

War and Armed Conflict in Yemen: Causes and Coping Strategies

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Abstract

The present study identifies the causes of wars and armed conflicts in Yemen together with their accompanying coping strategies. In-depth semi-structured interviews were conducted with seven researchers and academicians, specialised in humanitarian and security sciences to further understand the underlying causes of the phenomenon and gain deeper insights on coping mechanisms. The study revealed that the economic causes of wars in Yemen, comprising poverty, lack of equitable distribution of wealth among community groups and individuals, as well as man's improper exploitation by man are among the top central causes of wars. It also indicated that the political causes of wars in Yemen centre on the power struggle due to the State's structural vulnerability and tribal dominance over it either through direct or indirect channels. Further, it is proved that the social causes of wars are made up of poverty, homelessness, illiteracy, school dropouts, instability, and insecurity. Meanwhile, the cohesion of the Yemeni society is still playing a vital role in mitigating the consequences. The legal causes of wars in Yemen can be summarised in the weakness of judicial bodies, negligence of the constitution and its subsidiary laws, as well as hindering their implementation by the tribal component. It becomes evident that the multiplicity of sects has never been among the causes of war in Yemen until the ethnic, denominational and sectarian groups started utilising sectarianism as a cover to attain political objectives to secure power.

Keywords: war, causes, conflicts, Yemen, sectarian, confrontation strategy, social, political, sectarian, economic

Introduction

Wars and armed conflicts throughout the history of mankind have continued to be important issues dominating the central focus of intellectuals, politicians, historians, religious scholars, military theorists, and behavioural scientists (Waston, 2006) efforts have been exerted for studying and explaining the nature and reasons of this problem with outcomes varying highly.

Some of the conclusions drawn by experts have led to unclear perception of conflict. With this background, it is necessary to reconsider this problem in Yemen for three main reasons.

Firstly, there is a need to broaden knowledge about the causes and nature of the problem in Yemen. Secondly, there is a misdiagnosis of the war and its causes by some experts and specialists, and finally, many specialists show no desire to determine the causes behind the tragic wars in Yemen because of the difficult conditions and circumstances (winter, 2011) In the recent decades of Yemen's modern history, the magnitude of war have led to the destruction of the society (Anthony & Cordesman, 2013).

Based on the complexity, wide spread, and accompanying issues of this phenomenon in Yemen, (Smith, Trends and causes of armed conflict, 2004), it is necessary to conduct a scientific study and objective analysis due to the rampant destruction of war and its many ill consequences (Dorlian, Saada war in Yemen: between Politics and Sectarianism, 2011)The successive regimes in Yemen have not only ignored this phenomenon but have played roles for its entrenchment (German.Friedrich.Ebert, 2011) human rights and humanitarian organisations, either governmental or NGOs, have not paid significant attention to this phenomenon due to the lack of relevant researchers and quantitative and qualitative scientific research.

These reasons have prompted the researcher to study this phenomenon. The study is important since it shows the Yemeni people's deep suffering throughout history because of war along with their effects on the social life and the resultant damages caused by internal armed conflicts (STRAND, 2012) (Terrill, 2011) Moreover, the study is of great importance due to the scarcity of researches that deal with the issues of wars and armed conflict in Yemen. Hence, the study aims at discovering the political, legal, economic, social, and sectarian causes of wars in Yemen in order to better understand the phenomena and forward solutions for its causes.

Literature Review

Definition of war

According to Russell war is defined as the, "conflict between two groups, each of which attempts to kill and maim as many as possible of the other group in order to achieve some objects it desires" (Russell, 1916). In other words, war is a means used to resolve differences between units of the highest order of political organisation. A war can also be considered a means of achieving an end and a weapon that can be used for good or bad (Johan & Dennen, 1981).

From the perspective of the researcher, war in the present study can be defined as an armed conflict between two groups to resolve disputes that could not be settled in peaceful or diplomatic ways. This study provides a brief overview of the known causes of armed conflicts. The theoretical basis of that knowledge is both limited and important (Smith, Trends and causes of armed conflict, 2011) but the critical reviews on the causes, changing character, and internal armed conflict found that contemporary armed conflicts involve a wide variety of motives, military actors, and modes of violence. Armed violence is used for political, economic, and personal gain (Theo & schmitt, 2010) and, accordingly, oppression, poverty, and competition over economic resources are root causes of war (Baldwin, 2003) other causes of war differ from one country to another according to the needs of a society. A wave of theoretical and empirical studies has recently helped to identify some important economic and political determinants of civil wars (Sambanis, 2001) Another author discusses how the economic perspectives cause a civil war. The war in Rwanda provides a good example of how such economic causes invoke a civil war.

This war is attributed to pressure on land while that in Angola has been interpreted as a contest for natural resources (Collier P. , 2006) A recent ethno-sociological research in Uzbekistan and Kirgizia has confirmed that the situation surrounding the Russian community in central Asia has serious potentials for a conflict as a result of deep ethnic difference in which Russia plays a dangerous role in it (Tishkov, 1997)

The result of investigating the relationship between ethnic identity and civil points to several empirical instances of fluidity in the behavioural expression of ethnic identities (Kalyvas, Ethnic defection in civil war. Comparative Political Studies, 2008). The present study found that a civil war produces ethnic defection and fluidity in the behavioural expression of ethnic identities and tremendous cleavage and destruction among the communities that witnessed such circumstances.

A society with ethnic or religious diversity is more likely to witness a civil war, higher political protests, less civil liberties, and repression of minorities (Weidmann, 2011). Since 1945, civil wars have engulfed 73 countries and the caused death of more than 16 million people (Fearon & Liatin, 2003).

Another study comprising three papers examined the interconnected of civil war. In the first paper, the study reported that when political variables are added to the impact of natural resource, exports disappear indicating that wealth resources may encourage civil war by undermining government stability.

The second paper argues that civil wars for control of government occur in resource-rich countries, and that wealth resources, such as drugs, may be an important cause of these wars. In addition, the wars that take place for control of government usually occur where there is political instability and economic stagnation. Furthermore, it was found that wars that end in settlement, long wars, and wars that end because of UN intervention all improve post-war democracy and may even help a country achieve a higher level of democracy. Although resource abundance hurts democracy across countries, within a country, such increases in resource abundance may improve democracy (Armeiy, 2008).

Research Methodology

This is a qualitative research seeking to comprehend and describe the causes of war in Yemen and ways in which such causes could be addressed. In-depth semi-structured interviews were conducted using selective sampling procedure. Due to the nature and systematic complexity of the Yemeni society, a high profile group of researchers and academicians was selected in order for a better understanding of the issues. This sample was selected because of their higher qualifications and extensive reading and knowledge of the nature of Yemeni society. Further, they have decades of useful and influential stories, which allowed the researcher to discover the underlying causes of war.

The semi-structured interview is the best means of data collection that involves interaction between the researcher and the participants to gather valid and reliable information. The researcher conducted face-to-face semi-structured interviews with respondents for the sake of gathering data. This led to self-insight into the substantive views and respondents' experiences.

Participants' Characteristics

The study sample comprised a group of intellectuals and researchers of different ages and with various specializations, occupations, and scientific backgrounds. The interviews were conducted with the sample by posing open-ended questions that covered most issues related to the political, legal, economic, social, and sectarian causes of wars in Yemen. It is noteworthy that the researcher communicated with the respondents and conducted direct interviews with them all. Here, he explained the research objectives and notified them of confidentiality and that it would only be used for scientific research purposes. Interviews were carried out after facing considerable difficulties due to the refusal of many respondents to attend the interviews. However, they were successfully conducted upon the agreement of some respondents.

Table 1: Sample Characteristics

Participants	Participant No. (1)	Participant No. (2)	Participant No. (3)	Participant No. (4)	Participant No. (5)	Participant No. (6)	Participant No. (7)
Age	59	45	55	60	58	59	56
Occupation	Researcher	Academic Researcher	Researcher	Researcher & Writer	Military Researcher	Academic Researcher	Academic Researcher
Marital Status	Married	Single	Married	Married	Married	Married	Married
Experience	23	15	25	27	29	24	26

Result Analysis

Qualitative data was obtained from the participated researchers and academics through semi-structured interviews.

In this study, the data has been gathered to identify two themes:

- Theme 1: Causes of war in Yemen, including the economic, political, social, legal, and sectarian causes.
- Theme 2: Coping strategies.

Economic Causes of Wars in Yemen

Economic causes are most often the root causes of conflicts among the warring parties for control over wealth. Most occur in communities that suffer from destitution and poverty. This drives people to participate in wars in order to earn a livelihood. In response to a question regarding this matter, the second respondent clarified that the economic causes of wars in Yemen are poverty and illiteracy. He commented, “*Yemen is deemed to be a poor country with the existence of widespread illiteracy and poverty as well as major economic reasons. Rather, the political instability contributes to worsen the situation, including a decline in per capita income level*”.

The third respondent argued that the economic causes of wars are poverty, lack of equitable distribution of wealth and tribal structure. He stressed, “*Poverty and lack of equitable distribution of wealth among citizens are proper hypotheses. Everything is backwards in this country, i.e. the country was once dependent on agriculture and commerce.*”

Since the State was founded upon power, coercion and oppression where the tribal influence always prevails over the poorest and most underdeveloped areas, the agricultural, urban and civilized areas always fall prey to areas mostly engaged in tribalism and chauvinism”.

The fifth respondent emphasised, *“The economic factor is a pivotal factor or independent variable. Economy is life, a motive for war or a pillar of peace. In addition, the lack of equitable distribution of wealth, the monopoly of wealth by one single class and man’s improper exploitation by man lead to class struggle, which in turn causes war in a country such as Yemen. In fact, Yemen has scarce resources and it has been afflicted with political regimes that know nothing about social justice or equitable distribution of wealth”.*

Most respondents supported that the economic causes of wars in Yemen are pivotal, including poverty, lack of equitable distribution of wealth among social groups and individuals, and man’s exploitation of man, leading invariably to conflicts and wars. Since the traditional and social tribal component is based on the logic of power and chauvinism and motivated by poverty and underdevelopment, this tribal entity becomes more predominant over the most urbanized and civilized agricultural areas. Such areas always fall prey to the most fanatical and tribal areas in Yemen to satisfy their desires and hunger (Baldwin, 2003). (Collier & Heoffler, 1998).

Political Causes

There have been many political conflicts in Yemen, which vary according to their causes and motives, leading to many conflicts, bloodshed, and violations. In response to a question regarding the main causes, the first respondent said that the causes of wars in Yemen are mostly political, but not economic. He stressed, *“Wars may take the form of a religious, denominational or tribal nature, but the hidden objectives are political”.*

However, the third respondent noted that the main causes of war are the State’s structural vulnerability and tribal control over its political decisions. He said, *“True state has not been established in Yemen, where the tribal structure continues to be the underlying structure and real power. Rather, it is regarded as a nuclear bomb that fragments continual conflicts”.*

The fifth respondent supports that the political causes of wars in Yemen are caused by those people in power: *“People in power in Sana’a, the civil right wing and the religious right wing, consolidated their various ideologies and met in a repository to face and fight the National Front and cling to power so as to share the material revenues. So, power was at the centre of conflicts”.*

Similarly, the seventh respondent emphasised that the main political cause of wars in Yemen is the fanatical and traditional tribal component in the northern Yemen, which was associated with the imamate regime that ruled Yemen before the establishment of the republican system. He said, *“Power in Yemen, especially in the so-called northern Yemen during the imamate period, was always associated with imams, the prevailing ideology, strength, influence and power as well as war. That is because the imamate and tribe in the political and social history of Yemen throughout 1300 years are two sides of the same coin”*.

In view of the above, we can conclude that the causes of wars in Yemen centred on power struggle. This can be interpreted as the State’s structural vulnerability and the tribal dominance over it both directly by State officials, who are loyal to the tribe and its culture, or indirectly by neutralizing the implementation of law and order in Yemen (Collier P. , 2006) (Dorlian, Saada war in Yemen: between Politics and Sectarianism, 2011).

Social Causes

Social unrest and family disintegration often make the social members susceptible to fall deep into the traps of conflicts and wars because of family instability, homelessness, and educational dropouts. This is supported by the respondents’ answers to the social causes of war in Yemen. The first and second respondents said, *“Social causes lead to the spread of war phenomenon, high rates of unemployment, illiteracy, homelessness, and school dropouts”*.

This is further emphasised by the third respondent, who aptly said:

“We are experiencing a harsh, scarce and infertile environment. Poverty strikes the great majority of people. There are instability of living conditions, security instability, continual conflicts, and a lack of investment opportunities, development and prosperity. People who live below the poverty line are more than 50% and the poor are more than 75%. All these factors force impulses into uncertainty, adventure, violence and wars.”

The fifth and sixth respondents, however, were of the opinion that the cohesion of the Yemeni society and family is still better than those in other societies. They clarified that wars in Yemen were not caused by societal disintegration or any other reasons.

All the same, the third respondent stressed, *“Social cohesion is better in Yemen than any country and disintegration is almost close to non-existent because traditions and relationships in the Yemeni society still prevail, cohesion still exists and family continues to exist in spite of poverty”*.

The sixth respondent aptly emphasised, *“In my opinion, the social aspect is inferior to other causes due to the fact that sometimes it is not considered as other political, economic or legal causes but as an impact of armed conflicts and wars”*. As a result of the foregoing, it becomes clear that the social causes of wars are composed of poverty, homelessness, illiteracy, school dropouts, and living and security instabilities. Yemeni social cohesion, however, is still playing a vital role in mitigating the effects of such causes, which have less instigation of war when compared to political and economic causes (Sachs & Sa’ar, 2007).

Legal Causes

Legal and security causes and anomalies often play a major role in spreading war and conflict in Yemen and many other places. There are also other factors, which necessitated questioning the participants about the legal causes of wars in Yemen. The second and third respondents said: *“Law and Constitution remained marginalized throughout the past decades of successive regimes in Yemen despite the fact that Yemenis are the most proficient expertise in drafting constitutions and laws, but they do not implement or activate them. There is no authority to enforce law and this is main reason for administrative corruption”*.

Constitutional laws are rarely applied while the tribal customary laws are often enforced. That is to say, the tribal conventions are governing the State by tribal statesmen, according to the third respondent who said, *“Until very recently in Yemen, Constitution and law have been considered as issues of blasphemy. Islamic Sharia upholds the de facto tribal convention, which prevails and governs the State which, in turn, appeals to the tribe. There is a lack of acceptability of the top level among the ruling elites because their tribal affiliations are stronger than their affiliations to urban life, democracy, justice, liberty or law.”*

The seventh argued, *“With respect to legal causes that led to the continuity of war phenomenon, they include the weakness of judicial bodies, inapplicability of the Convention on human rights or the freedom of opinion, tribe influence, implementation of customary laws and tribal arbitration, ignorance of Sharia and law, and inapplicability of the firearm legislation”*.

It can be summarised that the main legal causes of wars in Yemen were, and still are, the weakness of judicial bodies, negligence of State Constitution and its subsidiary laws in the first place, impeding the application of law by the tribe component, implementation of customary laws, which are sometimes inconsistent with the requirements of the Islamic Sharia due to the problematic lack of full faith in law and its application by authorities. These have led to war (Terrill, 2011).

Sectarian Causes

Sectarian causes play a crucial role in instigating war in Western societies until they surmounted such crises by raising scientific and philosophical awareness. However, these causes, not yet declared, are still the main engine of war in Arab and Islamic societies, resulting in many conflicts and wars today. Asking whether the multiplicity of sects would be a cause of wars in Yemen, most responses answered in the negative. The first and second respondents said unanimously that the sectarian factor was absent from the conflicts at least during this period, but not during the past ruling periods of some radical imams or after the emergence of the Houthi movement. The first respondent said, *“I think religion has not led to any sectarian or denominational war. During that period, no war took place on religious grounds except for some radical imams such as Abdullah Bin Hamza. Here, religion was used as a cover with no effect on the people”*.

Similarly, the second respondent emphasised, *“We, Yemenis, live in peaceful coexistence. We have not witnessed any denominational conflict, but only in the recent period when foreign interventions began to play a negative role in the events happening in Yemen, such as the recent events in Saada”*.

In this connection, the third respondent explained that the multiplicity of sects does not constitute a problem. The problem is created by politicizing the religion or sect and imposing them on others, or using them as a cover to achieve political objectives. Consequently, conflicts and wars break out. He said, *“Multiplicity and diversity in the Yemeni environment are positive and important features. However, the emergence of conflicts is provoked by orders of politicizing such multiplicity and diversity, attempting to abolish them, imposing a particular colour to be in-charge of all other colours, and abolishing independent judgment, multiplicity and independence to others”*.

The fifth respondent emphasised, *“When the political religious parties were founded, they started to have influences. There are two coexisting sects in Yemen: Zaidi and Shafi’i. There has not been any type of conflicts provoked between them.*

It is said that Shafi'iyyah is the Shiite of Sunnah and Zaidis are the Sunnis of Shiites in Yemen. There are also two Ismailia and Makrami divisions and they are two secluded religious groups. They have not exerted influence on any person, interfered in political affairs, disseminated their beliefs or been hostile to other sects. Rather, they are two symbols of social peace and peaceful coexistence”.

The fourth, sixth and seventh respondents emphasised that the multiplicity of sects in Yemen is not a cause of the conflict. The fourth respondent said, *“I do not think so because I have not seen yet what religious or sectarian topic they are fighting about. Hence, it is a political conflict among groups that might belong to one of those sects”.*

The seventh respondent stressed, *“Based on objective, realistic, political and historical grounds, religion has been used as a cover-up and veil to justify the political and economic interests and objectives, as well as sectarian conflicts”.*

To sum up, the multiplicity of sects was not a cause of war in Yemen, except when the sectarian, denominational, and ethnic groups politicized such multiplicity or filled their followers' mentalities with sectarianism and denomination, using them as a cover to gain power. This is a negative phenomenon and a reality from which the Yemeni people have suffered and are still suffering (Theo & schmitt, 2010).

The Coping Strategy of the Causes of War and Armed Conflicts in Yemen

Table No. 3: The Coping Strategy

Topic	Hypotheses	Coping Methods
Coping Strategy	Addressing the economic causes	<ol style="list-style-type: none"> 1- addressing causes of poverty 2- Equitable distribution of wealth among the society members 3- creation of job opportunities to absorb the youth
	Addressing the political causes	<ol style="list-style-type: none"> 1- Applying the principle of peaceful alternation of power 2- Establishing an institutional state with strong system to implement the law 3- Preventing the interference and influence of the tribal entity on State policy
	Addressing the social causes of war	<ol style="list-style-type: none"> 1- Preserving the family unit from disintegration 2- Solving the problems of children's school dropouts 3- Providing appropriate living and security conditions
	Addressing the legal causes	<ol style="list-style-type: none"> 1- Implementing the State Constitution and laws 2- Impeding the tribal customary laws which are totally inconsistent with Islamic Sharia and Yemeni Law 3- Raising the community awareness of the importance of law implementation
	Addressing the sectarian causes	<ol style="list-style-type: none"> 1- Combating sectarian and denominational advocacies and their usage for gaining power 2- Raising the community awareness of the ethnic, regional and sectarian divisions

Conclusion

This study aimed at discovering the main causes of war in Yemen as well as the coping strategy adopted by Yemenis and their competent authorities. Wars have proved that poverty, illiteracy, lack of equitable distribution of wealth among members of the Yemeni society, and the monopoly of wealth by one single class are the major economic causes of conflicts in Yemen.

With regard to the political causes of wars, it has been shown that the fanatical and traditional tribal component in northern Yemen, which was associated with the past imamate system, was the main cause of wars in Yemen in pursuit of power and control. In addition, there is the use of denominations, tribalism, and sectarianism as tools for securing power, especially in northern Yemen. The State's structural vulnerability and the inapplicability of law played result from tribal interference in political decision, particularly after the 1962 Revolution. Moreover, the tribal and imamate systems decades before the 1962 Revolution were seen as two sides of the same coin in the political and social history of Yemen.

As for the social causes of wars in Yemen, they include poverty, homelessness, illiteracy, school dropouts, and living and security instabilities. Some respondents noted that the cohesion of the Yemeni society is still playing a vital role in mitigating the consequences. The legal causes of war can be summarised as the weakness of judicial bodies, negligence of State Constitution and its subsidiary laws, impeding their applicability by tribal components, and implementation of customary laws, which are sometimes inconsistent with the requirements of the Islamic Sharia.

In addition, the problematic lack of full faith in law and its applicability by those in-charge of both the legislative and executive authorities have led to the continuity of war Yemen. In regards to the sectarian causes of war in Yemen, most respondents emphasised that there were no sectarian hostilities in Yemen. Nonetheless, sectarianism was used as a political cover to achieve political objectives by the ruling system of radical imams and by the Houthi movement in the early twenty-first century. With respect to the factor classification on the basis of their own priorities, the political causes of war are ranked first as causes of wars in Yemen, followed by economic causes, legal causes, social causes, and sectarian causes, respectively.

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