

# Interests and Contests of Houthi and Al-Hirak Movements in Yemen crisis

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#### Introduction

The Yemeni crisis has its roots in the 2011 Arab Spring, which was further complicated by the entry of external actors that allied with local actors to achieve their strategic goals. The local actors are however not under the control of external players and these groups have displayed tactical flexibility based on changing dynamics to suit their interests. During the course of the civil war, Houthi Movement and Southern or Al-Hirak movement have emerged as powerful players with the former establishing a defacto government in the northern region and the later has transformed itself into a quasi-government body to further its goal of secession in the southern region.

In order to understand the on-going conflict and the two aforementioned movements, there is a need to contextualize the present situation from a historical perspective and unearth the legacy of political aspirations and contest. Gerald M. Feierstein has suggested that the present conflict was, in fact, a continuation of more than 60 years of failed state formation process that has perpetuated the cycles of violence, and the civil war that began in 2014 was only the latest eruption of the on-going cycle of violence.

In this paper, the first section would provide a brief background of the geopolitical landscape in Yemen between 1962 and 2011. The second section would capture the uneasy political transition process in the aftermath of the 2011 Arab Spring and enumerate its contribution to the subsequent civil war that began in 2014. The third section would study the developments in Yemen between 2014 to 2019 and analyse the strategic growth and political interests of the two key local actors namely the Houthi and the Southern Movements and lastly, underline India's policy options during the Yemeni crisis. The research would be exploratory in nature that would contextualise the civil war through the prism of Houthi and Al-Hirak movements and decipher the complex interplay of interests in Yemen's multilayered conflict.

#### **Research Questions**

- 1. What is the role of the Houthi and the Al-Hirak movements during the 2011 Arab Spring protests and the civil war in Yemen?
- 2. What are the similarities and differences between the Houthi and the Al-Hirak movements?
- 3. What are the ramifications of political growth of the Houthi and the Al-Hirak movements?
- 4. What are approaches adopted by the Gulf regional actors namely Saudi Arabia and UAE towards Houthi and Al-Hirak movements?
- 5. What are the causes of the rift in the Saudi-UAE coalition?
- 6. What are India's policy options in the Yemeni crisis?

#### Brief History from 1962 to 2011

#### The Imamate and the Republic

The Houthi Movement began as theological gathering in 1992 known as 'Believing Youth Forum' or *Shabab al-Moumineen* to safeguard the religious and cultural practices and traditions of Zaydi community through educational and cultural initiatives (Freeman 2009: 1008; Knights 2018: 15). The educational and cultural forum soon transformed into a socio-political movement that traces their legacy from the Zaydi Imamate that had existed in various forms in northern Yemen from 897 AD to 1962 with Imam as the head of state. The Zaydis in terms of jurisprudence are closer to Sunni Hanafi school of thought and in terms of doctrine, it is closer to the 'Fiver Shiism' that disagrees with the divine infallibility of Imams¹. It is distinct from the 'Twelver Shiism', the dominant branch in Iran, Lebanon, Iraq, Bahrain, Afghanistan, Pakistan, India and eastern Saudi Arabia (Zaidi 2010; Day 2010: 3).

Between 1538 and 1636, a significant section of the south-western coastline in Yemen came under the control of the Ottoman Caliphate (Hanioglu 2018: 26). The Zaydis, however, maintained its control over the highlands<sup>2</sup>. The Ottomans reappeared in the Yemeni lowlands in 1848 and highlands in 1872. The Ottoman campaigns were challenged by a series of local resistance efforts that culminated in the

<sup>1</sup> The Imam, according to the Zaydi tradition must be a descendent of Ali Ibn Abu Talib, the cousin and son-in-law of Prophet Mohammad and the fourth Rightly-Guided Caliph. Yemeni Zaydis derive their name from Ali's great-grandson and fifth Imam, Zayd Ibn Ali who was martyred for revolting against the corrupt authority of Umayyad ruler Hisham Ibn Abd al-Malik in 740 AD. Zaydis, therefore, consider the fight against corruption and injustice as a religious duty (The San Diego Union Tribune 2014; Sharp 2019: 1).

<sup>2</sup> In mid-17th century, Zaydis recaptured Sana'a from Ottoman control and the Imamate expanded from Hijaz in present day Saudi Arabia to Dhofar in Oman (Zaidi 2010).

Treaty of Da'an signed on 9 October 1911<sup>3</sup>. After the end of the First World War in November 1918 that led to the disintegration of the Ottoman Empire, Imam Yahya Hamid al-Din constituted the Mutawakkilite Kingdom based on semi-feudal agrarian economy<sup>4</sup> and declared independence of all the territories in Yemen barring the Aden Protectorates which were under the British rule<sup>5</sup> (Burrowes 1992; 43; Parfitt 1996: 38-39; Al-Abdin 1979: 36).

The Mutawakkilite Kingdom or North Yemen between March 1958 and December 1961 became part of the Confederation of United Arab States (UAS) along with Egypt and Syria to fend off the Saudi threat. After Imam Ahmad's death on 19 September 1962, a republican military coup<sup>6</sup> inspired by Egyptian President Abdel Gamal Nasser and led by Abdullah al-Sallal toppled Imam Mohammed al-Badr thereby ending the Imamate and the Yemen Arab Republic (YAR) was proclaimed on 27 September 1962<sup>7</sup> (Library of Congress 2008; Global Security 2011; Day 2010: 3-4). However, the new government's control over the North Yemeni territory was weak and fragmented ensuing civil war between the republicans backed by Egypt<sup>8</sup> and the royalists led by Imam Mohammed al-Badr and backed by Saudi Arabia and Jordan. By 1967, the civil war reached a stalemate and Egypt withdrew its army from Yemen on 15 December 1967<sup>9</sup> (Global Security 2011). In 1970, Saudi Arabia ceased support to the royalist forces and recognized the Yemen Arab Republic (YAR)<sup>10</sup> (Zaidi 2010).

<sup>3</sup> The Treaty of Da'an signed on 9 October 1911 between the Ottoman Representative and Imam Yahya Hamid al-Din recognized the Imam as the temporal and spiritual authority of the Zaidi community along with power to the Imam to levy taxes, appointments of governors and judges etc. under the Ottoman Caliphate (Hanioglu 2018: 25-33; Zaidi 2010; Parfitt 1996: 38).

<sup>4</sup> The Mutawakkilite Kingdom was domestically autocratic and managed to maintain its isolation and autonomy despite lack of resources based on self-sufficient social and economic system that stood on subsistence agriculture and limited external trade (Burrowes 1992; 43; Parfitt 1996: 38-39; Al-Abdin 1979: 36).

<sup>5</sup> The Mutawakkilite Kingdom underwent a series of confrontation with Ibn Saud's forces in the 1930s that led to the Treaty of Taif in May 1934. Under the terms of the treaty, Imam Yahya regained control of Hodeidah city and returned Najran and Jizan to Ibn Saud. Imam Yahya contributed to secure and demarcate the borders (Burrowes 1992: 42; Zaidi 2010).

During the 1930s and 1940s, public opposition led by the Free Yemeni Movement erupted against Imam Yahya's rule and the Imam was assassinated in a palace coup on 17 January 1948 (Al-Abdin 1979: 43). Imam Yahya was succeeded by his son, Imam Amir Ahmad (Library of Congress 2018).

<sup>7</sup> Abdullah al-Sallal became the President of YAR on 27 September 1962 and established an eight member Revolutionary Command Council. The new regime was recognized by Egypt on 29 September 1962 and by Soviet Union on 30 September 1962 (Global Security 2011).

<sup>8</sup> On 10 November 1962, the Republican government in Yemen signed joint defence agreement with Egypt to allow Egyptian army to enter Yemen (Yousefpour, Masoumi and Leili 2017: 258).

<sup>9</sup> Egypt after initial successes began to centralize control and alienated a large section of the Yemeni population (Burrowes 1991: 486).

<sup>10</sup> On 5 November 1967, President Abdullah al-Sallah resigned that paved the way for reconciliation between the royalists and the republicans. YAR after the end of the civil war opened up the high state office to tribal leaders in exchange for their allegiance and loyalty to the state (Burrowes 1991: 486).

The Zaydi community leaders after the removal of the Zaydi Imamate in 1962 faced harsh treatment as representatives of the ancien régime and the civil war between the royalists and republicans from 1962 to 1970 in which the community stood largely with the royalists further weakened their political status. During this period, Zaydi religious institutions and scholars, publications and culture were severely repressed. The Zaydi political and religious leaders since 1980s were cautious of the growing Wahhabi influence sponsored by the Saudi regime that sought to alter the religious identities of tribal communities in Sa'ada and other governorates (Nagi 2019; Akin 2019: 8; McKernan 2018; Schmitz 2014). The Islah Party that shares ideological similarity with the Muslim Brotherhood also sought to indoctrinate the tribal communities into its fold. In 1986, a Shiite group named, *Shabab Unity* was established to train young scholars under the guidance of Badreddin al-Houthi belonging from the Houth region in Sa'ada (Yousefpour, Masoumi and Leili 2017: 259). After Yemeni unification on 22 May 1990, *Shabab Unity* merged with *Hizb al-Haqq*, a Zaydi political party to further its interests.

In 1992, Believing Youth Forum was established as the epicentre of Zaydi religious revival based in the northern province of Sa'ada and Badreddin al-Houthi emerged as the spiritual guide of the group (Yousefpour, Masoumi and Leili 2017: 259). On a political level, *Hizb al-Haqq* was not electorally very successful in the 1993 and 1997 parliamentary elections (Schmitz 2014). The movement was gradually militarized under Hussein Badreddin al-Houthi, the son of Badreddin al-Houthi aiming towards political revivalism and reclaiming the religious and the political space of the Zaydi community (Nagi 2019; Schmitz 2014). It merged Zaydi religio-political revivalism with opposition to local and international actors basing on traditional roots of justice, resistance and empowerment and adopted the slogan, "God is great, death to the US, death to Israel, curse upon the Jews and victory to Islam" (Riedel 2017; Winter 2012).

The movement was heavily critical of President Saleh's alliance with the US and Saudi Arabia at the expense of undermining Yemeni sovereignty and by early 2000s, the Houthi militias launched a revolt against then-President Ali Abdullah Saleh led government demanding measures such as ending external intervention, curbing government corruption, democratic reforms, regional autonomy, equality, development of services and infrastructure etc (Rowen 2019; Akin 2019: 8). On 10 September 2004, Hussein Badreddin al-Houthi was killed by government forces during the First Houthi war on the charges of establishing an armed group, instigating anti-US protests and opening unlicensed religious institutions (BBC News 2004). Hussein's brother, Abdul Malik al-Houthi assumed the leadership role and the movement was involved in a six-year-long conflict fighting five more wars with the government forces between 2004 and 2010<sup>11</sup>.

<sup>11</sup> In the second and third Houthi wars fought from 19 March 2005 to 11 April 2005 and from 30 November 2005 to 23 February 2006 respectively, the movement conducted raids, ambushes, assassinations etc. In the fourth conflict between 27 January 2007 and 17 June 2007, the movement used mines, Molotov cocktails and RPGS to defend its territories from armoured attacks. It stormed into government buildings and attacked critical supply routes such as bridges in the fifth war fought between 2 May 2008 and 17 July 2008. During the last and sixth Houthi war fought between 11 August 2009 and 11 February 2010, the movement took control of Sa'ada by conducting major assaults against government forces (Akin 2019: 8; Batati 2014; Knights 2018: 16).

The six-year-long conflict provided the Houthi Movement with battle experience and expanded its support base among a large cross-section of people in northern Yemen aggrieved with President Saleh's regime. By 2009-2010, the Sa'ada governorate was largely under the Houthi control and it sought to advance its strategic control into other regions (Schmitz 2014). The 2011 Arab Spring protests, the resignation of President Ali Abdullah Saleh in November 2011 and the uneasy transition process offered an opportunity to the movement to fulfil its political ambitions.

The Saleh government during the late 2000s was preoccupied with neutralising the Houthi threat. In the southern part of the state, a new movement was emerging to address the regional imbalances after Yemen's unification in 1992. The Southern Movement shares similarity with the Houthi Movement in terms of its reliance on history and identity to serve its political causes and emerged as a result of state repression. Moreover, the interests of both movements coincided during the 2011 Arab Spring protests due to their shared animosity against President Saleh's regime and the perceived regional discrimination faced the Zaydi and other northern tribal communities after the end of Imamate and proclamation of the republic on 27 September 1962 as well as southern Yemenis after the unification of North Yemen and South Yemen on 22 May 1990.

### The Southern Aspirations

The Southern Movement or *Al-Hirak Al-Janoubi* emerged in 2007 out of the southern Yemeni's resentment towards the flawed unification process on 22 May 1990. The southern region of Yemen had been historically fractured into numerous tribal chiefdoms, sultanates and emirates etc. and the northern and southern parts of Yemen remained under single political authority for very short periods of time. Both regions developed distinct political systems, political cultures, unique values, beliefs, interests and preoccupations (Burrowes 1991: 489; Day 2010: 4). Therefore while the North Yemeni territory under Zaydi Imamate and Ottoman Caliphate was largely isolationist, feudal and theocratic; the southern Yemeni territory and the population was integrated with the colonial economy after Britain captured the port city of Aden in 1839 as a strategic asset to control and secure the sea lines to British India.

In 1904, Britain and the Ottoman Caliphate concluded a joint commission to demarcate the spheres of influence which became the future demarcation line between North and South Yemen (Muller 2015: 193; Global Security 2019; Day 2010: 3). Aden remained part of Bombay Presidency until 1937 after which it became a crown colony. The Aden colony and the chiefdoms, sultanates and emirates in the East and West Aden protectorates gradually joined the British sponsored Federation of South Arabia between 1962 and 1967 (Day 2010).

The anti-colonial movement led by Federation for the Liberation of Occupied South Yemen (FLOSY) and the leftist National Liberation Front (NLF) between 1963 and 1967 led to South Yemen's independence from the British rule (Salisbury 2018: 8). On 30 November 1967, the People's Republic

of Yemen was proclaimed which was renamed to Peoples' Democratic Republic of Yemen (PDRY) on 1 December 1970 after NLF took political control in June 1969 and established a socialist Republic (Library of Congress 2008; Dunbar 1992: 457; Day 2010: 4).

The subject of unification had been addressed by at least two Imams in the 20<sup>th</sup> century and it was reinforced after the spread of Arab nationalism (Burrowes 1991: 488-489). From Marxist South Yemen's perspective, the revolutionary struggle was dialectically correlated to its unity with North Yemen (Feierstein 2019: 5). North and South Yemen however by 1970s became the theatre of Cold War rivalry with North Yemen or YAR partnering with Saudi Arabia, an ally of the US and South Yemen or PDRY receiving support from the Soviet Union prompting tense relations including two border wars in 1972 and 1979. On both occasions, the conflicts ended with agreements namely the Cairo Agreement<sup>12</sup> signed on 28 October 1972 and Kuwait Agreement<sup>13</sup> signed on 6 March 1979 that aimed at military disengagement and eventual resolve for unification (Burrowes 1991: 489; Day 2010: 4; Al-Bab 2015; UN 1979). While both sides on several occasions had expressed commitment for unification, the political rapprochement process remained slow and was plagued with political difficulties.<sup>14</sup> Both states after the Kuwait agreement focused its efforts towards confidence-building measures and stressed on practical economic and socio-political cooperation.

A series of negotiations between 1988 and 1990 covering wide array of subjects such as initial military disengagement, joint demilitarized zone, accessible border crossings, joint investments, unity constitution, merging the administrative bodies including the ministries, and formation of joint political organizing committee etc. eventually culminated in the Unity Declaration signed by North Yemeni President Ali Abdullah Saleh and South Yemeni President and Secretary-General of the Central Committee of Yemen Socialist Party (YSP) Ali Salim el-Beidh on 22 May 1990 (Dunbar

<sup>12</sup> On 28 October 1972, North and South Yemen signed the Cairo Agreement brokered by the Arab League in which both sides agreed to unification under one flag, emblem, capital, leadership and common legislature, executive and judicial institutions and joint technical committees were established (Dunbar 1992: 458). The agreement however failed.

<sup>13</sup> In February 1979, border conflict between both sides reappeared following which renewed efforts were made to achieve peace. The Arab League backed peace efforts and Kuwait Agreement was signed on 6 March 1979 (Library of Congress 2008; Dunbar 1992: 458). Both sides agreed to cessation of attacks, troop withdrawals, non-interference, and establishment of committee to draft unity constitution (Dunbar 1992: 458).

<sup>14</sup> In South Yemen, internal conflict between two factions namely the Al Dhale-Lahj-Hadramawt axis and the Abyan-Shabwa axis emerged within the ruling Yemeni Socialist Party on 13 January 1986 that forced PDRY President Ali Nasir Muhammad and his supporters to flee to North Yemen. As a result, bilateral relations damped and conflict between both sides re-emerged in March 1988 over oil exploration in disputed borderlands separating North Yemen's Marib oil field and South Yemen's Shabwa region (Burrowes 1991: 490; Dunbar 1992: 458-459; Salisbury 2018: 9).

1992: 459-461)<sup>15</sup>. Subsequently, Saleh became the President, Beidh became the vice-President and Haidar Abu Bakr al-Attas, the Chairman of the Presidium of the Supreme People's Council of South Yemen became the Prime Minister heading a 39 member cabinet of the newly united Republic of Yemen. The South Yemeni Prime Minister Yasin Said Numan was appointed as the speaker of the parliament<sup>16</sup> (Ziade 1991: 820; Dunbar 1992: 462; Day 2010: 4).

Political unification of North and South Yemen in 1990 was mired by the economic slowdown, inflation and unemployment caused by Saudi hostility towards the newly united republic.<sup>17</sup> There was a high degree of economic disparity and the discovery of oil in Hadramaut province and production of crude oil at Maseela field since 1993, both located in the South did not result in all-round development. It was seen as Northerners' attempts to extract and exploit southern resources (Day 2010: 5-6; Akin 2019: 6). The southern region due to its socialist political trajectory had fared better than North in terms of basic social services, however, after the merger, the quality of service eroded due to North's crony capitalist economic system leading to a gradual economic preponderance of the Northern elites in the South (Feierstein 2019: 7).

The economic burden was compounded by administrative inefficiency related to joining the ministries and government departments based on 50:50 power-sharing arrangement creating a bloated bureaucracy and government officials, bureaucrats and the military continued to remain disintegrated (Dunbar

<sup>15</sup> The leaders of North Yemen, Ali Abdullah Saleh and the South Yemen's Secretary General of the Central Committee of Yemen Socialist Party (YSP), Ali Salim el-Beidh met in Taiz on 14 and 16 April 1988 and Sana'a on 4 May 1988. Both sides after the 4 May 1988 meeting agreed to military disengagement, set up a 2200 sq. kms demilitarized zone for a joint investment project, setting up joint border posts and easier access at border crossings using only national identification cards (Dunbar 1992: 459). On 19 November 1988, a parastatal joint company was established to push for investments in oil and minerals. The April-May 1988 agreements played a key role in reducing tensions and build mutual trust required for push towards normalization. The agreement signed in Aden on 30 November 1989 covered the draft unity constitution, joining the administrative bodies including the ministries, and formation of joint political organizing committee (Dunbar 1992: 459-461; Day 2010: 4).

Analysts have pointed that the disintegration of Soviet Union and the resulting loss of support pushed South Yemen to reconcile with YAR (Salisbury 2018: 9). At the same time, the political infighting within the Yemeni Socialist Party (YSP) in 1986 had considerably weakened the South Yemeni government (Feierstein 2019: 5-6). In social parameters, South Yemen by 1985 had managed to reduce illiteracy rate from 97 to 59 percent compared to North Yemen at 80 percent. However, the economic dividends deriving from land reforms did not increase agricultural productivity and industrial production remained slow (Dunbar 1992: 464). Moreover, the discovery of oil in the border regions offered financial impetus to cooperate in joint exploration and embolden unification efforts (Day 2010: 4). In North Yemen, tribal opposition to unification with the atheist South Yemen remained a major stumbling block to gain a domestic political consensus. In fact, pressure from the tribal groups was partly responsible for the slow progress after the Cairo and Kuwait agreements (Dunbar 1992: 467). After 1980s however, Saleh government succeeded in extending control in the tribal areas and the tribal leaders were co-opted in political and economic spheres.

<sup>17</sup> Saleh government during the 1990-1991 Gulf war had sided with Saddam Hussein regime. It was opposed to the external intervention and saw the Iraqi invasion of Kuwait as an Arab problem. In response, Saudi Arabia expelled almost 1 million Yemeni expatriates causing a major economic burden on the Yemeni state. Saudi Arabia also arm-twisted western oil companies to stall their exploration efforts in the disputed territories further stifling the economy (Dunbar 1992: 471-472; Ibrahim 1990; Miller 1990).

1992: 471-472; Feierstein 2019: 6; Day 2010: 4-5; Holzapfel 2014: 11-12). In the five-member central executive committee, there were three members from north and two members from the South that gave power to Saleh and the northern elites to push their agenda in the crucial subjects of state policy (Day 2010: 4). The Southern politicians were also disappointed with results of the parliamentary elections held on 23 April 1993 in which South based Yemen Socialist Party (YSP) assumed the third position with 56 seats in the 301 member parliament or *Majlis Annowab*<sup>18</sup>. (Salisbury 2018: 9).

The southerners by the end of 1993 became vocal about their grievances and the differences and dissatisfaction with the new political arrangement<sup>19</sup> flared into incidents of clashes between the armies of the north and south in late April 1994 and transformed into a full-scale civil war between 4 May and 7 July 1994<sup>20</sup>. The southern leaders led by Ali Salim el-Beidh declared secession on 20 May 1994 (Feierstein 2019: 7; Day 2010: 5; Salisbury 2018: 10). The southern upsurge was crushed and Saleh took measures at restructuring the power-sharing process in which the share of the southern government and military officials plummeted and institutions were dissolved. He appointed Abdrabbuh Mansour Hadi, a southerner as the Vice President to project the appearance of power-sharing rather than addressing the legitimate interests of the southerners. The southern civil and economic space after the civil war was further marginalized and the rentier state was expanded after the socialized lands in the South were distributed to Saleh's allies. The southerners saw their loss in the 1994 civil war as essentially a period of northern occupation of the southern region<sup>21</sup> (Feierstein 2019: 7; Day 2010: 5-6).

<sup>18</sup> President Saleh's party General People's Congress (GPC) secured the 122 seats and the Islamist Yemeni Alliance for Reform or Islah party secured 62 seats (IPU 2019; Feierstein 2019: 6). GPC's voter base remained concentrated in the north and YSP's voter base was limited to the south.

<sup>19</sup> The YSP proposed a new federal constitutional system and pushed for greater decentralization of political authority. It suggested that due to YSP's landslide margins in the southern region, GPC's claim as a pan-Yemeni party is nullified. YSP therefore insisted that it has legitimate right to rule in south Yemen (Day 2010: Salisbury 2018: 9-10). Saleh and the northern leaders rejected the proposed new federal constitutional system and suggested forming a three-way coalition. On 30 May 1993, GPC, YSP and Islah formed a coalition government and President Saleh and Prime Minister Attas retained their position (Feierstein 2019: 6). The Southern ruling elites were dissatisfied with the new political arrangement in which they felt their political control and influence were waning (Feierstein 2019: 6; Salisbury 2018: 9-10).

<sup>20</sup> Earlier in January 1994, Jordan mediated between the conflicting parties from north and south and the Document of Pledge and accord was signed on 18 January 1994 (Day 2010: 5; Al Bab 1994).

<sup>21</sup> President Saleh sought to expand the system of patronage by reinforcing the influence of the tribal groups that played a key role in defeating the southerners in the 1994 civil war. However, the tribal groups in the south that aligned interest with Saleh regime grew disillusioned and began to side with southern interests to demand for greater access in political decision-making (Day 2010: 8; Holzapfel 2014: 5). Therefore, the unification process failed to address basic issues of national identity, just governance and even economic development.

The failure of civil society efforts during the 2000s to correct the regional disparity pushed the southerners to opt for an organized opposition that formulated into the Southern Movement in 2007.<sup>22</sup> In the initial phase, the movement grew as an unstructured grassroots organization and the demands were limited to achieving equality in terms of access to opportunities at per with citizens from the north, greater decentralization, greater power in local governance and bigger share in the decisionmaking process, employment and control over the southern region's resources including oilfields etc. (Day 2010: 2; Holzapfel 2014: 5-6). By late 2008, the demand for secession became vocal and South Yemeni or PDRY flags appeared in public demonstrations in 2009 (Day 2010: 9). The movement at this stage remained largely non-violent to detach itself from Al Qaeda in Arabian Peninsula (AQAP) which had also supported the goal of secession to achieve an independent Islamic state in the southern region (Day 2010: 9). The central government at this stage was largely preoccupied with the conflict with the Houthis; AQAP threat, the poor state of the economy and the subject of southern aspirations as well as call for secession in relative terms did not receive high priority (Salisbury 2018:10). However, arbitrary detentions, unlawful killings, torture, arrests of journalists, restrictions on freedom of speech and assembly etc. were widely reported in the Southern Movement's nascent years (Human Rights Watch 2009).

The political indifference of the central government and the highly volatile dynamics domestically after the 2011 Arab Spring transformed the Southern Movement. The southern discontent has continued after the 2011 Arab Spring in Yemen and the subsequent civil war period has presented a new set of complexity in the multi-layered struggle and posed new questions on the idea of Yemeni unity.

The next section would briefly cover the 2011 Arab Spring and evaluate the uneasy political transition process that triggered the civil war in 2014 and continuing ever since. Furthermore, it would analyze the role, interests and growth of the Southern or Al-Hirak movement and the Houthi Movement in the context of the Arab Spring and the civil war.

# Political Transition Process after the 2011 Arab Spring

The Arab Spring protests touched Yemeni streets on 27 January 2011 with protestors calling for the resignation of the incumbent President Ali Abdullah Saleh from office. Coming from a military background, Saleh was appointed as the President and the General Commander of the Armed Forces of North Yemen or the Yemen Arab Republic (YAR) on 17 July 1978 after the assassination of President Ahmed bin Hussein al-Ghashmi on 24 June 1978. He was elected as the Secretary-General of the ruling General People's Congress on 30 August 1982 and re-elected to the presidency in 1983 and

<sup>22</sup> Earlier in 2001, southern parliamentarians, political parties, tribal groups, business community and the civil society formed the Public Forum for the Sons of the Southern and Eastern Provinces and drafted a letter to President Ali Abdullah Saleh to convey its grievances. Saleh regime however dismissed the Public Forum. In May 2007, southern military veterans began holding weekly protest to demand higher compensation. Gradually, the size of protests grew larger and southern political activism and opposition rallies were regularly targeted leading to casualties by government forces (Day 2010: 8; Salisbury 2018: 10).

in 1988 (The New York Times 1978; CNN 2017; 9). Saleh retained his presidency between the 1990 reunification and the 2011 Arab Spring. Saleh's corrupt and autocratic regime served as a fertile ground for protests that swept the region in 2010-2011 with high rates of income inequality, poverty, inflation, unemployment etc. According to the UN Security Council report from the panel of experts on Yemen published on 20 February 2015, Saleh had accumulated between US\$ 32 billion and US\$ 60 billion during his tenure (Edroos 2017).

The protest in the initial phase was mobilized under the Joint Meeting Parties or JMP, a coalition of Yemeni opposition parties. Saleh in response to the popular demands offered economic concessions and promised political reforms. He announced the creation of a fund to provide employment to graduates and vowed to extend social security coverage, hike wages, reduce income taxes etc. (Kasinof and Bakri 2011). Saleh attempted to appease the protestors by suggesting the formation of a unity government and setting up a committee for constitutional reforms, which was rejected by the opposition (Edroos 2017).

Saleh intended to introduce constitutional amendments that would allow him to stay in office for life after which, his son Ahmed Ali Abdullah Saleh will take office. However, in response to the public outcry, Saleh suspended the constitutional changes and assured that he would not opt for re-election after his term ends in 2013. The political opposition criticized Saleh's plans to remain in power till 2013 and it was speculated that he plans to hand over power to his son who will turn 40 which is a pre-requisite to assume presidency (Arraf 2017: 2; Edroos 2017). The political protests led to a violent confrontation between the protestors and Saleh loyalists and the state forces.

On 18 March 2011, Saleh loyalists dressed as civilians opened fire at a protest rally killing more than 50 people in Sana'a. The political violence subsequently eroded the support of the state forces and several top officials began distancing themselves from the Saleh regime. The commander of the First Armoured Division and the north-western military zone, General Ali Mohsin al-Ahmar distanced himself from Saleh. His resignation essentially split the military and cracks appeared in the regular army and air force that broke away from Saleh led government (Arraf 2017: 2; Salisbury 2018: 10-11).

On 23 November 2011, the incumbent President Ali Abdullah Saleh resigned on the conditions of receiving immunity from prosecution as part of the transition plan proposed by the Gulf Cooperation Council (GCC) (Whitaker 2011; Akin 2019: 7; Holzapfel 2014: 6). The agreement was complemented by an UN-backed implementation mechanism for the transitional period focusing on three broad plans. Firstly, to hold a national dialogue for addressing the political issues and framing a new constitution; secondly, to address issues of transitional justice and thirdly, to reform the armed forces into a unified military. Abdrabbuh Mansour Hadi, the vice-President under Saleh administration took over as the acting President who was responsible to oversee the political transition process. He was formally appointed as the President on 27 February 2012 after elections were held on 21 February 2012 in which he was the sole candidate (Arraf 2017: 2-3; Edroos 2017; Salisbury 2018: 11). The election was

boycotted by the Houthi and Al-Hirak Movements. Hadi pushed for a federal form of governance and organized National Dialogue Conference in Sana'a between 18 March 2013 and 25 January 2014 to arrive at a broad national consensus (Akin 2019: 7; Holzapfel 2014: 6-7). The conference produced a final document and opened the path for a new constitution. The document extended President Hadi's term in office by one year to draft a new constitution and allow government reforms (Arraf 2017: 3). These measures were highly contentious and efforts to achieve national consensus failed.

On the political level, the transition process was largely symbolic that enabled the resignation of Saleh but safeguarded him and his inner circle immunity from prosecution. Saleh continued to hold the leadership in Yemen's most powerful political party i.e. the General People's Congress and enjoyed the support of the major sections of the army (Akin 2019: 7). In terms of the power dynamic, Hadi, on the other hand, was politically weak and lacked widespread ground support. Hadi in December 2012 issued presidential decree no. 104 to reform and re-organize the military into the army, air force, naval and coastal defence, border force and strategic reserve forces including Missile Defence Command, Special Operation Command and Presidential Protective Forces. By 2014, the Presidential Guard and the First Armoured Division were dismissed by the Hadi led government (Arraf 2017: 3). These steps were aimed at reducing the influence of Saleh and his loyalists from the military.

The GCC transition plan, therefore, failed to bring stability in the state. It was largely seen as a power-sharing deal among the political elites and the new political reforms did not permeate into the already existing marginalized groups whose demands were ignored (Arraf 2017: 3-4; Akin 2019: 7). Moreover, the unavailability of basic goods and services along with the break down in law and order led to a security vacuum. The security vacuum facilitated the growth of Al Qaeda in the Arabian Peninsula (AQAP) and the Islamic State (IS) in several pockets throughout the state (Arraf 2017: 3). The uneasy political transition process and the fragile political landscape led to an alliance of convenience between the Houthi Movement and Saleh loyalists that were marginalized under the Hadi government. The Houthi Movement emerging from Sa'ada province during this period gained a strategic foothold by deterring the Islamists and tribal militias.

#### Political and Territorial Entrenchment of the Houthi Movement

During the Arab Spring protests, areas under the Houthi Movement witnessed anti-government demonstrations at an early stage and the youth delegation under the banner of *Shabab al-Sumud* or the Steadfast Movement maintained an active presence during the protests in Sana'a and other cities (Winter 2012). It saw the protest as an opportunity to push for its demands including a larger representation of the Zaydi community in local and government councils and administrative bodies. The movement at this stage pursued its political objectives in a peaceful manner. It adopted the name, 'Ansar Allah' i.e. Partisans of God to appeal to the non-Zaydis about its political objectives that projected an image of Muslim unity, resistance to oppressive rule, corruption and veneration of Prophet Mohammad's bloodline (Nagi 2019; Knights 2018: 17; Winter 2012).

In the post-Arab spring period, the movement undertook political programme which was complimented by military consolidation. It took advantage of the emerging security vacuum and by March 2011, government forces in Sa'ada were dislodged and the parliamentary representative of Sa'ada governorate belonging from Saleh's General Peoples Congress (GPC) Othman Mujalli was forced to flee (Winter 2012). The Movement after the resignation of Ali Abdullah Saleh in November 2011 took control of Amran, Al-Jawf and Hajja governorates besides Sa'ada (Nagi 2019; Akin 2019: 8; Knights 2018: 17). It offered security in areas where government control was absent. The movement's rhetoric against corruption and the Saleh regime's policy of patronage also boosted its popularity (Akin 2019: 8; Nagi 2019).

Moreover, due to the movement's religious, political and military opposition to Salafi groups, it helped the movement to alleviate its political position. The movement maintained an extensive intelligence gathering mechanism and continues to hold methodical records of local tribal networks and structures (Knights 2018: 17). It also took measures to take over the state armaments by co-opting military and government officials working in the transitional government. During the National Dialogue Conference held between 18 March 2013 and 25 January 2014, the Houthis broadly accepted the newly introduced federal structure as it would provide greater autonomy to maintain local affairs. It, however, rejected the six regions federal system that would limit their influence of the Houthi Movement in the Azal region comprising the landlocked northern governorates of Amran, Dhamar, Mahwit and Sa'ada and restrict political access in wealthier governorates containing oil reserves and ports (Nagi 2019; Juneau 2016: 653).

## The Prelude, Interlude and Postlude of the Civil War

In June 2014, Hadi led government announced its decision to cut-off fuel subsidies that became highly unpopular and protests ensued throughout the state. Abdulmalek al-Houthi, the head of the Houthi Movement warned the Hadi government to review its policy failing which; he would organize an uprising to topple the government (Arraf 2017: 4; Carboni 2018: 2). The Houthis exploited the populist sentiments claiming its continuing struggle against the corrupt political elite (Feierstein 2019: 15).

Eventually, on 18 August 2014, Houthi supporters in large numbers poured into Sana'a to protest against government's policies and demanded the resignation of the government. In the following days, tensions escalated and on 19 September 2014, Houthi forces clashed with the security forces and by 21 September 2014, Sana'a came under Houthi control. The UN in order to de-escalate the situation brokered a peace agreement between the government and the Houthi Movement namely Peace and National Partnership Agreement (PNPA) on 21 September 2014. Both sides agreed to establish an inclusive government and appoint representatives from the Houthi and the Southern Movement as presidential advisors. The agreement talked about economic and security reforms as well as revoking the decision to scrap fuel subsidies (Arraf 2017: 4; Feierstein 2019: 15). Houthi forces after the PNPA agreement were integrated into the security establishment and the government's artillery, tanks and

anti-aircraft weapons etc. were swallowed by the movement. In fact, after the takeover on 21 September 2014, Houthis absorbed 33 R-17E Elbrus short-range ballistic missiles and six operational 9M117M launchers (Knights 2018: 17).

However, differences over fundamental issues remained including the establishment of a federal structure consisting of six regions. The presentation of the draft constitution on 17 January 2015 flared the differences and the PNPA arrangement broke down. Houthis in response took control of the presidential palace and entered into an alliance of convenience with Saleh and the forces loyal to him to combat their common adversary, President Mansour Abdrabbuh Hadi, General Ali Mohsin al-Ahmar and the Islah Party (Akin 2019: 8; Feierstein 2019: 15). The Houthis through its alliance with Saleh secured access to strategic missiles, coastal defence forces and direct link with national intelligence agencies (Knights 2018: 17). Saleh during this period managed to resurrect the Republican Guard that was dissolved by the Hadi regime (Carboni 2018: 3).

On 22 January 2015, President Hadi, Prime Minister Kahled Bahah and cabinet resigned and on 6 February 2015, the parliament was dissolved (Arraf 2017: 4; Ghobari 2015). The Houthis established the Supreme Revolutionary Committee (SRC) to set up a new parliament along with a five-member presidential council. The General People's Congress (GPC) members who were close to Saleh joined the SRC (Carboni 2018: 3; Nagi 2019). On 21 February 2015, Hadi managed to escape from the house arrest and reached Aden. He claimed that he was still the president and all the decisions since September 2014 after Houthis took control of Sana'a were declared as invalid. Hadi's announcement was well received by the Gulf States that accorded him recognition as the legitimate government and immediate measures were taken to shift their embassies to Aden (Arraf 2017: 4). The situation, however, remained dire and on 19 March 2015, forces loyal to Saleh clashed with the forces that support Hadi in Aden and Hadi's residence was bombed (Security Council Report 2015). The political instability caused by Houthi's political and military advances as well as the political weakness of the Hadi regime opened the doors for external intervention.

# **Operation Decisive Storm**

On 20 March 2015, two Zaydi mosques were bombed in Sana'a that killed 137 people. The suicide bombings were conducted by the Islamic State (BBC News 2015). On 21 March 2015, Abdul Malik Al-Houthi decided to launch a military campaign in South Yemen to uproot the presence of IS and AQAP and Hadi was seen as complicit with the terror elements. The Houthi-Saleh coalition proceeded to march towards Aden and it was at this stage that Hadi requested the GCC to conduct a military intervention on 24 March 2015 and by 25 March 2015, the Yemeni President left for Saudi Arabia (The Wall Street Journal 2015).

Consequently, Saudi Arabia along with the UAE, Bahrain, Egypt, Jordan, Kuwait, Morocco, Qatar and Sudan launched 'Operation Decisive Storm' to restore Hadi's control over the government and

uproot the Houthis from Sana'a and other major cities. The US offered logistical and intelligence support towards the military expedition and a Joint Planning Cell was established to coordinate US intelligence and strategic support with Saudi Arabia (Arraf 2017: 5; Sharp 2019: 2). According to the Saudi worldview, the Houthis are seen as a proxy of Iran due to their shared sectarian identity and the sectarian and regional rivalry with Iran has played a major role to push Saudi Arabia into the post-2014 Yemeni quagmire to shape the course of events as well as neutralize the Houthi challenge to its regional supremacy<sup>23</sup>.

The Houthi-Saleh alliance despite the attacks by Saudi-led coalition managed to gain ground in South Yemen and captured parts of Aden until June 2015. The Houthis retaliated by launching a series of drone, rocket and missiles attack including scud and Burkan 2 ballistic missiles towards Saudi strategic assets such as oil facilities, power stations, military bases, airports etc. (USIP 2019). At this stage, the Houthis were countered not only by the coalition forces but also by multi-faceted groups and militias such as the Popular Committees formed by Hadi to secure Abyan governorate, Hadi's home province: local tribal groups; southern separatists including Al-Hirak movement and AQAP (Arraf 2017: 5).

The UN Security Council (UNSC) on 14 April 2015 adopted Resolution 2216 demanding the Houthis to end violence unconditionally and desist from taking unilateral actions that may threaten the political transition. It also imposed sanctions including assets freeze, travel bans and arms embargo on Abdul Malik al-Houthi and Saleh's son, Ahmed Ali Abdullah Saleh. The resolution reaffirmed its support for the legitimate government of Hadi and also supported the GCC in its efforts to assist in political transition (Arraf 2017: 5-6; UN 2015). The UN Resolution, therefore, provided a legal cushion for the Saudi led intervention besides awarding validity to the Hadi government.

Hadi's forces and the southern forces along with the ground forces from the UAE and Saudi Arabia succeeded in taking over Aden as a result of the heavy air strikes in July and August 2015. The battle gains of the Saudi led coalition was halted after the Houthi ballistic missile attack on a coalition military base in Marib province killing 45 Emirati soldiers and five Bahraini soldiers on 4 September 2015 (Fahim 2015). The Saudi initiative, therefore, failed to remove the Houthis from the capital. In the southern and eastern region, Hadi's forces backed by the Saudi-led coalition entrenched its control.

In April 2016, government forces recaptured Mukalla, the capital of Hadhramaut governorate from AQAP's control and established government control in major parts of southern and eastern Yemen with AQAP's presence being limited to numerous pockets. On 28 July 2016, Houthi and Saleh signed a power-sharing agreement to set up a ten-member Supreme Political Council (SPC) with equal representation. The SPC was seen as the successor to the Supreme Revolutionary Council which was

<sup>23</sup> Saudi Arabia earlier during the course of the 2004-2010 Houthi wars had supported the Yemeni government under then-President Ali Abdullah Saleh and allowed Yemeni military to use its base in Jabal al-Dukhan to attack Houthi positions. The Houthis in early November 2009 retaliated against Saudi Arabia's clandestine support by killing Saudi border guards and capturing Jabal al-Dukhan area. Saudi Arabia in response launched airstrikes inside Houthi controlled Yemeni territory and re-captured the Saudi territory (Boucek 2010: 11; France 24 2009).

headed by Salah al-Sammad. On 28 November 2016, General People's Congress (GPC) senior leader Abdelaziz Bin Habtour was appointed as the head of the Supreme Political Council (SPC) (Arraf 2017: 6). However, internal divisions with the alliance widened and the balance of power titled heavily towards the Houthis. Houthis succeeded to enhance its military capacity by co-opting a large number of Republican Guards loyal to Saleh. Eventually, the strategic alliance between the Houthis and Saleh became unsustainable and Saleh hinted about his growing proximity with Saudi Arabia. Houthis, therefore, killed Saleh when he was travelling from Sana'a to Sanhan on 4 December 2017 (Wintour 2017).

The breakdown in the Houthi-Saleh partnership raised hopes within the Saudi led coalition that it could neutralize the Houthis and alter the military stalemate. On 13 June 2018, Operation Golden Victory was launched by Saudi-led coalition to capture the port city of Hodeidah that is responsible for 80 percent of supplies in northern Yemen (Shay 2018; Graham-Harrison 2019). Hodeidah had been under Houthi control since October 2011 (Al Jazeera 2019). The battle in Hodeidah further aggravated the humanitarian crisis by blocking essential supplies in the conflict-torn region. Eventually, the UN brokered a ceasefire agreement in Stockholm to de-escalate the tensions in the city and port of Hodeidah and ports of Salif and Ras Issa and both sides agreed to establish a humanitarian corridor in Taiz on 13 December 2018 (UN 2019). UN Special Envoy Martin Griffiths played a key role in bringing Mohamed Abdel Salam, the spokesperson of the Houthi led government and Khaled al-Yamani, the Foreign Minister of internationally recognized government of President Hadi (UN 2019). On 11 May 2019, Houthis began the process of unilaterally withdrawing its forces from Salif port and western Hodeidah (Graham-Harrison 2019; Zeyad 2019). The Stockholm Agreement offered internal legitimacy for the Houthis who were earlier reduced to 'rebels' and it was recognised as a major player in the political process.

The Houthis, however, continued its military campaign against Saudi targets in 2019. On 14 May 2019, two pumping stations west of Riyadh and Aramco East-West pipeline in Yanbu were damaged by drone strikes. On 12 June 2019, a Houthi missile hit at Abha airport's arrival hall in south Saudi Arabia injured 26 civilians. The attack on Abha airport was repeated on 17 June 2019 and 2 July 2019. On 20 June 2019, a power station in Jizan province was attacked with cruise missile. Moreover, a desalination plant in Al-Shuqaiq city was also attacked but it failed to make any damage. It also launched a long-range missile at the Saudi port city of Dammam on 1 august 2019 to showcase its military potential. There were conflicting reports about drone attacks on King Khalid, Najran and Abha airports on 5 August 2019. On 17 August 2019, drone attack was repeated at Shaybah oilfield in eastern Saudi Arabia. On 25 August 2019, Houthis launched 10 Badr-1 ballistic missiles at Jizan airport and on 26 August 2019, a military base was attacked in Riyadh, which Saudi Arabia has denied. In a major military and strategic setback for Saudi Arabia on 14 September 2019, Houthis continued with drone attacks hitting Saudi Aramco's oil facilities in Abqaiq and Khurais cutting down an output of 5.7 million barrels per day (bpd) or around 5 percent of global oil supply (Al Jazeera 2019). The attack has drawn international attention with the US blaming Iran for the assault thereby escalating

the already existing regional tension between the US and Iran. From the Saudi perspective, the attack has displayed its vulnerability in the case of asymmetrical warfare. (Srivastava 2019).

In a sudden peace offering on 20 September 2019, Mahdi al-Mashat, head of Supreme Political Council of Houthi controlled government in Sana'a announced that it would de-escalate and stop all drone and missile targets inside Saudi Arabia in exchange of reciprocity from the Saudi side. On 28 September 2019, Houthi military spokesperson, Yehia Saree have claimed that it has captured hundreds of soldiers belonging to the coalition forces including Yemenis recruited mostly from southern Yemen as well as Saudi military officers. They have been allegedly captured from the south-western region of Najran in Saudi Arabia. According to the statement, three brigades along with one regiment of Saudi forces and military armoured vehicles have been captured (Al Jazeera 2019). It assured the families of the captured soldiers that they will be treated as the prisoners of war and would ascertain their security.

In the recent turn of events on 30 September 2019, the Houthis released 350 prisoners including three Saudi individuals in compliance with the terms of the Stockholm Agreement signed in December 2018 (Al Jazeera 2019; Reuters 2019). Abdul Qader al-Murtada, the Houthi head of the National Committee for Prisoners' Affairs (NCPA) suggested that the latest step is aimed at strengthening the implementation of Stockholm Agreement and appealed other parties to take steps (Al Jazeera 2019). Saudi Arabia reciprocated the overtures made by the Houthis and in the last week of November 2019, it has released 200 Houthi prisoners in compliance with the Stockholm Agreement (Al Jazeera 2019). Saudi Arabia and the Houthis have been engaged in secret talks since September 2019 and both sides on 13 November 2019 met in Oman for backchannel discussions on specific subjects such as reopening Sana'a airport, creation of buffer zone etc (Yaakoubi & Nichols 2019).

The Saudi attempts at reconciliation with the Houthis reflect a change in policy which is more willing to accommodate the movement in Yemen's political future. The cost of the war has been excessively high and according to the Armed Conflict Location & Event Data Project (ACLED) that released its projection on total casualties in the conflict on 31 October 2019, approximately 100,000 people have died in Yemen between 2015 and 2019 out of which 12,000 civilians died in around 49,000 direct attacks. According to the group, 40,000 conflict events have occurred between 2015 and 2019 and in 2019, 20,000 people have died in around 8,000 conflict events (ACLED 2019). The conflict at the present stage has reached a stalemate and heavy cost on life has been highly unpopular internationally and within the region.

# Southern Transitional Council and call for Southern Independence

The Al-Hirak or the Southern Movement that emerged in 2007 as an unstructured grassroots organization demanding equal access, greater decentralization and autonomy, control over resources (Forster 2017; Day 2010: 2; Holzapfel 2014: 5-6). The demand for separation gradually intensified and the 2011 Arab Springs protests offered an opportunity to Southern Movement and other groups to

assert its political interests. The political indifference of the central government and the highly volatile dynamics domestically after the 2011 Arab Spring transformed the organization. The movement according to their website presently envisions to liberate the southern region from the occupation of north Yemeni military control and achieving an independent southern state based on self-determination through referendum and peaceful negotiation with all relevant actors (Southern Movement 2019). The Southerners believed that unity by force is an occupation.

After Abdrabbuh Mansour Hadi took over power in November 2011, the National Dialogue Conference was held between 18 March 2013 and 25 January 2014 to achieve a national consensus as well as establishing committees to negotiate on compensation for land grabs and forced retirement (Akin 2019: 7; Holzapfel 2014: 6-7; Salisbury 2018: 11). The Southern Movement along with the Houthis rejected the final document that proposed to organize the state into a federation comprising of six regions with four regions in the north and two regions in the south. The southern leaders during the dialogue felt that their views were undermined and the younger members questioned the legitimacy of the southern representatives who were handpicked by President Hadi. The southerners were soon disillusioned with the transition process that led to their withdrawal intensifying further polarization (Salisbury 2018: 11; Akin 2019: 7; Sharp 2019: 6).

The southerners were highly alarmed after Houthi takeover of Sana'a in September 2014 and the consequent shifting of the capital to Aden. On 21 March 2015, Abdelmalik al-Houthi announced an incursion into southern Yemen to neutralize the presence of AQAP and IS and challenge Hadi government (Sharp 2019). The Southern Movement along with its affiliated militia, the Southern Resistance allied with forces loyal to Hadi and the Saudi led coalition to counter the Houthi advance. It eventually succeeded in re-capturing Aden and Lahj governorates from Houthi control. While the internationally recognized government continued to function from Aden, Hadi and several members of the top leadership operated from Riyadh(Forster 2017; Sharp 2019). At the same time, the government forces were highly fragmented and the physical presence of the government was limited to the presidential palace, Central Bank etc. leading to political and security vacuum. The Southern Movement as a result of their ground presence succeeded in taking over security and governance responsibilities (Forster 2017). For the Southern Movement, the impetus to join forces with the Hadi government and the Saudi led coalition stemmed from the need to avert a possible Houthi takeover and move towards independence. It, therefore, contradicted with the national and regional resolve to preserve unity (Southern Movement 2019).

The subject of secession gained increasing currency and push for independence even prior to reaching a political solution has heightened the complexity of the conflict. Robert Forster has identified three trends within the Yemeni conflict that led to the increasing influence of the southern cause. Firstly, after averting the Houthi takeover in Aden and other parts of southern Yemen, there was a disconnect in aims between local actors in Yemen and the Hadi government. Hadi government was seen as not only militarily weak but was also seen as politically feeble marked by numerous reshuffles in

political positions which were largely based on political loyalty rather than merit. Secondly, the Hadi government failed to address the humanitarian situation and reconstruction efforts in southern Yemen after the government re-captured areas under Houthi or AQAP control. Thirdly, the state-building process in Yemen has historically failed to incorporate the periphery which has led to the formation of alternative governance institutions premised on tribal identity, religious identity etc. Hadi, therefore, appropriated democratic undertones and promise of reforms but the transitional leadership remain largely undemocratic (Forster 2017).

In this context, the regional actors, as well as the international community, accepted Hadi who is based in Riyadh as the leader of the legitimate government without an in-depth familiarity with the realities on the ground. Consequently, while Hadi government's external legitimacy remained intact, the internal legitimacy gradually crumbled after Houthi took control of Sana'a (Salisbury 2016: 4). Therefore, southern nationalists saw the weakening of central authority as an opportunity to assert their independence.

For the Southern Movement, the UAE has emerged as a crucial external partner. The UAE since the 2011 Arab Spring has undergone a significant shift in its external interests. It has largely adopted a more interventionist approach to shape the course of events in the states undergoing turmoil during the course of the Arab Spring. The UAE's approach is motivated by the desire for internal stability and changing the regional status quo through regime change in the case of Syria and Libya. At the same time, it has backed counter-revolutionary activities in Bahrain as well as Yemen (Alsaafin 2019). The UAE's position in the initial stages coincided with Saudi Arabia and under the Saudi diplomatic and security umbrella, it succeeded to pursue its policy of intervention in Yemen (Stratfor 2019; Mckernan 2019). For UAE, the initial goals of neutralizing Houthi control in Sana'a and restoring Hadi's rule has been de-prioritized in favour of consolidating its interests by supporting the Southern Movement.

Involvement of the UAE in the Saudi-led coalition has permitted the Southern Movement to openly coordinate on counter-terrorism efforts with the US. It has also succeeded in entrenching its presence in several port cities in the south to support its energy and commercial interests in the Gulf of Aden and the Red Sea (Sharp 2019: 6-7). The UAE in the post Arab Spring period has maintained a strong opposition against Islamist political groups in Egypt, Libya and Yemen that could replace the political vacuum in the states affected by the Arab Spring.

In Yemen, the Islamist Yemeni Alliance for Reform or Islah party after the Houthi takeover in Sana'a in September 2014 joined hands with the Hadi government and Saudi Arabia. In this context, the UAE opted for the Southern Movement to counter Islah's alliance with Hadi and Saudi Arabia (Sharp 2019: 6-7; Alasrar 2019). The southerners were dissatisfied with Hadi-Islah alliance that took control over issues of governance (STC 2019; Alsaafin 2019). The UAE in its efforts to consolidate its influence in Aden and the southern region has institutionalized the Southern Resistance by identifying, equipping and training security forces and erected the tribal militias namely *Al-Hizam al-Amni* or Security Belt

in Aden, Abyan and Lahj governorates; Hadrami Elite Forces and Giants Brigades in Hadramawt and Shabwani Elite Forces in Shabwa. The Security Belt militias in the absence of government control provide both military and policing functions in the southern region (Augustin 2019; Salisbury 2018: 12; Serebrov 2017).

Growth of militias increased the incidents of periodic clashes with Hadi's forces namely the Presidential Protection Brigades or Presidential Guards headed by Nasser Hadi. In mid-April 2017, the Presidential Guards was engaged in armed conflict with Security Belt forces and southern forces close to the governor of Aden, Aidarous al-Zubaidi (Arraf 2017: 6-7). On 22 April 2017, the pro-separatist local governor and commander of the Security Belt, Hani Bin Braik with support for the UAE organized the Inclusive Hadramout Conference to demand greater autonomy. Hadi government in response removed Braik along with the governor of Aden, Aidarous al-Zubaidi.

The dismissal was seen as an act of betrayal by Hadi towards the South and massive rally was organized to protest against the Hadi government. On 4 May 2017, factions from Southern Movement released the Aden Historic Declaration to express the will of the southern people. The declaration acknowledged the role played by Operation Decisive Storm in opening the prospect of a future state for southern Yemenis. However, after the Houthi incursion in the South failed due to joint efforts by the coalition partners and southerners, the southern resistance was sidelined from the political process. Subsequently, on 11 May 2017, Aidarous al-Zubaidi announced the formation of 26 members *Al-Majlis al-Intiqali al-Janubi* or Southern Transitional Council (STC) and Braik was appointed as the vice-President (Arraf 2017: 6-7; Forster 2017; STC 2019). The formation of the STC was immediately rejected by President Hadi claiming that it contradicts the three foundations agreed on the local level i.e. the National Dialogue Conference, regional level i.e. the Gulf Initiative and its outcomes and international level i.e. UN Resolution 2216 (Forster 2017; Gasim 2018). Hadi government has therefore utilized the legal mechanisms to justify its political position and delay in conducting negotiations with the STC as well as the Houthis.

In terms of regional paradigm, the military expedition of the Arab coalition is premised on supporting the legitimate government of Hadi; however, the formation of STC has raised questions over the validity of the coalition at present. Moreover, STC also reflects the internal tensions within the coalition between Saudi Arabia that support the Hadi government and the UAE's strategic interests which is in favour of STC (Forster 2017; Augustin 2019). It would, however, be an oversimplification to suggest that there is a rift between Saudi Arabia and UAE due to their diverse policies towards Hadi government, methods for stalling Houthi threat and the Southern Movement. The new political possibilities that emerged after the 2011 Arab Spring such as free elections, freedom of expression etc. were seen as a challenge by both Saudi Arabia and UAE. Therefore, the fate and the survival strategy of both states are intertwined in the long-term. The STC nevertheless has uncovered the shortcomings of internationally led technocratic peace process framed by national and regional elites that discount the views of the people directly involved and affected by the conflict (Forster 2017; Augustin 2019).

The STC backed by Security Belt on 30 January 2018 surrounded Hadi government's presidential palace essentially blocking Prime Minister Ahmed Bin Daghr and other senior politicians. The Southern Resistance Force (SRF) also captured military barracks of the government forces (Wintour 2018). It led to a situation of civil war within the civil war. The crisis was however averted through Saudi intervention. In the subsequent months, the security, political and economic situation in Aden and the neighbouring regions returned to normalcy due to security coordination between UAE, STC and Hadi government's Interior Minister, Ahmed al-Maysari. The political differences however persisted. In May 2019, Houthis pushed towards Al-Dhale that lies between the borders of north and south Yemen. STC and pro-government forces managed to take control. However, in-fighting erupted between STC and its allies and the government forces and government troops were sent back to Aden. During this period, the Hadi government alleged that UAE has helped around 1000 Southern fighters to establish a base in Socotra (Uqba 2019).

On 9 July 2019, the UAE announced a limited tactical retreat from Yemen and redeployment of troops from Hodeidah. The UAE's move can be seen in the light of the international condemnation over the role of the Arab coalition in perpetuating the humanitarian crisis in Yemen. The UAE's military strategy has largely failed to uproot Houthi presence. Moreover, the increasing number of attacks on Saudi assets has caused concern for the UAE. Therefore, its decision to withdraw from Yemen is backed by efforts to protect its assets as the cost of actively fighting the Houthis outweighs the benefits (Stratfor 2019). It suggested that it would shift its emphasis from a military solution to a political solution and it would largely be focused on training local groups and counter-terrorism measures (Wintour and Mckernan 2019).

On 1 August 2019, the Houthis conducted a missile and drone attacks at a military graduation ceremony in Al Jalaa military camp in Buraiqa district in Aden killing around 36 soldiers and new recruits including Brigadier General Munir Mahmoud Ahmad Al-Mashali also known as Abu Yamamah al Yafaei (Salman and Ghobari 2019; DeLozier 2019). On 6 August 2019, the STC Vice President Hani Bin Braik accused the Islah Party of cooperating with the Houthis and implied that Hadi government is complicit in the attack. The allegations against Hadi government without offering any credible evidence is similar with Houthi allegations against Hadi government's complicity with the IS and AQAP after the bomb blasts in Sana'a on 20 March 2015 to justify its incursion in southern Yemen and to topple Hadi government that ensued the external intervention since 2015 (Arab Center for Research & Policy Studies 2019).

The STC on 7 August 2019 announced mobilization of its supporters to march towards the Presidential Palace in Aden. The STC actions culminated into armed clashes between the government forces backed by military police, members of Popular Resistance or *Al-Muqawama ash-Sha'biyya* etc. and the STC backed by Security Belt, members of Fourth Military Area Command, Military Police Command and Police Administration of Lahj Governorate, Special Security Forces of Aden, Lahj and Abyan Governorates, forces under the control of Hadi's Interior Ministry, tribal fighters etc. The forces aligned

with STC after days of street battles took control of the Presidential Palace in Aden and several military camps of government forces by 10 August 2019. Hadi called the STC action as a military coup against the internationally recognized government. The STC continued its military expedition against government-controlled Abyan and Shabwa governorates (BBC News 2019; The Arab Center for Research & Policy Studies 2019; Sharp 2019: 8).

On 28 August 2019, government forces and allied tribal groups succeeded in re-capturing the Presidential Palace in Aden and several other government buildings and it regained control of large parts of Abyan and Shabwa as a result of Saudi reinforcements (The Japan Times 2019). The UAE on 28 and 29 August 2019 launched airstrikes allegedly against terrorist groups killing around 300 people which effectively stalled the advances made by the government forces. The sporadic clashes however continued with STC maintaining a ground presence in Aden and other governorates while Hadi government's forces maintaining control over critical government institutions (Mukhashaf 2019). On 26 September 2019, Transport Minister Saleh Al-Gabwani tweeted that the capital of the Hadi government has been temporarily relocated to Ataq, the capital of Shabwa governorate until the liberation fo Aden and Sana'a (Middle East Monitor 2019).

Saudi Arabia in its attempt to reconcile the contesting interests of the Hadi government and STC brokered in late October 2019 that entails the formation of a 24 member government with equal representation from STC and Hadi government along with new measures to reduce corruption and fair allocation of resources in Yemen's central bank (Wintour 2019).

Presently, the Houthis are likely to benefit from the crack in the Arab coalition due to confrontation between STC and Hadi government as well as a distinct set of priorities between Saudi Arabia and the UAE (Stratfor 2019; Arab Center for Research & Policy Studies 2019). However, the Houthis strategic space within Yemen is likely to remain static in the near future as the conflict has reached a stalemate. In the southern region, the STC has emerged as a crucial actor and the southern aspirations for autonomy appear to be within reach. The STC's preoccupation with combating Hadi government could potentially re-open the space for radical groups such as AQAP and IS. Moreover, the international deliberation towards solving the Yemeni crisis is largely centred on the Hadi government and its conflict with the Houthi Movement in which STC is generally sidelined.

In this context, the international community is likely to remain unconvinced to push for secession in the already fragmented state of Yemen. Lastly, the societal structure in the southern region is highly composite marked by regional, tribal, ideological differences and demand for separation is not homogenous. These roadblocks are likely to continue which could be addressed through direct dialogue with the Hadi government as well as international stakeholders to increase its prominence in international diplomacy (Stratfor 2019). The recent truce between the Houthi Movement and Saudi Arabia as well as Saudi attempts to mitigate the tensions in the south could aid in UN's peace efforts to end the civil war and untangle the complex interplay in the conflict.

#### **India's Policy Options**

India and Yemen share civilizational linkages and Indian gold, precious gems, spices reached Qana through the maritime route since 11th century BC. Yemen's land routes served as a crucial trade link between India and other civilisations and empires in Egypt, Mesopotamia etc. European colonial powers since the 16th century were involved in competition over Yemen's vital coastal cities to control the trade routes to India (New Mexico State University 2019). After the British takeover of India, Indian experience in terms of the administrative model and political language was applied by Britain in the Arab world including Yemen. Aden came under British rule and became a part of Bombay Presidency in 1839 along with Khuriya Muriya islands in present-day Oman in 1954. According to the 1889 Interpretation Act, India was defined not in terms of its physical geography and it incorporated any Native rulers' territories that come under the British suzerainty. Aden Protectorate served as the westernmost frontier of the British Indian empire from 1839 until 1937. It is therefore pertinent to redefine India not only in terms of physical geography but also in terms of political and cultural geography (Willis 2009).

In the post-independence period. India was one of the first states to recognize North Yemen in 1962 and South Yemen in 1967. Yemen has supported India's permanent seat in the UN Security Council. The then Yemeni President, Ali Abdullah Saleh visited India in March 1999 and Indian then Vice-President Krishan Kant visit Yemen in October 1999 (Ministry of External Affairs 2016).

In the post Arab Spring period, India supported the GCC transition plan and recognised the government of President Abdrabbuh Mansour Hadi. India has maintained regular diplomatic communication with the transitional government. Yemen has been a part of Indian Ocean Rim Association (IORA) and the Yemeni Foreign Minister Dr Abu Bakr Al-Qirbi visited India to participate in IORA Ministerial meeting in Bengaluru from 11 to 15 November 2011. Yemeni delegations have regularly participated in IORA Workshop on Women Empowerment and Poverty Alleviation organised in Hyderabad between 17 and 19 September 2014; Indian Ocean Dialogue meeting in Kochi between 5 and 7 September 2014 and IORA Meeting of Experts on Maritime Safety and Security in New Delhi on 13 and 14 October 2015 (Ministry of External Affairs 2016).

India in the post-Arab spring period is keen to participate in Yemen's political, economic and social recovery. In April 2012, India was invited by the transitional government to join the Friends of Yemen group and in the same month, Nobel Laureate Tawakkol Karman also paid a visit to India under ICCR's Distinguished Visitors' Programme. The Yemeni political leadership had visited India on several occasions. The Deputy Minister of Planning and International Cooperation, Abdulaziz Abdul Ghani visited New Delhi during the 8th session of Joint Commission Meeting held on 11 and 12 March 2013 (Ministry of External Affairs 2016). Bharat Heavy Electricals Limited (BHEL), on 14 February 2011 prior to President Saleh's resignation in November 2011, signed a US\$ 436 million agreement to build a 400 MW Gas Turbine based power plant in Marib Gas based power project

(Phase II) (The Economic Times 2011). The Yemeni Minister of Electricity and Energy Salih Hasan Sumiya visited India in May 2013 to deepen engagement in power generation. On 30 April 2014, Bharat Heavy Electricals Limited (BHEL) signed an MOU with Yemeni Ministry of Electricity and Energy to develop Solar Photovoltaic based power plants all over the Arab state (BHEL 2014).

During the visit of Mridul Kumar, the Joint Secretary (Gulf Division) of Indian Ministry of External Affairs to Yemen between 21 and 22 November 2013, India offered wheat worth US\$ 2 million. In order to identify areas of engagement, the Joint Secretary met with the Yemeni First Deputy Minister Dr Abdulqawi A Noman; Vice Foreign Minister of Foreign Affairs Dr Ali Hassan Muthanna; Minister of Planning and Internal Cooperation, Mohammed Al-Saeed Al-Saadi and First Deputy Minister for Trade, Mr Iqbal Bahader. India is keen to share its expertise in election management and electoral roll preparations. During the visit of India's Chief Election Commissioner, VS Sampath, both states signed an MOU on 24 December 2013 in which India's Election Commission would assist Yemen's Supreme Commission of Election and Referendum (SCER). Sampath also met with President Abdrabbuh Mansour Hadi to discuss bilateral cooperation in the area of election management and cooperation (The Economic Times 2013).

Education has emerged as a crucial area in which both states can share and learn from each other. The University of Aden has established cooperation with Jawaharlal Nehru University, Allahabad University and the University of Roorkee. On research think-tank level, the Indian Council for World Affairs (ICWA) has signed an MOU with Sheba Centre for Strategic Studies in April 2012 (Ministry of External Affairs 2016). Indian private firms in the sphere of pharmaceuticals, fertilisers and oil have also shown interest to enter the Yemeni market.

India's political bonhomie with the transitional government suffered a jolt after the Saudi-led coalition launched attacks on the Houthi Movement who were seeking to take control in southern Yemen. The Saudi air attacks and the worsening civil war endangered the lives of the Indian expatriate community living in Yemen. Indian Navy's INS Tarkash and INS Sumitra in coordination with Indian Air Force launched Operation Raahat between 31 March and 8 April 2015 to extradite the Indian and the international diaspora. The Indian expedition succeeded to evacuate around 4640 Indians and 960 individuals from 41 nationalities (One India 2015; Kumar 2015). During the operation, India evacuated three Pakistani nationals and Pakistan's rescue team evacuated 11 India nationals (First Post 2015). India's rescue mission was highly successful and foreign states such as Czech Republic, France, Germany, Hungary, Ireland, Romania, Slovenia, Sweden, Turkey and the United States, Bangladesh, Cuba, Djibouti, Egypt, Iraq, Indonesia, Philippines, Lebanon, Malaysia, Nepal, Sri Lanka, Singapore and Yemen, Netherlands, Bahrain and Thailand sought help from India to rescue their citizens (Prague Post 2015). The US also its citizens stranded in Yemen to communicate with the Indian High Commission for assistance and evacuation (Taneja 2015). India as a result of the civil war had to relocate its embassy to Djibouti since 14 April 2015.

India's total export to Yemen in 2014-2015 was at US\$ 992.13 million. However, the civil war deteriorated the total trade between both states and India's export to Yemen plummeted to US\$ 399.79 million in 2015-2016. In 2016-2017, India' export saw a marginal increase of US\$ 446.13 million and it further increased to US\$ 563.46 million in 2017-2018. In 2018-2019, India's total export to Yemen is at US\$ 741.32 million. India's total imports from Yemen was at US\$ 540.68 million in 2014-2015, US\$ 6.88 million in 2015-2016, US\$ 4.81 million in 2016-2017, US\$ 153.05 million in 2017-2018 and US\$ 11.77 million in 2018-2019 (Department of Commerce 2019).

India is ardently in favour of a negotiated solution to achieve peace in Yemen and staunchly opposes the use of violence. It has expressed support for President Abdrabbuh Mansour Hadi government. India sees the civil war in Yemen as an intra-Arab conflict and the tension between Hadi and Southern Movement is seen through the prism of divergent priorities between Saudi Arabia and the UAE. India's relations are highly cordial with both states and therefore it has adopted a policy of non-interference in Yemeni affairs. At the same time, India wants to broaden the scope of engagement in Yemen's reconstruction and nourish cooperation in developing political institutions, energy, education, health and pharmaceuticals, technology and humanitarian assistance.

#### Discussion

The Houthi Movement and the Southern Movement that share the history of political alienation and uneven economic development were at the forefront during the 2011 Arab Spring protests calling for the resignation of President Ali Abdullah Saleh. The Houthis during the transition process utilized the opportunity to push for a larger representation of the Zaydi community in local and national politics. The Southern Movement, on the other hand, saw it as an opportunity to ascertain local autonomy that eventually transformed into the demand for independence. The emergence of both movements is based on the historical sense of injustice and the perceived sense of regional and ethnic discrimination imposed by the central authority. Therefore, both movements stress a strong reliance on history and regional identity to further its political purposes. However, while the Houthis' struggle is motivated by political and religious revival and tribal identity, the primary motivations for the southern struggle are regional and tribal differences.

Goals of the Houthi Movement are largely perceived as irredentist that aspires to restore its political dominance over North Yemen as well as South Yemen which is devoid of Saudi and Wahhabi influence and staunch anti-US and anti-Israel postures. The southern political struggle is more outward-looking and it aspires to gain international legitimacy. It presently sees itself as a political competitor against President Hadi's rule in Aden. It is keen to re-imagine a new state in the southern region largely in consonance with the pre-united South Yemen. During the transitional period, the objectives of both the movements briefly coincided with both demanding decentralization from the central authority and strengthening of local autonomy. Consequently, the policies formulated by President Abdrabbuh Mansour Hadi such as the federal form of governance remained highly unpopular among both Houthi

and the Al-Hirak movements. However, the shared disdain towards Hadi's central authority collapsed after Houthis took control of Sana'a and threatened to move towards Aden to topple Hadi government.

The pursuit to obtain legitimacy is a crucial driver for both movements. Participation of the Houthi representatives in peace initiatives including December 2018 Stockholm Conference has elevated its status from a rebel group and an Iranian proxy to a major player in discussions in the Yemeni peace process. It has gradually gained recognition as the de-facto political authority in Sana'a and the northern region. At the same time, the Southern Transitional Council (STC) formed in May 2017 acts as a quasi-government organization providing public services and it is presently undertaking several international outreach initiatives to gain legitimacy. The STC's efforts in January 2018 and August 2019 to taking control over government buildings in Aden can be seen as attempts to dilute Hadi's political footprint and preserve political control.

Both Houthis and the Southern Movements over the years have emerged as tactful players in building and shifting alliances. The Houthis' position towards then-President Ali Abdullah Saleh was highly antagonistic and both sides fought a series of wars between 2004 and 2010 and the movement participated in the 2011 anti-Saleh protests since the early stages. After Abdrabbuh Mansour Hadi was instituted as the President with the support of Gulf States, the Houthis were aware of Saleh's continuing hold over military and Yemeni politics and it utilized Hadi's weak political control and Saleh's military capabilities to further its interests. The alliance with Saleh helped the Houthis to expand its support base and in gaining access to military equipment. However, the military stalemate along with differences in strategy resulted in a split in Houthi-Saleh alliance and Ali Abdullah Saleh was eventually killed for switching alliances and siding with Saudi Arabia on 4 December 2017.

The southerners after the Houthi incursion in March 2015 entered into a tactical alliance with the Hadi led government and the Saudi led coalition to deter the Houthi threat. However, the Southern Movement continued to contradict Hadi's government and regional actors' commitment to preserving unity. The Southern Movement's military contribution in the anti-Houthi coalition increased its political stake and it succeeded to hone international support especially from the UAE. The active military and financial support from the UAE tilted the military parity in the Southern Movement's favour. Evidently, the political differences between the Southern Movement and the Hadi government transformed into armed clashes and contest over control of Aden and other areas in southern Yemen.

In terms of international backing for the Houthi Movement, Iran and its Lebanese ally, Hezbollah has been alleged to supply with weapons, technology, training and funding etc. However, due to the inconclusive knowledge of cooperation with the Houthis, the role of Iran has remained outside the scope of the paper. Moreover, there is a tendency to view the conflict in Yemen through the lens of regional competition between Iran and its so-called proxy, the Houthi Movement and Saudi Arabia and its ally, Hadi government. However, the course of the Yemeni civil war has displayed that the local actors have attached and detached their ties with external actors on the basis of changing local

dynamics. Therefore, there is a need to address the crisis in Yemen from a local perspective since the regional dimension has distracted serious discussions on local complexities.

In terms of the most prominent regional player, Saudi Arabia, it has historically acted the regional hegemon in Yemeni politics and economy. The Saudi involvement in 2015 was premised on halting Iranian influence as well as shaping the political discourse in Yemen. Saudi Arabia despite its superior military hardware did not succeed in neutralizing the Houthis. Saudi armed forces are unable to engage in urban and high population areas and their airstrikes have been responsible for the destruction of public infrastructure perpetuating the humanitarian crisis.

Both Saudi Arabia and UAE realize the importance of the Southern Movement in deterring the Houthis. However, the existence and relevance of the Hadi government are crucial for Saudi Arabia to justify its intervention in Yemen. The UAE has gradually shifted its priority from restoring Hadi's rule to securing its strategic and economic interests by supporting the Southern Movement. It appears that there is a tacit understanding between the UAE and Saudi Arabia over the STC-Hadi government conflict and the recent attempts in September 2019 to bring STC and the Hadi government to the negotiating table reflect Saudi attempts to reach reconciliation to re-group the anti-Houthi coalition. At the same time, the stalemated nature of the conflict between the Arab coalition and the Houthis has prompted Saudi Arabia to gradually reconcile its interests vis-a-vis the Houthi Movement.

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