bolstered their economic power. However, the power of the Zaydi imamate began to wane in the 18th and 19th centuries, particularly in the face of Wahhabi invasions from the Arabian Peninsula and renewed Ottoman interest.

The 19th century witnessed a resurgence of Ottoman ambition in Yemen, driven by a desire to revitalize imperial borders, assert caliphal legitimacy, and secure strategic locations and lucrative trade revenues. The Ottomans reoccupied much of North Yemen starting in 1849, facing continued, though fragmented, resistance from the Zaydi imams and local tribes. This period was characterized by the Ottomans attempting to implement more direct control and consolidate their authority, a departure from earlier, more autonomous arrangements.

Concurrently, a new colonial power arrived on Yemen's southern shores: the British. In 1839, the British East India Company seized Aden, recognizing its immense strategic importance as a coaling station along the sea lanes to India, especially after the opening of the Suez Canal in 1869. Unlike other British outposts in the Middle East, Aden was directly ruled as a British crown colony, while the surrounding hinterland became the Aden Protectorate. The British secured treaties with tribal leaders in the interior, offering protection and subsidies in exchange for loyalty, gradually expanding their influence.

This dual colonial presence effectively partitioned Yemen into two distinct entities: an Ottoman-controlled North and a British-influenced South. In the early 20th century, the British and Ottomans formalized this division by drawing a border between their territories, a boundary that would persist for much of the century. This imposed separation would have lasting consequences, fostering different administrative systems, economic orientations, and political cultures in the north and the south.

In North Yemen, Ottoman rule continued to face challenges. The Zaydi imams, particularly Imam Yahya ibn Muhammad, led significant uprisings against the Ottomans in the early 1900s. These rebellions eventually forced the Ottomans to grant the imam autonomy over much of North Yemen in 1911 through the Treaty of Daan. World War I proved to be the final act for Ottoman presence in Yemen. With their defeat, the Ottomans evacuated in 1918, leaving Imam Yahya to establish the fully independent Mutawakkilite Kingdom of Yemen.

Imam Yahya and his son Ahmad ruled North Yemen for the next 44 years, creating a centralized "king-state" that aimed to insulate Yemen and revitalize its Islamic culture. They strengthened the state and secured its borders, though their rule was often seen as autocratic and stagnant by a small but growing number of Yemenis aware of modernization elsewhere. This autocratic rule, combined with an increasing awareness

of global political shifts, sowed the seeds of nationalist sentiment and a desire for change.

In South Yemen, British control of Aden and its protectorates continued, providing stability and infrastructure to the port city. However, anti-colonial sentiment and Arab nationalism began to swell in the mid-20th century, fueled by wider decolonization movements across Africa and Asia. An armed rebellion erupted in 1963, led by groups like the National Liberation Front (NLF), challenging British authority.

The British government, under increasing pressure and facing economic constraints, announced its intention to withdraw from South Arabia in 1967. The departure was not smooth; the Federation of South Arabia, a British-backed entity, collapsed, and the National Liberation Front emerged as the dominant force. On November 30, 1967, South Yemen gained independence as the People's Republic of South Yemen, a state that would soon embrace Marxist-Leninist principles and become the sole communist state in the Arab world.

Meanwhile, in North Yemen, the winds of change were also blowing fiercely. A nationalist movement, simmering since the 1940s, sought to overthrow the traditional Zaydi imamate. On September 26, 1962, a military coup led by revolutionary republicans, primarily army officers, dethroned the newly crowned Imam Muhammad al-Badr, declaring the Yemen Arab Republic. This dramatic event triggered the North Yemen Civil War, a brutal eight-year conflict that pitted royalist forces, supported by Saudi Arabia, against republican forces, heavily backed by Egypt and the Soviet Union.

The civil war in the North was a complex and internationalized proxy conflict. Egyptian troops, numbering in the tens of thousands at their peak, provided crucial military support to the republicans, while Saudi Arabia supplied the royalists. The conflict became a microcosm of Cold War rivalries and inter-Arab ideological struggles. The war finally concluded in 1970 with a reconciliation agreement, leading to Saudi Arabia's recognition of the Yemen Arab Republic. While the republic was established, Zaydi influence continued to be present in social affairs, and many Zaydi families were allowed to participate in the new regime, albeit with the acceptance of equal citizenship.

Thus, by 1970, the land of Yemen was formally divided into two distinct, ideologically opposed states: the Yemen Arab Republic (North Yemen) and the People's Democratic Republic of Yemen (South Yemen). The North, emerging from centuries of imamate rule and a recent civil war, embarked on a republican path with a strong tribal and military influence. The South, having shed British colonialism, adopted a socialist system with close ties to the Soviet bloc. These separate historical trajectories, born from ancient divisions and modern interventions, would inevitably collide, setting the stage for future conflicts and the eventual, albeit fragile, unification.

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