

# History of Yemen's Crisis and its Global Implications

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## Abstract

Yemen's story, from becoming one country in 1990 to the rise of the Houthi rebels and how they affect global trade, is full of changes. First, when North and South Yemen joined in 1990, people hoped for stability and progress. But inside Yemen, there were fights, tribal issues, and struggles to modernize. The fights for power and bad governance made things worse. Then came the Houthi movement. It started because some Shia Muslims in Yemen felt left out politically and economically. Originally just a religious group, it became a strong political and fighting force. Iran helped them, and they took over important sea routes like the Bab el Mandeb strait. The world's response to the Houthi blockades shows how tricky Yemen's situation is. Countries tried diplomacy, asked for breaks in fighting, and secretly tried to influence things. Big countries like the United States, China, Iran, and Russia got involved too, making things even more complicated. With sea routes disrupted, shipping costs go up, and it takes longer for goods to reach their destination thus affecting global politics, trade and business. In short, Yemen's story from unification to the Houthi rebels shows how history, politics, and money all mix together. Yemen's problems show that the world needs to work together to fix things and bring peace, happiness, and cooperation to everyone.

*Keywords:* Yemen, houthis, zaydi, red sea, bab-el mandab strait

## Background

The emergence of Islam in Yemen during the 7th century marked a significant transformation for the region. While initially a crucial contributor to the caliphate's military expansion, Yemen's history unfolded through various dynasties, Ottoman rule, and British occupation. The Zaydi branch of Shia Islam gained prominence in North Yemen in the late 9th century, shaping the country's religious landscape. The eventual independence of the Mutawakkilite Kingdom of Yemen under the Zaydi

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rule saw internal challenges, including opposition from the Shafi Sunni majority, territorial losses to Saudi Arabia, and British control in the South (Orkaby, 2014). Yemen's brief union with the United Arab Republic in 1958 was short-lived as the larger entity collapsed soon after, reflecting the volatile political landscape in the region during that period (Kaufman, 1997).

### **Civil War and Creation of Two Yemens**

The political landscape in Yemen during the 1960s was marked by internal conflicts, external interventions, and ideological divisions that eventually led to the creation of two distinct states with contrasting governance systems. The Free Yemeni Movement, supported by Gamal Abdel Nasser of Egypt, initiated a rebellion favoring secular Arab nationalism, sparking the North Yemen Civil War. The royalists, led by Imam Muhammad al-Badr and backed by Britain, Saudi Arabia, Jordan, and Israel, faced off against the republicans supported by the Soviet Union. Economic strain and military defeats compelled Nasser to withdraw from Yemen in 1967. Despite internal strife among the republicans, Soviet support and the withdrawal of Saudi assistance tilted the balance in their favor. The siege of Sanaa in 1967, initially successful for the royalists, eventually failed, leading to the republicans' victory and the establishment of the Yemen Arab Republic (Feierstein, 2019).

Simultaneously, anti-British sentiments in the Aden Protectorate culminated in the Aden Emergency. The National Liberation Front, with backing from Egypt and the Soviet Union, waged guerrilla warfare, ultimately leading to British withdrawal in 1967. The National Liberation Front took control, and two years later, a Marxist faction staged a bloodless coup, transforming South Yemen into the People's Democratic Republic of Yemen, a socialist state aligned with the USSR. The division of Yemen into two independent states, each with its distinct political and societal development, further widened the gap between them (Brocklesby, 2020).

### **Yemen Before the Unification**

The political evolution in North Yemen, particularly after the civil war, reveals a complex interplay between the Republican forces, tribal dominance, and attempts at modernization. Despite the Republicans' victory, tribal considerations in Zaydi areas persisted, highlighting the challenge of integrating diverse elements within the newly formed Yemen Arab Republic. The 1970 Constitution attempted to establish a new political order, but the absence of political parties allowed old elites to maintain significant power, especially within the Consultative Council (Haggard and Kaufman, 1997).

The ascension of Lt. Colonel Ali Abdullah Saleh marked a turning point in Yemen's history. Initially facing challenges, Saleh consolidated power (1990- 2017) by

suppressing internal threats and implementing the National Dialog Committee's town hall meetings. This process resulted in the National Pact, effectively constituting a new political order. The General People's Congress (GPC) emerged as the ruling party, incorporating diverse political groups, including former leaders of rebellions against Saleh. Saleh's strategy in the 1980s showcased a solidified grip on the Yemen Arab Republic. By controlling the political process through the GPC, co-opting various groups, and allowing limited expression within his established system, Saleh effectively navigated the complex political landscape from 1990 to 2017 (Omairan, 2023).

### **Oil Discovery**

The discovery of large oil reserves in the Yemen Arab Republic in 1984 marked a significant turning point, leading to its oil sales in 1987 (Carapico, 1988). This coincided with intensified talks of unification with South Yemen. It cultivated close ties with socialist nations, particularly the USSR. Other socialist countries like China, Bulgaria, Hungary, East Germany, and Czechoslovakia contributed to South Yemen's development. Additionally, South Yemen fostered friendly relations with left-leaning African nations like Libya and Ethiopia (CIA, 2011). However, political instability marred South Yemen's short existence, including accusations against President Salim Rubaya Ali for orchestrating the assassination of the Yemen Arab Republic president in 1978. This led to internal turmoil, Ali's resignation, and subsequent execution following a failed coup attempt. (Feierstein, 2019).

In October 1978, the transformation of the National Front into the Yemen Socialist Party marked a significant shift towards a unified democratic Yemen with a socialist outlook. Abdul Fattah Ismail assumed the role of Secretary General, wielding considerable influence in South Yemen's political elite. Ismail's support for extensive nationalization and collectivization led to the formation of Marxist paramilitary groups targeting North Yemen and Oman. However, Ismail's aggressive policies faced internal opposition and disapproval from the Soviet Union. Eventually, with tacit approval from the USSR, Ismail resigned due to purported health issues and relocated to the Soviet Union. The moderate Ali Nasir Muhammad succeeded him as the leader of South Yemen, attempting economic reforms by allowing a limited private sector and attracting emigre capital (Dunbar, 1992). The events on January 13, 1986 marked a violent and chaotic turning point in South Yemen's political landscape. Ali Naser Muhammad's aggressive actions against the opposition, resulting in a deadly shootout, triggered a civil war that lasted 12 days. The death toll of 4,000 to 10,000 innocent people underscores the severity of the conflict (Day, 2010).

## Unification of North and South Yemen

Ali Naser Muhammad's defeat and subsequent flight to North Yemen paved the way for Ali Salem al-Beidh to assume leadership in South Yemen. The changing stance of the new Soviet leadership, marked by *Glasnost* and *Perestroika*, led to a significant reduction in funding and assistance to South Yemen (Bugajski, 1991). The unification of North and South Yemen (Fig. 1) in 1990 marked a significant turning point in their tumultuous history. Despite experiencing wars, border skirmishes, and rebellions, the two sides consistently expressed a desire for a unified Yemen (Dostal, 2021). The easing of Cold War tensions and the discovery of oil, fueled motivation on both sides for unification.



Fig. 1. The Republic of Yemen

The period leading up to the formal agreement in April 1990 saw positive developments, including border agreements, discussions on power grid connections, and collaboration on oil processing. The signing of the two-page formal agreement in April 1990 united the Yemen Arab Republic (YAR) and the People's Democratic Republic of Yemen (PDRY) into the Republic of Yemen (Endres, 2002). The unification of the nation and the discovery of oil reserves initially fueled hopes for peace and progress. However, these aspirations were ultimately undermined by factors such as the pursuit of power, an inability to overcome differences, and ineffective governance (BBC, 2023).

## **The Emergence of Houthis**

After the unification, the Houthi movement started in Yemen attributed to the dissatisfaction with the political and economic marginalization of the Zaidi Shia community, to which the Houthis belong. Perceived discrimination by the central government, coupled with economic challenges and a sense of exclusion, fueled their discontent. Regional and sectarian dynamics, along with geopolitical influences, further contributed to the rise of the Houthi movement (Trevor Johnston, 2020).

The Houthi rebels initiated a moderate theological movement among the Zaidi Shia minority in the late 1990s. Originally focused on combating corruption and opposing President Ali Abdullah Saleh's government, they later received military, training, and financial support from Iran, strengthening the Zaidi sect of Shiite Islam. This support significantly contributed to their capacity to engage in conflicts within Yemen and resist the government backed by Saudi Arabia and the US. The Houthi rebels adamantly oppose Israel, the US, and Western allies (Trevor Johnston, 2020).

The conflict in Yemen, involving the Houthi rebels, has intensified with attacks on ships in the Red Sea near the Bab-el Mandab (Fig. 1). Despite the Houthi leadership denying direct involvement in some attacks and asserting their fight against a corrupt system, the US-designated them as global terrorists during the Trump administration. The Biden administration later removed this terrorist label, but it now faces significant challenges in dealing with the Houthis (Reuters, 2024).

Houthis control the Bab el Mandeb strait, a key chokepoint at the southern entrance of the Red Sea enabling them to influence maritime traffic, potentially disrupting global trade and impacting the economy. They initially opposed Israel by claiming to support Palestinians in key Yemeni waterways, targeting cargo ships, and asserting connections to Israel. However, their focus shifted to attacking ships from various nations using drones and missiles, believed to be provided by Iran. This broader assault disrupted global trade, prompting Western retaliation from the US, UK, Canada, and other countries that deemed the Houthi actions destabilizing (Salhani, 2024).

## **Tension in the Red Sea, Bab-el Mandab Strait and the Gulf of Aden**

The Red Sea, a critical global trade route, faces escalating geopolitical tensions involving Houthi rebels. These conflicts pose a direct threat to Indian trade routes, especially for exports like basmati rice, potentially increasing costs by 15 to 20% because the ships carrying goods have to travel through the Cape of Good Hope (Fig. 2). Further escalation could lead to heightened oil prices, inflation, and economic distress globally, emphasizing the need for careful strategic decisions (Sharma, 2023).





Fig. 2: Red Sea, Bab-el Mandab Strait and the Gulf of Aden

If Houthis block the Suez Canal, ships have to pass through the Cape of Good Hope that will add another 15-17 days duration to travel from Europe to Asia.

Yemen's complex conflict involves various factions, including Houthi rebels, pro-Hadi forces, Southern Transitional Council (STC) secessionists, and Al-Qaeda in the Arabian Peninsula (AQAP). Secret deals between AQAP and Saudi Arabia add complexity to the conflict. The situation, marked by Houthi control in the north, pro-Hadi dominance in the east, and STC control in Aden and Mukalla, remains in a stalemate with ongoing peace talks (Day, 2010).

The geopolitical implications, especially in the Red Sea region, involve the Houthi attacks and their impact on maritime trade routes, leading to disruptions, increased insurance costs, altered shipping routes, and a decline in Red Sea traffic. These events have far-reaching consequences, affecting international relations, energy markets, and the overall global economy. The involvement of designated global terrorists and their actions adds a layer of security concerns, raising questions about regional stability and broader global repercussions.

### International Responses

The international response to the Houthi blockage of the Red Sea, Bab-el Mandab Strait, and the Gulf of Aden has been a multifaceted and complex situation. Diplomatic initiatives and calls for ceasefires have been part of these efforts, but the international response is significantly influenced by the broader implications of instability in the region. The Yemen conflict is characterized by a complicated web of external actors with divergent interests. The Houthi rebels' involvement,

supported by Iran, has turned the conflict into a proxy war, with regional powers such as Saudi Arabia and the United Arab Emirates backing the internationally recognized government. China's covert role in bridging relations between Iran and its regional rivals adds another layer of complexity (Pierson, 2023).

The airstrikes conducted by the US and Britain in response to Houthi attacks on ships in the Red Sea have broader political ramifications. The involvement of external powers, including the U.S. and Britain, underscores the geopolitical dynamics involving Houthi rebels, Iran, and their perceived opposition to Israel and the West. The alignment of the Houthi leadership with the 'axis of resistance' alongside Hezbollah and Hamas, further complicates the regional dynamics and intensifies the risk of conflict. The broader implications involve the potential destabilization of the Middle East and the intricate interplay of various actors, both regional and international, with interests in the Yemeni conflict (Salhani, 2024).

The situation in the Middle East and North Africa (MENA) region is complex and potentially volatile, with the US acting against Houthi rebels and the potential involvement of Iran and Russia. The global impact is significant due to geopolitical implications and the potential for a broader conflict. The unpredictability of international events adds an element of uncertainty, highlighting the interconnectedness of geopolitical events and their potential to reverberate globally, affecting political landscapes, business, and economic interests (BBC, 2024).

### **Nepal's Perspectives and its Commitment to Peace**

The Hamas terrorists carried out attacks in Israel on October 7, 2023, killing more than a thousand innocents. The Houthi rebels are one of their supporters. Ten Nepali students were killed in the attacks and some including Bipin Joshi have been made captives for months (The Kathmandu Post, 2023). This has directly impacted Nepal and the Nepali life. The attacks happened thousands of miles away from Nepal, yet it does not go unaffected as no development can be viewed in isolation in this increasingly interconnected and interdependent world. In addition to this, key oil shipping routes particularly the location of the Bab el-Mandeb strait near Yemen is a matter of concern for global oil markets which could lead to a rise in oil prices globally. Landlocked Nepal remains directly impacted by the price rise of energy.

Nepal has been contributing to the United Nations peacekeeping missions in various trouble spots of the world since 1958 under the aegis of the UN for the maintenance of international peace and security. It currently stands first in the troop-contributing country to the UN peacekeeping operations. Since 1958, a total of 149,890 Nepali peacekeepers have served in UN missions. This number includes 8,615 members of the Nepal Police and 8,785 from the Armed Police Force (The Kathmandu Post, 2024).

According to the Nepali Army, Nepali peacekeepers are deployed in Congo, South Sudan, Abyei Sudan, Western Sahara, Israel, Lebanon, Mali, Syria, Central African Republic, Iraq and Yemen. The participation of the Nepali Army in the UN Peacekeeping Operations spans 64 years and covers 44 UN missions, (The Kathmandu Post, 2024). The Nepali Army has always accepted challenges and participated in the most difficult operations. Nepali peacekeepers have become to be both desirable and reliable. According to the Nepali Army website, throughout the peacekeeping journey, its 73 personnel have made the ultimate sacrifice at the altar of world peace and another 68 have been disabled. The nation also stands first in sending women peacekeepers. As many as 2,554 women peacekeepers have served in various peacekeeping missions and at present 632 female soldiers or 10 percent of the total deployment of Nepal are female (Nepal Army, 2024). Nepal has committed to provide up to 10,000 peacekeepers should the UN request.

Nepal has always condemned terrorism in all its forms and manifestations, and at the same time advocated for peaceful resolution of disputes and conflicts for ensuring global peace.

## **Conclusion**

This article attempted to present a comprehensive overview of how the Republic of Yemen was created and then discussed the emergence of Houthi rebels covering their origins, motives, and the international response to their actions.

The Houthi movement initially emerged in Yemen in the late 1990s as a moderate theological movement within the Zaidi Shia minority. Gradually, it transformed into a political and militant group. The rebels, backed by Iran, have strategically sought influence over crucial maritime routes, particularly the Bab el Mandeb strait. This geographical advantage allows them to control a vital chokepoint, enabling the disruption or blockage of access to the Red Sea. This not only impacts regional trade but also has global ramifications for international maritime commerce. The conflict has triggered an international response involving diplomatic initiatives and calls for ceasefires. However, resolving the situation is complicated by an intricate interplay of geopolitical dynamics, as external actors with diverse interests are involved.

The economic repercussions of Houthi actions are substantial, particularly in the Red Sea region, a crucial passage for global trade. The disruption of maritime trade routes has led to increased insurance costs, changes in shipping routes, and prolonged shipping times. These factors contribute to a broader surge in shipping costs, posing significant challenges for businesses engaged in international trade and affecting global economic activity and trade efficiency. Given the involvement of major global players in the Middle East and North Africa region, the situation



has the potential to escalate tensions, leading to a broader regional and global crisis. This not only impacts political landscapes but also poses risks to business and economic interests at a larger scale. Houthis' actions in the Red Sea have the potential to exacerbate tensions in the Middle East and beyond. Humanitarian crises in one region have instances of spilling over beyond national borders.

The case of Houthi rebels in Yemen underscores how the deep disunity among the national community within the country, exacerbated by external interference makes the country a focal point of international conspiracies and intrigues. This amply highlights the complexities arising from the collision of various internal and external actors in instability and confusion. Rebels in Yemen not only destabilize the region but also serve as a troubling example of how radical factions in one part of the world can exploit the societal vulnerabilities, radicalizing societies and fueling populism both on the left and right-wing populism. Such actions have far-reaching implications that come with significant threats to national security and stability not only with the national frontiers but also across borders. In this increasingly interconnected world, where nations' destinies have come to be intertwined, any regional developments will impact global security and economic stability and disturb the age-old harmony and tolerance in the social fabric of multi-ethnic, multi-religious, multi-lingual and multi-cultural societies like Nepal.

Nepal as a responsible member of the international community is fully conscious of its responsibilities. It conducts independent foreign policy and decides every issue on its merits without favor or fear and takes a position that is in the best interests of the nation. (Bhattarai, 2023). It wants to stay away from all conflicts and firmly believes in the peaceful settlement of disputes and wants the international community to respect the primacy and power of diplomacy and dialogue to resolve any differences or disputes. Nepal strongly feels that the five principles of peaceful co-existence (*Panchsheel*) that are derived from the teachings of Lord Buddha, the enlightened son of Nepal, provide an honorable exit from this chaotic and messy world.

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