



**Hermes Institute of
International Affairs,
Security & Geoeconomy**

OCCASIONAL PAPER 1/2022

**The Role of External Actors in the Civil War in
Yemen:
The Escalation of Violence and the Crimes
Committed**

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July 2022

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1. Introduction

The current civil war in Yemen has contributed to the largest humanitarian crisis in the world (Human Rights Watch, 2020). Around 24 million people have the urgency to receive humanitarian assistance, and 100,000 have been killed since 2015 (Council on Foreign Relations, 2021). During these past years, Yemen has seen war crimes and crimes against humanity being committed in its cities and all parties to the conflict are deeply involved. The Panel of Experts on Yemen, mandated by the UN Security Council (UNSC), has documented patterns of torture, extrajudicial killings, enforced disappearances, arbitrary arrests, and the detention of humanitarian workers (Global Center for the Responsibility to Protect, 2021).

Back in 2014, the Houthi group of Shiite rebels – formally known as Ansar Allah – exploited the advantageous situation of popular discontent in Yemen over President Abdrabbuh Mansur Hadi’s Government (Sharaf, 2021). The Houthis seized Yemen’s capital Sana’a and took control over Hodeida, situated on the coast and the principal port of the Red Sea. Eventually, the Houthis’ power increased, forcing Hadi to resign and flee to Aden. In 2015, a series of operations led by the House of Saud and a coalition of Arab states – including Bahrain, Egypt, Jordan, Kuwait, Morocco, Qatar, Sudan, and the United Arab Emirates (UAE) – aimed at finishing, or at least reducing, Iran’s influence in Yemen, overthrowing the Houthis, and re-establishing Hadi’s Government. The cooperation between the Houthis and Hadi’s predecessor, the former President Ali Abdullah Saleh, came to an end in 2017, when he parted friendship with the Houthis – to side with the Saudi coalition – and was later assassinated by the rebel group (Sharaf, 2021).

The Iranian support to the Houthis through training, funding, and increasing military capability (US Department of State, 2021), suggested that the rebel group had joined the “*axis of resistance*.” According to Nevola and Shiban (2020), this axis included the Lebanese Hezbollah, the Syrian President Assad, the Palestinian Hamas organization, Iraqi Shia militias, and certainly Iran. Prince Muhammad bin Salman, Crown Prince of Saudi Arabia, could not accept the extensive power Iran had accumulated in the Middle East, and he became the symbol of the military campaign in Yemen (Day & Brehony, 2020). The Saudi effort was supported by the US, since former President Barack Obama was aiming to complete a nuclear deal with Iran in 2015, the so-called “*Joint*

Comprehensive Plan of Action (JCPOA)” (Arms Control Association, 2021)¹. However, the Group of Eminent Experts (GEE) mandated by the UN Human Rights Council (UNHRC) has affirmed that together with the US, also Canada, France, and the United Kingdom can be seen as responsible for having equipped the Saudi-led coalition with weapons and military intelligence (Global Center for the Responsibility to Protect, 2021). Many scholars argue that the presence of various external actors engaged in the conflict could be the cause of the Yemeni civil war and explain the crimes committed (Riedel, 2020). This narrative is largely supported by international organizations that are demanding the international community to enact effective measures to stop the proxy war.

This paper has the objective to analyze the role of the external actors in the escalation of violence and the crimes committed during the civil war in Yemen by answering the following twofold research question: (a) how have external actors contributed to the escalation of violence during the civil war in Yemen?; and (b) to what extent have these external actors been held accountable? The paper will firstly introduce Straus’ ladder of violence and the factors of escalation and restraint of violence. This theory developed by the scholar will be necessary to understand the process behind atrocities and to determine its causes. Subsequently, the paper will describe the main actors in the Yemeni conflict and report the crimes committed during the conflict. Afterwards, the analysis will present Straus’ theory implemented into the dispute in Yemen, reflecting upon the aspects that have allowed external actors to contribute to an escalating violence, and the ones that have restrained further violence. The research question will be answered considering the result of Straus’ theory in Yemen and the measures taken so far to hold accountable external parties to the conflict.

The paper is based on literature research, considering relevant studies on the issue. Due to the vast information on the topic, the research will focus on the period from the beginning of the civil war in September 2014 until 2021, and on the main international and regional actors that have contributed to the conflict in Yemen. The paper aims to bring attention to a very current topic and fill the academic gap in a complete study that covers both the political and accountability components. Due to the complexity and length of the ongoing issue, there is a lack of up-to-date and exhaustive academic work that comprises

¹ The main priority for the US was the JCPOA, to stop Iran from pursuing its own nuclear weapon. However, by opposing the Prince of Saudi Arabia and not supporting them in Yemen, the US would have risked that the House of Saud had joined the campaign against the nuclear negotiations and threatened the deal.

more fields. Scholars must bring attention to the matter and publish accessible papers to diffuse information worldwide. There could be a productive contribution between the academic sphere and policymakers to prevent the conflict from further prolonging.

2. Theoretical Framework: Straus' Ladder of Violence and the Escalation of Violence

According to Straus (2012), the decision to use violence against civilians is "*deliberate and instrumental.*" Mass violence is seen by the scholar as a product of a fluid decision-making process in which a series of factors determine the violence's trajectory. He argues that often leaders or organizations put into practice large-scale violence to gain or keep power. This theory is supported by most scholars that find a justification of violence directed by political elites in the desire to obtain material or political benefits. Most times the large-scale violence is inflicted by Governments since it requires institutional capacity and a high level of organization (Straus, 2012). In the case of civil wars, leaders can employ large-scale violence due to different aspects such as territorial control, hate feelings, weak state capacity, or a non-democratic regime (Straus, 2012). During these types of conflicts, the violence directed at civilians can be seen as a result of war, since they are not only observers but have a role in the conflict (Valentino, 2014).

Straus' ladder of violence (Figure 1) is useful to understand the dynamic process behind atrocities and its factors of escalation and restraint. The diagram used by Straus shows three possible spheres of violence: (1) mass violence and group destruction, which is unusually selected; (2) mass violence and killings are the result of a dynamic process influenced by many factors and; (3) policies of violence are the result of a combination of escalation and restraint variables. The factors of escalation and restraint put pressure to go up or down the ladder. During a war, authorities can go in both ways; however, the intensity of each dictates the course of violence and its magnitude (Straus, 2012). Straus concludes that the use of violence is justifiable and legitimated during a war, and this explains why leaders resort to violence in a conflict. Contrarily to the escalation motive, during a dispute, the threats could drive leaders to act with moderation and avoid a raging trend.

In the diagram, Straus presents several aspects that could lead to the escalation or restraint of atrocities (2012). At a macro level, factors of escalation can lead to a process of

violence resulting in genocide; however, this is not always the case. A great number of wars do not end with genocide, because of its high cost in both economy and international reputation (Straus, 2012). Even when referring to a conflict that does not conclude with genocide, Straus' ladder of violence is helpful for either policymakers to predict possible outcomes in a dispute, or for scholars to analyze past and current wars.

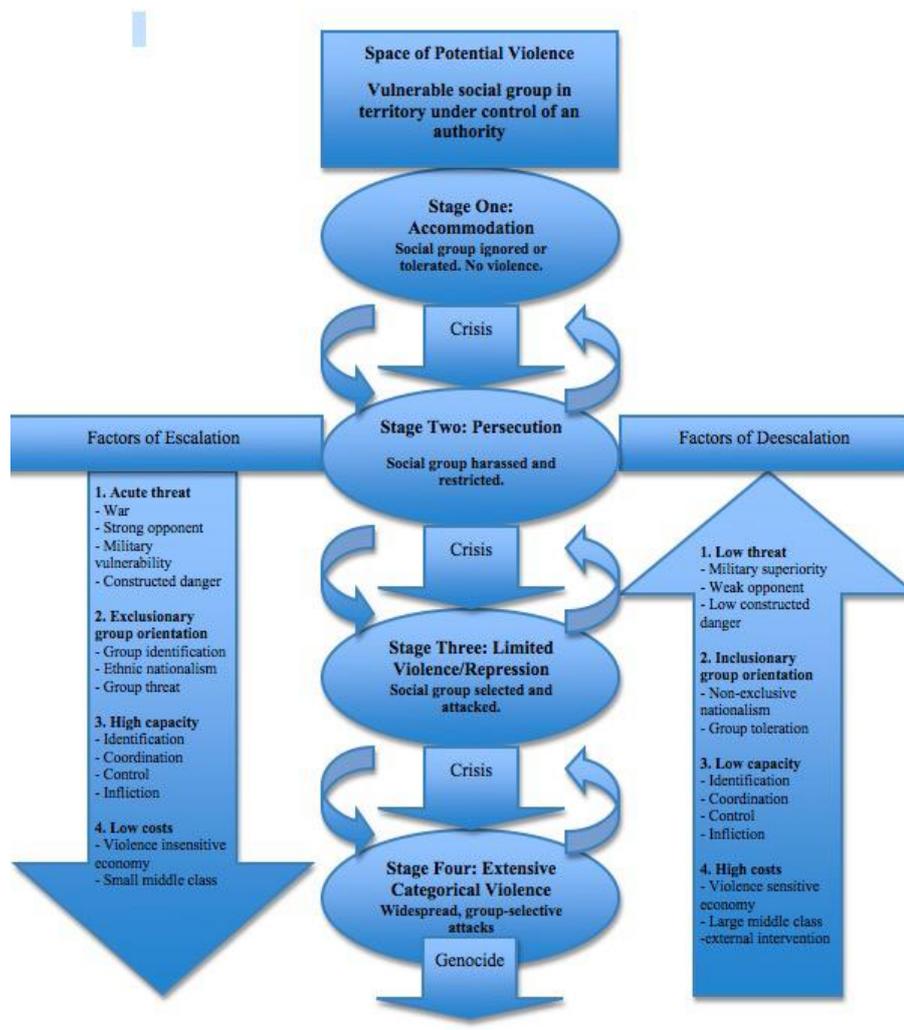


Figure 1

Ladder of Violence

(Source: Conflict & Crimes Slides Tutorial 3.1 (p. 9), by Maarten Bolhuis, 2021)

3. The Main Actors and the Crimes Committed

3.1 The Actors in the Conflict

The Yemeni civil war can be considered a multipolar conflict due to the large presence of key actors involved in the dispute. As noted earlier, on the one hand there is the Houthi movement, supported first by Saleh's Government in Yemen, and later by the Iranian coalition. On the other hand, Saudi Arabia and the Arab coalition are fighting to restore President's Hadi position. Other actors have contributed to the conflict through a more indirect intervention, including the US, France, the UK, Australia, and Germany, by supplying weaponry, training, or military intelligence (Robinson, 2021).

3.1.1 The Pro-Houthi Actors

The Houthis, a Zaydi Shiite group from northern Yemen, emerged at the end of the 1980s; however, it only became politically active in 2003 while protesting against – at the time – President Saleh's decision to support the US invasion of Iraq (Glenn, 2015). In 2011, a Houthi alliance with – by then – former president Saleh and its party was established to overthrow the new Government of Hadi, which was supported by the UN (Robinson, 2021). This alliance ended in 2017 with the killing of Saleh by the rebel group due to its new coalition with Saudi Arabia. The Houthi group then found an ally in Iran, interested in gaining more power in the Middle East and overpowering the US - Saudi coalition. Moreover, the rebel group has broadened its roots and received support not only from a part of the Zaydi population in Yemen but also from non-Zaydi groups (Riedel, 2020).²

The main regional supporter of the Houthis has been Iran, which began to actively back up the rebel group in 2015 when Saudi Arabia embarked on a military intervention in Yemen (Robinson, 2021). Teheran has since used the dispute to gain regional power in the Middle East and prevail over the Saudi coalition (Vatanka, 2020). During the 1990s, Yemeni students traveled to the Zaydi school of Islam in Iran where they were influenced by the anti-western doctrine. Many of the students were highly persuaded by the revolutionary message of Teheran and amidst them, there were some of the future members of the Houthi group (Vatanka, 2020). This factor could be considered decisive for the solid ties between the two parties.

² The Zaydi population represents the 35-40% in Yemen.

3.1.2 The Anti-Houthi Actors

Saudi Arabia, together with the UAE has played an essential role in the military campaign against the Houthis and above all against the Iranian coalition. After the seizure of the capital of Yemen and later of the presidential palace in 2015, President Hadi was forced to resign. Hadi fled first to Aden, the temporary capital of the country that he had designated, and declared that he was still the President of Yemen. When the Houthis got closer to Aden, Hadi escaped to Riyadh, where he was welcomed by Prince Muhammad bin Salman (also referred to as ‘MBS’) (Riedel, 2020). The Saudi Prince could not accept that Yemen had fallen under Iranian influence, above all since it appeared to the Arabs that Teheran had already on its side Lebanon, Syria, and Iraq (Riedel, 2020). Therefore, Saudi Arabia, with the support of the Gulf Cooperation Council (GCC), affirmed that the Houthis had resorted to a coup to overthrow Hadi’s Government and this led to a series of operations in Yemen: Operation “Decisive Storm” and Operation “Restoring Hope”³. The first was a military intervention meant to bring back Hadi’s administration and to stop the advance of the Houthis in Yemen; the second operation – still ongoing – was seen as a second phase, established to end the airstrikes and reach a solution to end the war (Riedel, 2020).

International players have also had a crucial impact on the civil war in Yemen. The US has had the most significant role as an international ally to the Saudis since it supported the GCC intervention in Yemen in 2011 (Day, 2020). The initial interest in Yemen was to put into practice counter-terrorism strategies to fight Al-Qaeda in the Arabian Peninsula (AQAP) and help create a new Government with Hadi as a President and as an ally⁴. After the transitional Government was dissolved and President Hadi fled to Saudi Arabia, the US seemed to focus more on a nuclear deal with Iran to prevent it to develop its own nuclear weapon (Day, 2020). In 2018, former President Trump withdrew the US from the JCPOA and incremented economic sanctions undermining diplomatic relations with Tehran (Fitzpatrick, 2020). To further complicate the dangerous situation in the Middle East, in 2021 Trump designated the Houthis a Foreign Terrorist Organization (FTO). Even if the new US administration has already delisted Ansar Allah from the FTO list, it has had a damaging influence on the humanitarian crisis in Yemen, since it

³ The GCC is formed by Bahrain, Kuwait, Oman, Qatar, Saudi Arabia and the UAE. Oman was the only member to oppose to the operations and did not deploy military equipment to this purpose.

⁴ AQAP was formed in 2009 and is a union of the branches of Al-Qaeda in Yemen and Saudi Arabia.

prevented humanitarian organizations from helping the population (Action Against Hunger, 2021).

Differently from the other Western countries, the US has had direct and indirect intervention. The Obama administration did not think that the Houthis could represent a substantial threat; therefore it imposed some limitations to its participation in Operation “Decisive Storm”, by providing military assistance on the field to the Arab coalition, yet without the targeting or directly bombing by any US soldier (Day, 2020). Despite the limits established, the US continued to provide military training and weaponry to Saudi Arabia, both under the Obama administration and later with Donald Trump when the alliance was strengthened. During the Obama mandate, the US sold \$112 billion in arms and equipment to the Saudis, and in 2017, former President Trump announced that Washington would sell another \$110 billion in arms to Saudi Arabia (Day, 2020).

Other international actors have had a presence in the conflict by providing weapons, logistical support, or military intelligence to the warring parties. Reports have been published attaching pictures of weapons identified on the field that carry the identification of the US and other Western arms manufacturers (Day, 2020). Canada, the UK, and France, together with the US, continue to support the Saudi coalition through indirect or direct intervention, which has led to serious human rights violations and the destruction of crucial infrastructure in the country.

3.2 The Crimes Committed During the Conflict

The GEE on Yemen mandated by the UNHRC, established in 2017 and dissolved in October 2021, has reported detailed evidence of violations of international human rights law. The abuses include indiscriminate attacks using mortar shelling, the recruitment of child soldiers, unlawful airstrikes, use of torture, sexual violence, extrajudicial killings (UNHRC Group of Eminent International and Regional Experts on Yemen, 2020). The Chairperson of the GEE Kamel Jendoubi affirmed in a 2020 report that the continuous violations demonstrate the lack of respect for international law by the actors in the conflict. (UNHRC Group of Eminent International and Regional Experts on Yemen, 2020). The GEE has stressed that every party to the conflict is responsible for these violations, however, impunity seems to prevail. The group has recently advised the UNSC

to take up the discussion on human rights violations and to work on a list of persons that could be subjected to the UNSC sanctions.

According to Human Rights Watch (HRW), since March 2015, the Arab coalition and the Houthi group have been committing human rights violations across the country, tearing down Yemen's fragile economy and leading to a disastrous state of famine (HRW, 2019). HRW has documented more than 90 unlawful airstrikes by the Saudi coalition, targeting Yemeni fishing boats and a Houthi detention center that have resulted in the death and injury of civilians. The Euro-Mediterranean Human Rights Monitor, together with the non-profit organization SAM for Rights and Liberties (2021) has also reported the recruitment of around 10,300 child soldiers by the rebel group, which classifies as a war crime according to the Rome Statute of the ICC. Moreover, HRW also reports several indiscriminate artillery attacks by all parties in different metropolitan areas in Yemen as well as in Riyadh's international airport, that qualify as war crimes (HRW, 2019). Evidence has shown the following human rights violations: the death of 140 civilians caused by landmines positioned by the Houthis, the arbitrary detention and abuse by all warring parties, the blockade of humanitarian aid by Saudi Arabia, the extrajudicial killings of journalists, politicians, and students by both main groups, and patterns of sexual violence (HRW, 2019).

The first step forward to a peaceful settlement of the Yemen conflict was the Stockholm Agreement (2018). The Yemeni Government and a Houthi delegation reunited to sign an agreement that would: (1) establish a ceasefire in the city of Hodeidah (2) establish a mechanism to exchange more than 15,000 prisoners by both parties; (3) and the statement of understanding on Ta'iz, that required the creation of a joint committee with two representatives from the Civil Society and the presence of the UN (Stockholm Agreement, 2018). Despite the commitment, none of these obligations have been respected, and there is no sign that something will change soon. There have been repetitive attacks in Hodeidah by the Houthis violating the ceasefire established resulting in hundreds of deaths of civilians (Jalal, 2021). Moreover, thousands of prisoners are still detained by both warring parties, including minors. After the failure of the Stockholm Agreement and the continuous invitations of the GEE this year to the Security Council to appeal to international law, no other fruitful actions have been taken.

4. Analysis of External Actors' Part in the Civil War and Accountability

4.1 The Role of External Actors in the Yemeni Civil War

By using Straus' ladder of violence (Figure 1), a tailor-made analysis can be done by evaluating the factors of escalation and restraint in the Yemeni conflict. To clarify the implementation of the theory into the issue studied, a similar diagram (Figure 2) has been created based on the dispute in Yemen. This method has been chosen to answer to the first part of the research question: how have external actors contributed to the escalation of violence during the civil war in Yemen?

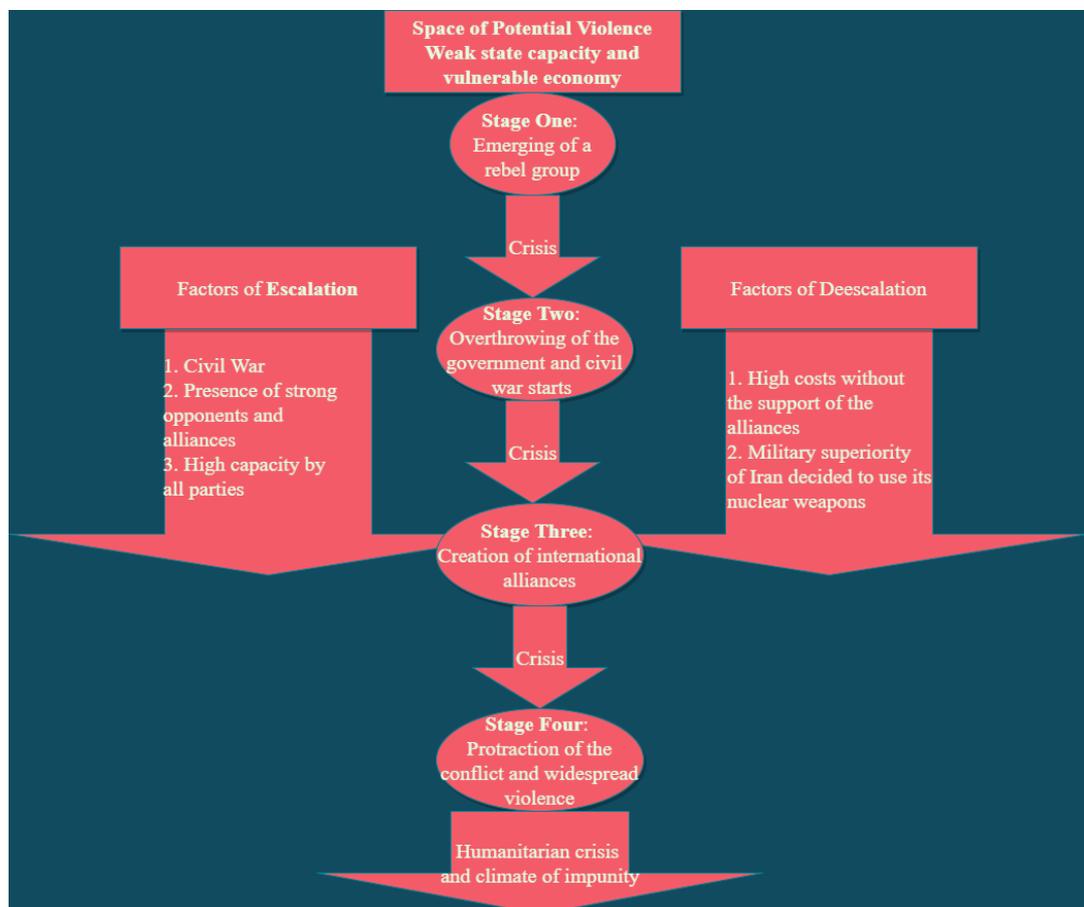


Figure 2

The ladder of violence applied to the civil war in Yemen

(Source: Straus' ladder of violence, by A. Bossi, 2021)

This diagram (Figure 2) describes how a weak state capacity and vulnerable economy have allowed a rebel group to emerge and take control of Yemen. The

humanitarian crisis and climate of impunity is a result of a process of violence highly influenced by the presence of external actors that entered the conflict. The factors of escalation at a regional level could be: the identification of a group (the Houthis were initially strongly supported by a population that was unsatisfied by the weak Government); and the already existent civil war. Considering the factors of escalation at an international level, it could be identified: the presence of a strong opponent (the Houthi - Iran vs. the Saudi-led coalition); and the high capacity by both warring parties. Contrarily, the factors of restraint both at an international and regional level could be: the high costs of the war (mainly for Saudi Arabia if the allies decided to suspend the support); and the military superiority (if Iran decides to use its nuclear weapons).

The final stage of both diagrams differs in the outcome of the process of violence, in the first one (Figure 1), the latter phase is genocide, whereas in the second diagram (Figure 2), the concluding stage is constituted by a humanitarian crisis and climate of impunity. In the case of the Yemeni conflict, genocide seems to be an implausible outcome due to various factors of restraint, such as the high costs that would take for all parties to destroy an entire group, and above all, because there is not an exclusive nationalism. The war is based on political and territorial power rather than on an ethnic or religious motivation, therefore these factors of de-escalation can prevent genocide from happening. The conflict in Yemen seems to have reached the latest stage in its ladder of violence, however, the situation could prolong if the international community keeps denying the need for a legal process to hold those responsible accountable.

It is evident from the second diagram, that external actors have been fueling the conflict and protracted its length for their own purposes. Without the economic, logistic, and military support by both sides, the civil war could have ended earlier. The sale of weaponry and military intelligence by foreign parties – Canada, the US, the UK, and France – has endorsed airstrikes, torture, arbitrary detention, enforced disappearances which have resulted in the killing of thousands of civilians and the destruction of schools, hospitals, mosques, and more (Robinson, 2021). Most external parties have also supplied material assistance to enforce a naval blockade in various ports in Yemen, which has contributed to the worsening of the humanitarian catastrophe (ATT Expert Group, 2021). The high capacity from external actors has sustained regional parties in their bloodshed permitting war crimes and crimes against humanity to occur. The indirect support is additionally prolonging the civil war, therefore threatening more crimes to happen. As

Straus suggests, violence is a product of a fluid decision-making process in which a series of factors determine the violence's trajectory (2012). Similarly, a series of external factors have influenced the trajectory of the conflict in Yemen and perhaps even its outcome. Nonetheless, the choice to support this war by external actors is deliberate, and by halting it, an end could be put to the dreadful atrocities.

4.2 Accountability for External Actors

To answer the second part of the research question "to what extent have external actors been held accountable?" it is necessary to analyze the ongoing argument and recent developments on the issue. Thus far, sanctions have been only directed to one party of the conflict, the Houthis. Back in 2014, the UNSC set sanctions against the Houthi leaders and former President Saleh, and later in 2015, implemented an arms embargo (HRW, 2019). Other sanctions, such as the designation of the Houthis as a terrorist group by the US, have resulted in damaging Yemen with humanitarian blockades. Nevertheless, various European countries have started to see the cruel reality of the war and the irreversible effects on the humanitarian crisis in Yemen. After the news of the death of the Saudi journalist Jamal Khashoggi in the Saudi consulate in Istanbul in 2018 leaked, Germany, the Netherlands, Finland, and Norway reconsidered their commercial relationship with Saudi Arabia and suspended the arms sales (HRW, 2019).

Despite the progress obtained from a European point of view, there seems to be a long and challenging path ahead due to the recent developments. At the beginning of October this year, the UNHRC rejected a resolution for the renewal of the GEE on Yemen (UNHRC Group of Eminent International and Regional Experts on Yemen, 2021). By eliminating the only independent and impartial mechanism in Yemen, there could be an arrest in the process to achieve accountability and justice. The resolution led by the Netherlands was voted against by 21 countries, like Bahrain, Russia, China and supported by 18, such as the UK, Germany, and France. It is alleged that the non-voting member Saudi Arabia lobbied to convince other states to vote against the renewal (Nasser, 2021). This action has allowed perpetrators to pursue their objectives in continuing to protract the Yemeni civil war and can therefore be considered as a defeat for the international community.

This year, EU Parliament adopted the resolution 2021/2539 calling on EU member states to take the lead on the issue of accountability and employ the principle of universal jurisdiction when possible (European Parliament, 2021). The resolution invites EU states to apply the EU Global Human Rights Sanctions Regime framework to hold responsible those individuals or entities committed serious human rights violations. Among the sanctions, states can implement travel bans or the freezing of funds. Furthermore, the resolution underlines that the EU-based arms exporters that are supporting the war in Yemen through the sale of weapons are non-compliant with some of the binding requirements of the Council Common Position (2008) on arms exports⁵. Despite the existence of the Arms Trade Treaty (ATT) since 2014, domestic jurisdiction still prevails in the competence of international arms trade obligations when there is no international regulation that supports the ATT (ATT Expert Group, 2021). Thus, there is a current legal challenge to hold states accountable and link them to the sale of weaponry used in the civil war in Yemen.

According to Mwatana for Human Rights (2020), the cloud of impunity that characterizes the war in Yemen is putting a threat to the population and normalizing the violation of human rights. Until now, the international community has completely failed to hold accountable the external and regional actors for their crimes and has allowed impunity to overcome over justice.

5. **Conclusion**

This paper has analyzed the role of external actors in the contribution of the escalation of violence and on the crimes committed during the civil war in Yemen. Since the beginning of the civil war, Yemen has become a pawn in the game between Iran and Saudi Arabia. This proxy war has involved countries worldwide that are fighting over a wrecked nation. Evidence has demonstrated that the escalation of the conflict and killings of thousands of civilians have been the outcome of an influential presence of external actors in the conflict. International actors have participated in the dispute by selling weaponry and military intelligence to the Saudi coalition consequently contributing to the death of thousands of civilians. All sides of the conflict have violated human rights and international humanitarian law and several of these violations amount to war crimes. This

⁵ Council Common Position 2008/944/CFSP of 8 December 2008 defines common rules governing control of exports of military technology and equipment for the EU Member States.

study has used Straus' ladder of violence to demonstrate how the process of violence in Yemen has escalated and to what extent have external actors contributed to the atrocities committed during the conflict. By adapting Straus' theory into the described matter, the paper has demonstrated that aspects such as strong opponents, the existence of a civil war, and high capacity have fostered an escalation of violence. Meanwhile, high costs and military superiority could explain why further violence has been restrained. Furthermore, the analysis has presented an insight on the accountability for the crimes committed, which has determined that no external actors have been held responsible for their actions. This situation has allowed perpetrators to gain economical and territorial power over the civil war in Yemen and has resulted in a disastrous humanitarian crisis and a climate of impunity.

6. Discussion

6.1 Methodological Limitations and Future Research

Several studies have been published on the matter of external intervention in the civil war in Yemen. However, many of these studies have focused on the history of conflict and its political outcome and rarely on the accountability aspect. This could be because of the complexity and the extensive data on the conflict in Yemen that has involved a multitude of countries and has been protracting since 2014. Additionally, the fact that this is an ongoing dispute could as well pose complications to producing accurate and complete research. The lack of a complete study on the conflict of Yemen could also be because the international response has been slow to emerge. Only recently, Governments have decided to detach themselves from the kingdom of Saudi Arabia and put a halt to the sale of arms. Hence it is essential to work closely with international organizations which can access more accurate data from the field. This research could be essential to promulgate a detailed examination of the conflict and spread the word on the responsibility that most of the Western countries share in it.

6.2 Policy Recommendations

6.2.1 To Prevent the Civil War in Yemen from Prolonging

The parties to the conflict should reestablish the terms of the Stockholm Agreement and settle ceasefires and no-fly zones to avoid unlawful killings.

The Houthis could then picture Biden's administration no more as the leader of the Saudi military campaign, but rather as a neutral actor. The EU could also be a moderator in a negotiation process between the parties with an effort to re-establish diplomatic relations between Iran and Saudi Arabia.

6.2.2 To Hold Accountable Actors Involved in the War

The UNSC should reestablish the GEE on Yemen and jointly collaborate to draft a list of people that could be subject to the UNSC sanctions. EU member states should apply the EU Global Human Rights Sanctions Regime framework to hold responsible those individuals or entities that committed serious human rights violations by using the principle of universal jurisdiction.

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