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Unravelling the Tapestry: A Literature Review on the History of Yemen's Conflict

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Abstract

This study aims to provide a comprehensive overview of the historical context and evolution of Yemen's conflict, identifying and analyzing key themes and contributing factors and highlighting gaps in current research to suggest areas for future study. The methodology involved a meticulous and systematic literature selection process, prioritizing peer-reviewed journal articles, academic books, and reports from reputable organizations, focusing on historical and contemporary analyses. The data was gathered from various academic and reputable databases, including JSTOR, Google Scholar, PubMed, and Web of Science, and analyzed using thematic and content analysis. The results indicate that Yemen's conflict is driven by a complex interplay of political instability, economic hardship, social and cultural dimensions, and foreign intervention. Key findings highlight the chronic political fragmentation, economic dependency on oil revenues, significant social factors such as tribal affiliations and sectarian divides, and the complicating role of external influences. The study identifies gaps in research, particularly the need for in-depth studies on the humanitarian impact, local peacebuilding efforts, and long-term environmental impacts. Addressing these gaps will provide a more holistic understanding of Yemen's conflict and inform effective policy responses.

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Introduction

Yemen, located at the southern tip of the Arabian Peninsula, boasts a long and complex history marked by periods of prosperity and turmoil. Historically, its strategic location along major trade routes contributed to its wealth and cultural richness (Brandt, 2024a). Ancient Yemen was home to several powerful and influential kingdoms, including the Sabaean, Himyarite, and Aksumite empires, each leaving a significant cultural legacy (Orkaby, 2022). The Sabaeans, known for their advanced irrigation systems and the legendary Queen of Sheba, played a crucial role in the ancient trade networks that linked the Mediterranean world with Africa and South Asia. This historical period was characterized by economic prosperity and cultural achievements, making Yemen an essential player in the ancient world's trade and politics (Playfair, 2022).

In the 20th century, Yemen underwent significant political upheaval that reshaped its social and political landscape. The north, formerly ruled by an Imamate, became the Yemen Arab Republic (YAR) in 1962 following a republican coup. This revolution was part of a broader wave of Arab nationalism sweeping the Middle East (Maṭoi & Pricope, 2019). Meanwhile, the South gained independence from British colonial rule in 1967, forming the People's Democratic Republic of Yemen (PDRY). The PDRY adopted a Marxist-Leninist government, which contrasted sharply with the republican but non-socialist government of the YAR in the north (Joseph Kostiner, 2020). These contrasting political ideologies and historical experiences set the stage for future conflicts between the two regions.

The unification of North and South Yemen in 1990 was a momentous event but fraught with tension and conflict. The merger was motivated by economic difficulties in both states and the end of the Cold War, which reduced external support for both regimes. However, the union was initially unstable as deep-seated political, economic, and social differences persisted. In 1994, these tensions erupted into a civil war, with northern forces loyal to President Ali Abdullah Saleh emerging victorious. This victory solidified Saleh's power but did little to resolve the underlying issues that had caused the conflict. Instead, it created a new set of grievances and laid the groundwork for future instability (Dostal, 2021; Joseph Kostiner, 2020; Singh, 2019).

The current conflict, often referred to as the Yemeni Civil War, began in 2014 when the Houthi movement, a Zaidi Shia group from northern Yemen, seized control of the capital, Sana'a. The Houthis' rise was fueled by widespread dissatisfaction with President Saleh's successor, Abdrabbuh Mansur Hadi, and the deteriorating economic and security situation in the country. The Houthi takeover prompted a military intervention by a Saudi-led coalition in 2015 aimed at restoring the internationally recognized government of President Hadi (Edwards, 2019; Glazner, 2020; Hokayem & Roberts, 2023). This intervention has further complicated the conflict, introducing a new layer of regional and international dynamics.

The ongoing war has resulted in a severe humanitarian crisis, with millions of people displaced, widespread famine, and significant loss of life. The conflict has devastated Yemen's infrastructure, economy, and social fabric, making it one of the world's most pressing humanitarian emergencies. The United Nations and various humanitarian organizations have repeatedly called for a ceasefire

and increased aid, but the complex web of local, regional, and international interests has made achieving a lasting peace challenging (Bhattarai & Bhattarai, 2024; Brandt, 2024b; Dosari & George, 2020; Hokayem & Roberts, 2023). Understanding the historical context of Yemen's conflict is crucial for grasping the full extent of the crisis and the intricate factors that continue to drive the violence and suffering in the country.

Understanding the history of Yemen's conflict is crucial for several reasons. Firstly, it provides insight into the root causes and driving forces behind the ongoing violence and instability. Historical context allows policymakers, scholars, and humanitarian organizations to develop more informed and effective strategies for conflict resolution and peacebuilding. Secondly, the Yemeni conflict has significant regional and global implications, affecting geopolitical dynamics, security, and international relations. A thorough understanding of its history is essential for grasping the broader impact of the conflict. Lastly, understanding the historical context is vital for addressing the humanitarian crisis, as it helps identify the most effective ways to provide aid and support to those affected by the war.

The primary objectives of this literature review are to provide a comprehensive overview of the historical context and evolution of Yemen's conflict, identify and analyze the key themes and factors contributing to it, examine the various perspectives and debates within the existing literature, and highlight gaps in current research to suggest areas for future study. By achieving these goals, the review aims to present a balanced understanding of Yemen's complex conflict and support the development of more effective strategies for resolution and peacebuilding.

The scope of this literature review includes a wide range of sources, including academic articles, books, reports from international organizations, and other relevant literature on Yemen's conflict. The review will cover historical events from the pre-20th century to the present, focusing on significant developments in the 20th and 21st centuries. However, there are limitations to this review. Due to the vast amount of literature available, not all sources can be included, and some perspectives may be underrepresented. Additionally, the rapidly evolving nature of the conflict means that new developments and research may emerge that are not covered in this review. Despite these limitations, this literature review aims to provide a thorough and balanced understanding of the history of Yemen's conflict.

Method

The literature selection process for this review was meticulous and systematic to ensure the inclusion of high-quality and relevant sources (Antons et al., 2023). The criteria for selecting the literature included the publication's relevance to Yemen's conflict history, its scholarly credibility, and its contribution to understanding the key themes and factors of the conflict. Priority was given to peer-reviewed journal articles, academic books, and reports from reputable organizations. Publications in both English and Arabic were considered to capture diverse perspectives. The literature was also selected based on its

temporal coverage, ensuring that historical and contemporary analyses were included.

The data sources used to gather literature for this review encompassed a variety of academic and reputable databases. Key databases included JSTOR, Google Scholar, PubMed, and Web of Science, which provide access to peer-reviewed journal articles and academic papers. Additionally, reports and publications from international organizations such as the United Nations, the World Bank, and various non-governmental organizations (NGOs) were utilized. Online libraries and archives, including the Yemen Polling Center and the Yemen Data Project, were consulted to obtain relevant historical documents and reports.

The method of analyzing the literature involved a combination of thematic analysis and content analysis. Thematic analysis was used to identify and examine recurring themes and patterns across the selected literature. It involved coding the texts and categorizing the data into key themes such as political causes, economic factors, social dimensions, and external influences. Content analysis was employed to quantify the presence of certain themes and factors, providing a systematic way to analyze the literature's content. This dual approach allowed for a comprehensive and nuanced understanding of the various aspects of Yemen's conflict as presented in the existing literature. The findings from these analyses were then synthesized to draw overarching conclusions and identify gaps in the research..

Results and Discussion

1. Historical Background of Yemen's Conflict

The early history of Yemen is marked by the rise and fall of several influential kingdoms and empires, each contributing to the region's rich cultural and political tapestry. The Sabaean Kingdom (circa 1200 BCE - 275 CE) is perhaps the most renowned, known for its advanced agricultural practices, particularly the construction of the Marib Dam, which facilitated extensive irrigation. This kingdom played a crucial role in the incense trade, connecting the Mediterranean world with Africa and South Asia (M. Ali, 2022; Brandt, 2024b). Following the decline of the Sabaes, the Himyarite Kingdom emerged as a dominant force in the region around 110 BCE. The Himyarites maintained control until the rise of the Aksumite Empire from modern-day Ethiopia, which temporarily ruled parts of Yemen in the 6th century CE. This period saw the spread of Christianity and, later, the advent of Islam in the 7th century, significantly influencing Yemen's cultural and social fabric. The region's strategic location and fertile land made it a coveted prize for various empires, including the Ottomans, who controlled parts of Yemen from the 16th century until the early 20th century (M. Ali, 2022; Mațoi & Pricope, 2019).

The 20th century brought significant political upheaval and transformation to Yemen. In 1918, following the collapse of the Ottoman Empire, North Yemen became an independent state under the rule of Imam Yahya. This period was marked by attempts to modernize the state while maintaining traditional authority structures (Joseph Kostiner, 2020; Mațoi & Pricope, 2019). In 1962, a republican coup overthrew the Imamate, establishing the Yemen Arab Republic (YAR) in

the north. It sparked a civil war between royalist forces, backed by Saudi Arabia and Jordan, and republican forces, supported by Egypt. Meanwhile, South Yemen experienced revolutionary changes (Badeeb, 2019; Kadri, 2021; Zabarah, 2020). After gaining independence from British colonial rule in 1967, the southern part of the country became the People's Democratic Republic of Yemen (PDRY), adopting a Marxist-Leninist government. The ideological divide between the YAR in the north and the PDRY in the south set the stage for ongoing tension and rivalry between the two states (Aygul, 2020; Badeeb, 2019).

The unification of North and South Yemen in 1990 was a landmark event, driven by economic necessity and geopolitical changes following the end of the Cold War. However, the union was fraught with difficulties from the outset. Economic disparities, political rivalries, and differing governance structures created significant friction. The southern leadership felt marginalized in the new government, leading to the 1994 civil war. The conflict resulted in a decisive victory for northern forces loyal to President Ali Abdullah Saleh, who then consolidated power. Despite the formal unification, underlying tensions and grievances persisted, particularly in the South, where many felt excluded from the political process and economic benefits (Brehony, 2020; Dostal, 2021).

The modern era of Yemen's conflict is characterized by the devastating civil war that began in 2014. The Houthi movement, originating from the Zaidi Shia minority in northern Yemen, capitalized on widespread dissatisfaction with President Abdrabbuh Mansur Hadi's government. In September 2014, the Houthis seized control of the capital, Sana'a, forcing Hadi to flee. It prompted a military intervention in March 2015 by a Saudi-led coalition aimed at restoring Hadi's government. The conflict quickly escalated into a multifaceted war involving various factions and external actors. It has led to a severe humanitarian crisis, with widespread displacement, famine, and destruction of infrastructure. The modern conflict has deepened existing regional and sectarian divides, drawing in international players and complicating efforts for peace. The war's protracted nature and the involvement of numerous local and international stakeholders have made it one of the most complex and intractable conflicts in recent history (Albasoos & Al Hinai, 2020; Brandt, 2024b; Hokayem & Roberts, 2023).

2. Dimensions of Yemen's Conflict

.. The literature on Yemen's conflict consistently highlights the significant role of political factors in fueling and sustaining the violence. Several studies focus on the chronic political instability that has plagued Yemen, pointing to its political landscape's fragmented and often contentious nature (Al-Tamimi & Venkatesha, 2021; Albasoos & Al Hinai, 2020). The fall of the Ottoman Empire and the subsequent establishment of the Yemen Arab Republic (YAR) and the People's Democratic Republic of Yemen (PDRY) in the 20th century created a legacy of political division and rivalry. The unification of North and South Yemen in 1990 did little to resolve these deep-seated tensions, and instead, the marginalization of the South and centralized power under President Ali Abdullah Saleh exacerbated regional disparities and grievances (Alterman, 2022; Brandt,

2024b). Additionally, the literature underscores the failure of successive governments to establish inclusive political institutions and governance systems, which has perpetuated cycles of rebellion and civil unrest (Clausen, 2020; Lackner, 2019). The rise of the Houthi movement and their subsequent control of the capital, Sana'a, is often attributed to the long-standing exclusion and disenfranchisement of northern tribes by the central government (Hokayem & Roberts, 2023; Khan & Ullah, 2020).

Economic conditions are another critical factor extensively discussed in the literature. Yemen's economy has long been characterized by poverty, unemployment, and underdevelopment, significantly contributing to the conflict (Al-Tamimi & Venkatesha, 2021; Wennmann & Davies, 2020). The literature highlights the dependency on oil revenues, which has created a rentier state with little economic diversification. As oil production declined, so did the government's capacity to provide services and maintain stability (N. Ali et al., 2023; Huddleston & Wood, 2020). Scholars emphasize the role of economic hardship in fueling social discontent and unrest. Widespread poverty, particularly in rural areas, and high unemployment rates among the youth have made large segments of the population susceptible to recruitment by militant groups (Albasoos & Al Hinai, 2020; Mukashov et al., 2022). Additionally, economic inequalities between regions, exacerbated by uneven development policies, have intensified regional tensions and contributed to the ongoing conflict (Dosari & George, 2020; Lackner, 2022).

As highlighted by numerous studies, social and cultural dimensions are also crucial in understanding Yemen's conflict. Yemen's complex tribal structure and deep-rooted tribal loyalties play a significant role in shaping the conflict dynamics (Al-Tamimi & Venkatesha, 2021; Brandt, 2024b). Literature indicates tribal affiliations often supersede national identity, influencing alliances and enmities. The sectarian divide between the Zaidi Shia Muslims in the north and the Sunni Muslim majority in the rest of the country is another critical social factor. Various political actors have manipulated this sectarian divide to mobilize support and justify violence (Huddleston & Wood, 2020; Li, 2023). Furthermore, the literature discusses the impact of cultural traditions and norms, such as the importance of honour and revenge, which can perpetuate cycles of violence and hinder conflict resolution efforts (Day & Brehony, 2020).

The role of foreign intervention and international relations is a dominant theme in the Yemen conflict literature. Numerous studies examine the involvement of regional powers, particularly Saudi Arabia and Iran, and their influence on the conflict's trajectory (Dosari & George, 2020). Saudi Arabia's intervention, leading a coalition to support the internationally recognized government against the Houthi rebels, is often seen as part of a broader regional power struggle with Iran, which is accused of backing the Houthis (Aygul, 2020). The literature also explores the impact of global powers, such as the United States and the United Kingdom, whose arms sales and military support to the Saudi-led coalition have been subjects of significant debate (Day & Brehony, 2020). Additionally, the involvement of international organizations, including the United Nations, in peacebuilding and humanitarian efforts is critically assessed (Arman, 2023). Scholars argue that while foreign interventions and international relations have significantly shaped the conflict,

they have often exacerbated the violence and complexity of the situation, making a resolution more challenging (Al-Enezy & Al-Duaij, 2020; Al-Hinaiti, 2023; Arman, 2023). The literature on Yemen's conflict provides a multifaceted analysis of the political, economic, social, and external factors that have contributed to and sustained the conflict. Each of these dimensions offers critical insights into the underlying causes and dynamics of the ongoing violence, highlighting the complexity and interconnectedness of the issues at play.

3. The Complexities of Yemen's Conflict: Themes, Debates, and Research Gaps

The literature on Yemen's conflict reveals several recurring themes and patterns. One prominent pattern is the chronic political instability stemming from Yemen's fragmented political landscape. It includes the persistent power struggles between various factions and the failure of successive governments to establish a stable and inclusive political system (Aygul, 2020; Brandt, 2024a). Another recurring theme is the significant impact of economic factors, such as widespread poverty, unemployment, and underdevelopment, which have exacerbated social tensions and contributed to the conflict (Mukashov et al., 2022; Wennmann & Davies, 2020). Additionally, the literature frequently highlights the role of external influences, particularly the interventions by regional powers like Saudi Arabia and Iran, which have further complicated and prolonged the conflict (Kadri, 2021). Social and cultural dimensions, including tribal affiliations and sectarian divides, are also consistently mentioned as critical factors shaping the conflict dynamics (Glazner, 2020; Mațoi & Pricope, 2019).

Among scholars, there are several areas of disagreement and debate regarding Yemen's conflict. One major debate revolves around the primary drivers of the conflict: whether it is primarily driven by internal factors, such as political and economic issues, or by external influences and regional power struggles (Bhattarai & Bhattarai, 2024; Khan & Ullah, 2020). Some scholars argue that the conflict is a proxy war between Saudi Arabia and Iran, while others emphasize the significance of Yemen's internal socio-political dynamics (Al-Saidi, 2020; Kadri, 2023). Another area of contention is the effectiveness of international interventions and peacebuilding efforts (Li, 2023). While some researchers advocate for increased international involvement to resolve the conflict, others argue that external interventions have often been counterproductive, exacerbating the violence and instability (Al-Enezy & Al-Duaij, 2020; Arman, 2023). There are also debates about the role of historical grievances and how far back in Yemen's history one should look to understand the current conflict (Al-Hinaiti, 2023; Dostal, 2021).

Despite the extensive research on Yemen's conflict, there are notable gaps in the existing literature. One significant gap is the lack of in-depth studies on the humanitarian impact of the conflict, particularly on vulnerable populations such as women and children. More research is needed to understand these groups' specific challenges and develop targeted interventions. Additionally, there is a need for more comprehensive analyses of the local peacebuilding efforts and grassroots initiatives that have emerged in response to the conflict. These initiatives often go underreported but are crucial for understanding potential

pathways to sustainable peace. Furthermore, there is limited research on the long-term environmental impacts of the conflict, including the degradation of natural resources and its implications for Yemen's future stability. Addressing these gaps through future studies would provide a more holistic understanding of the conflict and inform more effective policy responses.

Conclusion

Yemen has a long history marked by influential kingdoms such as Saba and Himyar, which shaped the region's culture and politics up to the 6th century CE with the influence of Christianity and Islam. In the 20th century, Yemen underwent significant political upheaval following the collapse of the Ottoman Empire, with North Yemen becoming an independent state and South Yemen gaining independence from Britain in 1967. The two regions unified in 1990 but continued to experience tensions and a civil war in 1994. The modern conflict in Yemen began in 2014 with the Houthi movement seizing the capital, triggering a military intervention by a Saudi-led coalition in 2015. It exacerbated the humanitarian crisis and regional divisions, making it one of modern history's most complex and intractable conflicts.

The literature on the Yemen conflict consistently highlights the significant roles of political, economic, social, and foreign intervention factors in fueling and sustaining violence. Chronic political instability and the failure of the government to establish inclusive political institutions are often cited as primary causes. Poor economic conditions, including widespread poverty, high unemployment, and dependence on oil revenues, significantly contributed to the conflict. The complex social and cultural structures, including tribal loyalties and sectarian divides, influence the conflict dynamics. Additionally, foreign interventions, especially by regional powers such as Saudi Arabia and Iran, as well as military support from global powers like the United States and the United Kingdom, further complicate the situation and make resolution more challenging.

Recurring themes in the literature include political instability, the significant impact of economic factors, and the role of external interventions. Scholars debate whether the conflict is primarily driven by internal factors or external influences and the effectiveness of international interventions in resolving the conflict. Despite extensive research on the Yemen conflict, there are still gaps in in-depth studies on the humanitarian impact, particularly on vulnerable groups such as women and children, and comprehensive analyses of local peacebuilding efforts and grassroots initiatives. Further research on the long-term environmental impacts of the conflict is also needed to provide a more holistic understanding and formulate more effective policy responses..

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