Identities and Narratives as Social Constructs: The Making of the Sectarian War in Yemen

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Abstract

The war in Yemen is predominantly understood in the media as a sectarian war, however the academic literature on the conflict itself disregards this and claims that other dimensions of the war are most important. Not excluding the sectarian dimension, this thesis analyses the sectarian dynamics of the war through Gagnon's theory on the Myth of Ethnic Wars. Gagnon's theory shows the importance of understanding the process of identification of ethnicities and how this is used by elites who wish to maintain power. A set of three arguments is put forward to test Gagnon's theory in relation to the Yemeni case: (1) the elite that has the power is challenged; (2) the challenged elite has a demobilization strategy based on a sectarian narrative in order to make ethnicity the only relevant identity and to undermine the opposing narrative that is challenging the elite; and (3) the challenged elite will have a homogenization strategy in order to create a homogenous ethnic space and therefore a homogenous political space. These arguments contributed to guiding the research and to proving the overall argument of the thesis, which is that the conflict in Yemen does have sectarian dynamics and that these are a deliberate strategy of the challenged elite in an attempt to maintain power but this also the potential to create a full-blown sectarian war.

1. Introduction

In January 2017, the crisis watch of the International Crisis Group (ICG) determined that after several failed ceasefires and peace talks the fighting in Yemen intensified and the situation severely deteriorated (ICG, 2017A). The conflict in Yemen that started in 2015 has resulted in a severe humanitarian crisis, affecting 18.8 million people in the country that are now in need of humanitarian aid or protection (OCHA, 2017). This number is particularly noteworthy as it represents approximately 70% of the total population of Yemen. At the start of the conflict the ICG stated that "Yemen is headed for protracted violence on multiple fronts. This combination of proxy wars, sectarian violence, state collapse and militia rule has become sadly familiar in the region. Nobody is likely to win such a fight, which will only benefit those who prosper in the chaos of war, such as al-Qaeda and IS. But great human suffering would be certain. An alternative [a solution to the conflict] exists, but only if Yemenis and their neighbors choose it" (ICG, p.2, 2015). Today, two full years later, the situation remains unchanged as there seems to be no end of the violent conflict in any near future: "both sides [the Houthis and the Yemeni government] appear locked in a cycle of escalating violence" (ICG, 2017B).

The war in Yemen has predominately been understood through the media as a proxy sectarian war between Iran and Saudi Arabia, also known as a sectarian war between Sunnis and Shias (Clausen, 2015; Petrou, 2014). Understood as such, the main rebel/insurgent group, the Houthis, are seen as Shia fighting other Sunni groups. However, this perception does not necessarily reflect the reality and the dynamics of the conflict on the ground since it falls short of taking into account other actors such as tribal militias or separatist groups who have little to do with Iran or Saudi Arabia and who have no clear link with religious ideologies (ICG, 2015). Moreover, Iran's relationship with the Houthis is also seriously debated and contested (Juneau, 2016). The Houthis claim that they are not fighting a sectarian war, but rather defending the people of Yemen against unjust and corrupt leaders (Yadav, 2014). These are just some examples of how the dynamics of the current conflict in Yemen do not match with the surrounding sectarian narrative displayed in the media (Clausen, 2015). Rather, these examples indicate that while sectarianism is a factor, the Yemeni war contains more complexities than the prevailing sectarian narrative allows for. Put simply, sectarian elements need to be taken into consideration in any analysis of the Yemeni war, but they need to be better understood than simply Sunni versus Shia. In light of this, the guiding research question is the following: what are the sectarian dynamics of the Yemeni war?

In order to answer the research question, I will first present the scholarly research that has been done on the causes and dynamics of the Yemeni war and then proceed with a literature review over civil wars. In the second section, I will present Gagnon's theory on the Myth of Ethnic Wars (2006) as part of the theoretical framework used in this research. In the third section a set of arguments derived from the theoretical framework are laid out. In the fourth section, the concepts used will be defined and operationalised, and the method of data generation and analysis will be explained before finally addressing the limitations and scope of this research. The research and analysis will be divided into three sections: the first section analyses the Houthi movement at the start of the war, showing that the elite in power is threatened by a popular movement. The second section then shows that the reaction of the challenged elite is to demobilize and homogenize the opposing party, notably the Houthis, in order to try to maintain and regain power. The third section shows the limitations of the implementation of the demobilization and homogenization practices which explains why Yemen is not a full sectarian war but is still at risk of such an outcome. Finally, the thesis finishes with a conclusion in which the main findings are presented and provide possible implications of a prolonged conflict.

2. Literature Review

The literature review is divided into two sections. The first section addresses the scholarly research on the causes and dimensions of the Yemeni war whereas the second highlights the overall scholarly debate concerning civil wars. Beginning with the literature on the causes of the war in Yemen, this section can in itself be roughly divided in two groups of scholars. On the one hand, a first group of scholars, consisting of Hokayem & Roberts (2016) and Terrill (2014) argue that the international dimensions are the most significant as external state actors and regional powers have influenced the conflict. Terrill (2014) analyses the involvement of Iran, whereas Hokayem & Robets (2016) rather emphasize the engagement of the Gulf countries by asking why and how they intervened: "containing Houthi power became a driver of Gulf engagement in Yemen: the GCC [the Gulf Cooperation Council] designed and brokered the 2011-12 transition from the Saleh administration to that of his vice-president, Abd Rabbo Mansour Hadi, hoping that other Yemeni factions, and a complex political process, would keep the Houthis in check" (Hokayem & Robets, p.162, 2016).

This stance is on the other hand refuted by the second group of scholars, namely Salisbury (2015), Perkins (2016), Gros, Gard-Murray, & Bar-Yam (2012), Lewis (2013), and Clausen (2015), who claim that the economic and domestic dimensions of the war are the

most important ones and that the international dimensions mentioned above are not sufficient to explain the war. Salisbury (2015) starts off by analyzing the war through the Saudi and Iranian involvement and labels the conflict a 'Cold War' but concludes that the local disputes, rather than the international character, are of key importance to the war: "at first sight, Yemen appears likely to be another country where Saudi-Iranian tensions further complicate existing homegrown rivalries. At the root, however, the latter are local disputes, far more than they are a proxy conflict between Saudi Arabia and Iran" (2015, p.12). Clausen (2015) stresses that the causes of the war in Yemen are due to the lack of reforms after the Yemeni Arab Spring in 2011. She states that it is the political and economic systems that are at the center of the crisis and that this should not be forgotten (Clausen, p. 25, 2015). Linked to Clausen's (2015) ideas is Perkins (2016) who believes that "the discourse on Yemen fails to take into account the decades of oppressive neopatrimonial rule, obscenely poor stewardship of the commons, and scarcity or skyrocketing price of essential goods and services" (p. 15, 2016). Gros, Gard-Murray, & Bar-Yam (2012) also stress the importance of the socio-economic origins and their impact of food prices and the existence of separated ethnic groups but disregard the political aspect that the two previous scholars mentioned: "our work has identified two major sources of violence in Yemen: partial ethnic separation with poorly defined boundaries and unreliable food security for a vulnerable population" (Gros, Gard-Murray, & Bar-Yam, p.10, 2012). Lewis (2013) has a different argument concerning the causes of the war and analyses the relationship between violent criminal activity, underdevelopment and conflict. Stating that criminal activity is one of the factors that is mainly overlooked while analyzing insurgencies and conflicts in countries.

The main difference and disagreement between the two groups of scholars is what dimensions of the war (international or domestic) are the most important. Looking at the research that has been done on the causes of the Yemeni war one can see that the conflict dynamics have been analyzed separately and independently: political system, economic reasons, food prices, criminal activity and international interest. Significantly, few scholars have taken the sectarian dimensions of the Yemeni war into account. The fact that scholars choose to look at very different dimensions of the war is not unique to the case of Yemen, but also occurs frequently in the larger academic debate surrounding civil wars.

The literature on the causes and dynamics of civil wars can itself be divided in three different categories which represent what different groups of scholars believe are the main causes and dimensions of the civil wars: (1) greed and opportunity, (2) 'diversity breeds conflict' (also known as the ethnicity argument), and (3) grievances (Wimmer, 2012, p.145).

The greed and opportunity category, consisting of Fearon & Laitin (2003), Collier & Hoeffler (2004), and Keen (2005) believe that civil war or violent conflict will break out because a certain group of actors will benefit in one way or another from the conflict or from a certain outcome of the conflict. Actors want to improve their situation, either economically or politically or both. These scholars work is based on cross-national statistical studies. Within the greed and opportunity category it is "the material and organizational incentives to stage a rebellion against government" that are the causes of conflicts (Wimmer, 2012, p.145). Fearon and Laitin (2003) believe that civil wars break out when there is an opportunity for them to break out. For them this means a weak state, and the possibility for actors to organize and grow into full-fledged rebellions. Collier and Hoeffler (2004), in opposition to the two other categories (diversity breeds conflict and grievances), state that civil wars break out when (rebel) groups and organizations would benefit economically and financially from the war, or an outcome of the war. For example, if there is a large number of natural resources, such as oil or diamonds, this increases the likelihood of war breaking out as certain groups would try to violently get a hold of them. Keen (2005), goes a step further in the greed and opportunity category as he believes that some actors will try to prolong the conflict as much as possible because they benefit from the war, such as having access to key infrastructure or black markets. These actors typically enrich themselves in civil wars. There are however several shortcomings in this category, and the research of the different scholars has been criticized on several different levels, claiming that there are serious empirical, methodological and theoretical problems (Nathan, 2005). Nathan argues that this method of quantitative analysis "seek[s] to ascertain the causes of civil war without studying civil wars and attempt[s] to determine the motives of rebels without studying rebels and rebellions" (2005, p.2).

In opposition to the previous category, the second category of literature concerning the causes of the civil wars is the 'diversity breeds conflict' or the ethnicity argument. In this category, scholars (Gellner (1991); Nairn (1993); Horowitz (1985); Lake & Rothchild (1998); and Gurr (1993)) believe that it is not greed or opportunity dimensions, but ethnicity dimensions that causes civil wars. It is linked with the idea that certain ethnic groups have deep grievances (from the past), and that these grievances are rooted in the culture and society. Gellner (1991) and Nairn (1993) argue that the more heterogeneous and ethnically diverse a state or country is the higher the chances of an armed conflict. The literature on ethnic conflict also explains violent conflict as a response to perceived external threats to or from an ethnicity towards another (Horowitz, 1985). This is also in line with Lake and Rothchild (1998) who believe that ethnic conflicts are caused by collective fears of the future.

Gurr (1993), believes that ethnic conflicts will erupt when leaders exacerbate existing fears and divisions between ethnic groups. "Ethnic identities are not primordial but nonetheless based on common values, beliefs, and experiences. They are not instrumental but usually capable of being invoked by leaders and used to sustain social movements that are likely to be more resilient and persistent than movements based solely on material or political interests" (Gurr, 1993, p.5).

Finally, the third category of literature concerning civil wars is a from a group of scholars (Davies (1997) and Stewart (2002)) that argue that minority grievances are the most important dimensions of civil wars and conflicts. The category does not believe that it is ethnic differences nor greed that explain civil wars, rather it is that a group of people have been economically (unequal distribution of natural resources), socially (members of a social group are treated and seen as lesser than social groups) and/or politically (no participation in the political apparatus of the country) excluded. There can be a gap on horizontal lines and or vertical lines of society that would at a certain point be so intolerable that the members of the group would revolt against the existing system which is excluding them. As Davies (1997) argues "political stability and instability are ultimately dependent on a state of mind, a mood in society" (p.136). Stewart (2002), believes that when there are horizontal inequalities present in a country for a long while and that these have been increasing, the likelihood of conflict or civil war will increase. People will claim what they feel they deserve and revolt against the power structure they claim responsible for their situation (Davies, 1997).

While the strands of literature outlined above clearly demonstrate the significance and impact of exterior involvement on the one hand and internal conditions on the other, including different dynamics such as weakness of governance structures and distribution of economic resources. In a civil war context, they tend to analyse these dimensions in isolation rather than in relation to one another. Moreover, this renders the narrative incomplete as is does not explain the potential sectarian dynamics of the conflict and if it does (in the case of ethnicity) it regards ethnic groups as static and units of analysis which limits the understanding of ethnicity and religion in conflicts. To quote van Doorn (2013): "Civil wars are caused by highly complex social processes that greatly depend on the historical and regional context". This brings us to the theory of Gagnon and the Myth of Ethnic Wars (2006), where he goes a step further in understanding the role of ethnicity in wars.

3. Theoretical Framework

The question of ethnicity and its (supposed) bearings on violent conflict, is the main part of departure in the works of Gagnon. Through an analysis of the war in Yugoslavia, Gagnon (1994, p.130) questions what the causes of violent conflict along ethnic lines are. Significantly, he questions why the perpetrators were describing the war as a conflict that is essentially about ethnic differences as he demonstrates that there were no such clear ethnic differences before the war (Gagnon, 2006, p.10). "Far from being the spontaneous eruption of ancient ethnic hatreds brewing in a cultural or historical context hostile to democratization (…) the war was begun precisely because of the relative strength of homegrown pressure for political pluralism and support for liberal democratic values" (Gagnon, 2006, p.118). Rather, he clearly argues that violent conflicts along ethnic cleavages are a "purposeful and rational strategy planned by those most threatened by changes to the structure of economic and political power" (Gagnon, 1994, p.140). The main goal to shift what is challenging away from them (the elites in power) and towards something else (the threat to the community based on ethnic terms). In order to gain support and legitimacy they will try to shift the focus of the debate/political discourse in their own advantage. He states that "violent conflict along ethnic cleavages is provoked by elites in order to create a domestic political context where ethnicity is the only politically relevant identity" (Gagnon, 1994, p.132).

Gagnon lays out several processes and practices of how the challenged elites start to frame the threat as an ethnic one. This is what Gagnon terms as the *demobilization*, the intentional silencing of certain voices and people, in order to marginalize, undermine and exclude them from the public realm. "The strategies pursued by these elites had as their main goal not the mobilization but rather de demobilization of the population" (Gagnon, 2006, p. 180). The challenged elite will have a rhetoric claiming that there is a threat towards a certain group of an ethnic identity. This will then create a delimitation of an 'us' versus 'them' in ethnic terms. Within that rhetoric there will also be a need for protection of the 'us' from the 'them'. This will in turn later justify certain (costly) policies to protect themselves. In this process, having control over the media and information sources is key for the challenged elite.

In comparison to the theories which state that elites manipulate an ethnic sentiment for their own benefit, Gagnon's theory takes a step further as he argues that rhetoric, narrative or framing are not sufficient to have an ethnic conflict. In this theory, a social constructivist approach is used. As "this approach makes clear that actively mobilizing people around issues of culture and identity requires more than simply appealing to history and symbols, or

declaring a threat in ethnic terms" (Gagnon, 2006, p.187) contrary to the previously mentioned theories regarding ethnicity. He stresses the importance of "immediate social context and personal, lived relationship in the construction of identity" (Gagnon, 2006, p.187). Therefore, changing the social context and reality (through violence) is a way of changing the way people will identify themselves as identity and ethnicity are social constructs. "Identification is the product of social interactions and has meaning only in the context of those interactions, the meaning of ethnicity must be understood within a particular social context" (Gagnon, 2006, p.8). "[T]he premise [is] that the meaning of ethnicity and the conceptions of attachment to an ethnic identity are constructed in everyday life" (Gagnon, 2006, p.10). This is a deeper understanding of ethnic identification and does not look at ethnicity or ethnic groups as "fixed categories" or "as units of analysis" (Gagnon, 2006, p.178-179). "The immediate purpose of this violence was to demobilize the wider population to prevent a successful anti-regime mobilization from toppling the existing structures of power in the republic by shifting the focus of political discourse and action away from liberalization toward purported threats to the very existence of the nation newly defined in very narrow terms" (Gagnon, 2006, p.132)

Therefore, having a 'real' change in the environment will change the way people identity themselves, which is accompanied by the rhetoric creates an ethnic war. There will be a "radical restructuring of the ethnic composition of the regions" "to destroy the lived realities of the multiple and complex interactions that make up social coexistence" (Gagnon, 2006, p.5; p.132) This means creating homogenous ethical regions, and a clear physical delimitation of the different ethnicities. "The goal is not so much ethnic homogeneity as it is the construction of homogeneous political space as a means to demobilize challengers" (Gagnon, 2006, p.9). The end goal is to have political homogeneity (even though this is a continuous process), "the means to such an end is the silencing, marginalizing, and demobilization of those voices calling for fundamental shifts in the structures of power" (Gagnon, 2006, p.9). Thus, next to the *demobilization* of the challengers, the elite will try to *homogenize* the political space through violent practices. In his theory identity is not caused by violence but is rather the goal and result of violence. As these strategies become self-fulfilling prophecies.

This theoretical framework is being used for the purpose of this research because it surpasses the other literature on civil wars as it does not regard the role of ethnicity and religion in conflicts as static or given, but rather as a social construct. "Telling the story of the wars in a way that does justice to social realities and that recognizes the agency of human

beings, while acknowledging the importance of larger structure of power in constraining individuals' voices and perceptions of choice and in shaping outcomes" (Gagnon, 2006, p. XV). It does not necessarily reject other explanations to wars but gives an explanation to conflicts that go beyond the dominant understanding that seem to misread ethnic conflicts. As we have seen that the literature on the conflict in Yemen is conflicting on what the dynamics of the war are and do not explain the sectarian dimensions, this theory will be able to surpass this and integrate the notion of sectarianism as it analyses the role of ethnicity/sectarianism in conflicts while remaining critical of its other dynamics.

4. Argument

Through the theoretical framework Gagnon proposes, the main argument of this thesis is that the conflict in Yemen has sectarian dynamics, which are a deliberate strategy of the challenged elite in an attempt to maintain power. The challenged elite has a strategy of demobilization and homogenization in order to silence, undermine and eliminate threats against them. From this argument, three sub arguments have been developed:

Argument 1: The elite that has the power is challenged.

Argument 2: The challenged elite will have a demobilization strategy based on a sectarian narrative in order to make ethnicity the only relevant identity and to undermine the opposing narrative that is challenging the elite.

Argument 3: The challenged elite will have a homogenization strategy in order to create a homogenous ethnic space and therefore a homogenous political space. This is done by silencing and eliminating the opponent and the making of a homogenous ethnic space in order to make ethnicity the only relevant identity.

These arguments will guide the research and help answer the research question stated earlier – what are the sectarian dynamics of the Yemeni war?

5. Concepts, Operationalization, Data Generation and Analysis
a. Concepts and operationalization

The concepts that will be defined and operationalized in this research are derived from the arguments above and constitute the following: *ethnicity, elites, demobilization, sectarian narrative* and *homogenization.* Starting with ethnicity, it is a "fluid and complex relational process of identification" based on the social realities and interactions (Gagnon, 2006, p.8.) of a group of people towards a perception of shared history, culture, language, religion, values, geography etc. The ethnicities applicable to this case are the two main

theological schools in Yemen: Zaydis and Sunnis. Elites here mean a group of people, or a person, that have the political (and often also economic) control and power of a certain country. These elites become challenged elites when their hold on power is threatened. The threat can come from another group trying to take the power, or remove them from power. It can also come from a change in the power structure where they also see their control and power diminish. The challenged elites that are analysed in the thesis are the pro-government forces/groups actors that support the Hadi government. These are a variety of different groups and states such as the Islah political party, Saudi Arabia, and different tribal groups. Moving on to demobilization, which is the strategy of the challenged elites, "the immediate goal of this strategy (…) to prevent an immediate overthrow of the existing structure of power through the reconstruction of political space that is, through the creation of a political space in which the only legitimate and authentic political and ideological position [is] the one help by the ruling party" (Gagnon, 2006, p.87-88). The fourth concept, sectarian narrative, is a discourse of certain people or institutions concerning a subject, in this case the conflict, that is explained, described and justified by sectarian/religious terms. The sectarian narrative of the "conflict is about the relationship between these clear-cut [sectarian] groups" (Gagnon, 2006, p.10) Finally, homogenization is a practice by the challenged elite and can be divided into two types of homogenization. The first is creating a homogenous ethnic space is the attempt to create a certain ethnic (in this case religious) homogeneity of certain living areas or regions. Clearly put, not having mixed and heterogeneous regions where people from different ethnicities and/or religions live in the same area. That is physically separating the social reality of cities, regions and areas of a country. The second is creating a homogenous political space as this will "creat[e] a political space in which the only legitimate and authentic political and ideological position was the one held by the ruling party" (Gagnon, 2006, p.88).

The first element that will be looked at is to see if, how and by who or what the elite is being challenged. The second element that will be analysed are the different narratives of the challenged elites to see if they have a sectarian narrative, if they are making sectarian divisions (us versus them) between the different groups and if they are saying that the opposing 'ethnic' group is a threat to their own 'ethnic' group in order to demobilize what or who is challenging them. The third element regarded are the practices and policies of the challenged elites. This is done in order to see if they are silencing and eliminating the opponent groups in order to create a homogenous sectarian/ethnic space and therefore a homogenous political space.

b. Methods of data generation

The data will be generated through various documents and reports will be analysed from international organizations and international non-governmental organizations that collect data and information on conflict and wars such as United Nations (UN) reports, ICG reports, Amnesty International (AI) reports, Human Rights Watch (HRW) reports, and through different news agencies that have conducted interviews with the different parties. Going through reports made by different independent international organizations, and non-governmental organizations will provide different information that can be compared and contrasted as gathering information from Yemen directly is very difficult. The research from the different reports is itself directly retrieved from Yemen, and the interviews are from official representatives from the different parties in Yemen. Interviews have also been conducted with specialists from different entities from different research, academic and non-governmental organizations. These will be from the organizations that are present in Yemen and scholars that have done their own field research. This is once again to gain more data and to be able to contrast the information received for the analysis to be thorough and not take the information provided as the sole information available.

c. Methods of data analysis

Process tracing is the method of data analysis that will be used. It is the "systematic examination of diagnostic evidence selected and analysed in light of research questions and hypotheses" (Collier, 2011, p.823). Process tracing is a method used to analyse social phenomena and "can make decisive contributions to diverse research objectives, including: (a) identifying novel political and social phenomena and systematically describing them; (b) evaluating prior explanatory hypotheses, discovering new hypotheses, and assessing these new causal claims; (c) gaining insight into causal mechanisms; and (d) providing an alternative means—compared with conventional regression analysis and inference based on statistical models—of addressing challenging problems such as reciprocal causation, spuriousness, and selection bias" (Collier, 2011, p.824). Contrasting, analysing and examining the independent information and data provided by independent organizations and interviews will give sufficient information to be able to analyse.

The limitations of the research concern the retrieval of data since it will be through different organizations and not directly from Yemen. Moreover, the data is limited to what is written or translated in English as I have no access to actors that are directly involved in the conflict nor do I speak Arabic or local dialects. However, the organizations and experts

mobilised in this thesis, have in depth information, contacts and expertise on the situation in Yemen and will be able to further the research and understanding of the war in Yemen conducted for this thesis.

6. A challenged elite

The first argument of the thesis is that the elite that is in power in Yemen is challenged. More precisely, the Houthis have been challenging the elites of Yemen for the past decade and in 2014 succeeding in becoming a real threat to the president as they took over control of the capital. For the past decade, the Houthis have been protesting for political and economic reforms, and have been fighting corruption, injustice and the political system in Yemen. Between 2004 and 2010, the Houthis fought a series of six wars against the government, at that time ruled by former President Saleh. These conflicts were not linked to religion or ideology but rather president Saleh's crackdown on their group, which "felt under attack and also felt the sting of political exclusion and marginalization" (Laub, 2015). In a thorough analysis done on the history of the Houthis and their religious beliefs, by Lucas Winter (2011), analysing the Zaydi roots and while going through the history of clashes between them and the Saleh regime up until 2010, shows that even when the Houthis would act through their ideology it would be done for political reform. "[A]lthough highly political, his [Husaym al-Huthi, former leader of the Houthis, who was killed] message was not an insurgent one, and he believed that the Zaydi notion of rising up against unjust rulers (khuruj) should be done in a peaceful manner (through the parliament) and that he took up arms only because he was forced to do so" (Winter, 2011, p.107).

It is in 2011, after the Yemeni Arab Spring where president Saleh stepped down, giving the Houthis an opportunity to be part of the transition process put in place by his successor, today's president Abdrabbuh Mansur Hadi (Hadi). In an article published by Amnesty International, in 2015, it is shown that in 2014 it was the Houthis that called for protests and demonstrations once the government had cut fuel subsidies. "By joining the NDC [the National Dialogue Conference], they gained a seat at the national bargaining table, where they advocated popular positions, including a federal state based on democratic principles, political pluralism, religious freedom and balance of powers" (ICG, 2014). A year later, once the Houthis had taken the capital, they planned on implementing a transitional government, not linked to any sectarian stances (Amnesty International, 2015). "It took a decade for the Houthis to march on Sanaa, but before they did so, they also sat in its square, participating in a broad-based social movement that called itself the 'Change Revolution'"

(Yadav, 2014). "The development [came] as the Houthi fighters, after taking over the presidential palace in Sanaa following months of political unrest, [demanded] that Hadi implement a power-sharing deal" (Al Jazeera, 2015). These different reports show that the Houthis have been fighting against repression and for democratic political reforms and that they were trying to participate politically in the transition therefore challenging the elite who would lose power if the reforms were to be implemented.

7. The demobilization and homogenization as a strategy to counter the Houthi movement

The second argument shown here is that strategies of demobilization and homogenization have been significant aspects of the Yemeni conflict as the challenged elite has used them to silence, undermine and eliminate the Houthi movement and popular uprising against them. More precisely, the challenged elite is implementing demobilization practices based on a sectarian narrative in order to make ethnicity the only relevant identity and to undermine the opposing narrative that is challenging the elite. In addition, the challenged elite had implemented homogenization practices in order to create a homogenous ethnic space and therefore a homogenous political space.

a. Demobilization based on a sectarian narrative and the control of the media

According to Gagnon, the first step in creating an ethnic conflict, where religion is the only politically relevant identity, is to define the interest of the collective in ethnic terms (Gagnon, 2006, p.136). This is done through a rhetoric based on sectarian divisions of an 'us versus them'. 'Us' is of one ethnicity protecting itself from a potential threat from 'them' the opposing ethnicity. In Yemen, such a rhetoric is very much present. The pro-government groups with the backing of the Saudi-led coalition have tried to influence the narrative of the conflict as an ethnic and religious one as they have framed the Houthis as mainstream Shias and have used certain terms such as Persians, or Twelver Shias which are religiously and historically loaded terms. The leader of group fighting the Houthis and Saleh's forces in Taiz, Hamoud al-Mikhlafi. portrayed the Houthis as 'Persians' and as Shia (Al-Muslimi, 2015). The Yemeni Ambassador to the United States, Ahmed Awadh Ben Mubarak also stated that the conflict in Yemen is a conflict between Arabs and Persians, defining the Houthis as Persians (Baron & Al-Muslimi, 2016). The historical/sectarian divide is linked to previous wars in the 16th century when Shia Islam (Safavids who made Shia Islam the state religion of Persia) fought the Sunnis (Adbo, et al. 2016). "Hard-line Sunni Islamists have used harsher

historic terms, such as rafidha, rejecters of the faith, and majus, Zoroastrian or crypto Persian, to describe Shias as heretical" (Adbo, et al. 2016). Using this term to portray the Houthis, is a reference to their religious linkages. By naming the Houthis Persians, they are not considered as Arabs, but rather as Shia Iranians, creating a greater divide between the two groups. President Hadi has also used religious terms to describe the Houthis, such as 'Twelver Shia' (Al-Muslimi, 2015). This refers to Shia's who believe that there were historically twelve Imams. The Houthis are Zaydi Shias meaning that they do not believe in the Twelver Shia (Adbo, et al. 2016). This is an important distinction because it shows that Hadi here is trying to link the Houthis with mainstream Shiism to deepen the religious divide between the Houthis and Sunnis, whereas the two theological schools (Zaydism and Sunnism) are not that far apart (Al-Muslimi, 2015). Al-Jubeir (2015), who is the Saudi Arabian Ambassador to the United States stated in a press conference when talking about the military operation (Operation Decisive Storm) stated that it is "to protect the people of Yemen and its legitimate government from a takeover by the Houthis. A violent extremist militia." The Zaydis Shias are theologically closer to Sunnis than they are to mainstream Shias. Exacerbating the differences of the two religious groups shows how the pro-government groups have portrayed the 'them' in religious terms creating a sectarian divide between the groups.

In addition, Yemeni government officials have not only made a sectarian divide between the opposing groups, there are also statements claiming that this opposing sectarian group is a threat: "there are an estimated 50 Jews remaining in Yemen—all at risk of an ethnic cleansing campaign spearheaded by the Iran-backed Houthi rebels" (Yemen's information minister Moammer al-Iryani spoke on Israel Radio on 16 April 2017) (The Times of Israel, 2017). He also noted that the Houthi's are acting upon their slogan (God is Great. Death to America. Death to Israel. Curse upon the Jews. Victory to Islam) and that therefore they are threat to the Yemeni people (The Times of Israel, 2017). Moreover, he said that this threat towards the Jews was "a blow to Yemen's heritage and culture" framing the Houthis as a threat to Yemen's heritage and culture. The pro-government groups have also portrayed themselves, the 'us', with historical and sectarian references. Hussei al-Ahmar, a tribal leader that is opposed to the Houthis described himself as "the powerful lion of the Sunnis" (Al-Muslimi, 2015). Describing himself as a defender of the Sunnis, in opposition to the 'attacker Shia'. Thus, not only is the 'them' portrayed in religious terms and as a threat, the 'us' is also portrayed by certain influential leaders as the protectors of a religious group. This is done clearly to demobilize the Houthi and their movement.

One essential element during the framing of the conflict is the control over the media (Gagnon, 1996, p.137) as this will push for one sectarian group to only see the dominant narrative made by the challenged elite. The control of the information, not only to spread the specific messages of the rhetoric but also to silence any other rhetoric or information. Silencing the opponent in order to also create a homogenous political space (argument 3). This is very much the case in Yemen as overall information on the conflict itself has been very hard to gain and there is a very tight control of media and press. The government had control over most of the television and radio stations, this did not stop them from trying to silence independent or opposing media outlets. Media stations such as the TV station Yemen Today (owned by former president Saleh) was raided by government forces, and the equipment of the TV station was confiscated (Human Rights Watch, 2014). The government justified its actions by stating that Yemen Today was "inciting chaos". The government has also prevented certain newspapers to be printed (Freedom House, 2015). Reporters and journalists are intimidated in order to try to silence them, as a reporter from Sky News, Muhammad al-Qadhi stated that he was intimidated on the streets while he was capturing protesters in Sanaa (Human Rights Watch, 2014). Similar incidents have happened to Al Jazeera reporters, US freelance journalists, or other international reporters were not allowed to have access to certain areas in the country (Human Rights Watch, 2014; Freedom House, 2015). In a report regarding the free press in Yemen it was noted that journalist that reports on corruption or on the rebel groups are more likely to face criminal prosecution (Human Rights Watch, 2013; Freedom House 2015). Journalists and reporters are threatened, imprisoned, prosecuted, attacked, harassed, disappeared or killed (Human Rights Watch, 2013). In 2012, there were over 260 separate cases of incidents against journalists, the press and the media where over half of the cases were perpetuated by the Yemeni government (Freedom House, 2015). And as the conflict started to escalate, the number of these cases also increased showing that the government was trying to have control about what is being said in the media (Freedom House, 2015).

With such a rhetoric and the control over the narrative that is spread, the pro-government forces, the challenged elite, have been trying to demobilize their opponent, the Houthis by making Sunnism the only relevant identity that is threatened by the Houthis framed as Shia extremists. Proving the argument (2) that the challenged elite is implementing demobilization practices based on a sectarian narrative in order to make ethnicity the only relevant identity and to undermine the opposing narrative that is challenging the elite. Moreover, this then falls into the argument that the conflict in Yemen has sectarian dynamics,

which are a deliberate strategy of the challenged elite in an attempt to maintain power. However, as mentioned earlier, framing the conflict as a sectarian one is not the sole element in order to create a sectarian war in Gagnon's terms. Rather, strategies of demobilization play an important part as they should continue into strategies of homogenization of the ethnic and political space.

b. Homogenization of the ethnic and political space

The challenged elite had homogenization practices in order to create a homogenous ethnic space and therefore a homogenous political space. Gagnon mentions that the means by which one can create a political homogenous space are not only done by silencing or eliminating the opponent but by creating homogenous ethnic spaces. This is the reconstructing of the ethnic/religious composition of regions. Simply put, creating regions where there is only one ethnicity/religion in order for people to identify solely with that one ethnicity/religion with the intent of making ethnicity/religion the only relevant identity. As noted earlier this is linked to the notion that the process of identification to an ethnicity is based on social realities. Therefore, creating a physical delimitation between different ethnicities and religions is important for elites if they want to have an ethnicity that is the only relevant identity. In the Yemeni war, there are instances where they have tried, or are creating ethnic homogenous spaces. In the Security Council Expert Report from 2016 it was noted that "on 8 May, security personnel began to forcibly displace individuals working or residing in Aden who were from the north" (UNSC, 2017, p.59); "the forced deportation of three workers from a factory in Lahij to Ta'izz on or about 12 May. The Yemeni military forcefully removed them from their workplace and transported them to the "north" of Yemen. One worker was given time to go to Aden, before being deported, to enable him to relocate his family to the north" (UNSC, 2017, p.59). The government justified these policies by saying it was a question of security in the area. However, this is discrimination against northerners, as they are usually Zaydi. This might not be a full-scale displacement of Zaydis but it is important as it shows that the government forces do have policies that try to reconstruct the ethnic/religious composition of regions in order to create homogenous ethnic spaces.

In the Yemeni case the direct elimination of opponents and moderate figures from both sides of the conflict is a clear example of the homogenization of the political space. Yemen has been facing a large number of assassinations, attempting to shape the political realm and many important government and military officials as well as politicians have been assassinated over the past years (Amnesty International, 2016). It is not always clear however

who or which group is behind the different assassinations as they are often perpetuated by unidentified men or bombs making it difficult to blame one party or the other, creating an atmosphere of insecurity. There are many more assassinations, and attempts that are forging the political landscape of Yemen. These assassinations go further than simply trying to weaken the opponent as they target very specific people. Importantly, the first assassinations were moderate Houthi leaders Ahmed Sharafuddin, Abdul Karim Jadban and then Abdul Karim al Khaywani, which in turn then severely weakened the position of those who sought the integration and normalisation of the rebels in the political system, a position very remote from the warmongering logic promoted by Abdul Malik al Houthi and his opportunistic ally Ali Abdullah Saleh" (Bonnefoy, 2016). Additionally, Muhammed al Mutawakkil, a known moderate figure, descendant of Zaydi imams and the mentor of many independent intellectuals, was assassinated in November 2014 (Bonnefoy, 2016). Mohammed Abdel Malek al-Mutawakel, a prominent figure believed to have helped bring a peace deal between the Houthis and the pro-government forces was also killed (Al Jazeera, 2014). Seen as such, there is a real threat to independent or dissenting voices (journalists and intellectuals included) since, if they are not already assassinated, they fear for their lives. This is also tied to Gagnon's theory where violence is needed to create a sense of identity towards a certain ethnicity, this changes the social reality of the society and therefore changes the identification towards a certain group. Changing the political landscape by eliminating the moderates will also create a self-fulfilling prophecy in the sense that the conflict will then unavoidably become more sectarian if the non-sectarian actors are killed.

To briefly summarize the main arguments, the challenged elite has a strategy of demobilization and homogenization in order to silence, undermine and eliminate Houthi movement and popular uprising against them by using a sectarian narrative that frames the Houthis as a sectarian group that is threatening the Sunnis, by controlling the information and media in order to control the narrative, by creating a homogenous ethnic space, displacing norther's (traditionally seen as Zaydi) that live in the southern regions of Yemen (traditionally seen as Sunni), and by creating a homogenous political space by eliminating opposing politicians, journalists or intellectuals.

8. **The limitations of the implementation of the demobilization and homogenization practices**

The last point is that if all the other arguments are fully implemented there is a risk of creating a self-fulfilling prophecy of a sectarian war as Gagnon mentions in his theory

(Gagnon, 1996, p.136). However, while analyzing the different narratives the demobilization and homogenization practices they are not fully 'implemented' which in turn also explains why Yemen is not a full sectarian war. This does not mean that it is not at risk of becoming a full sectarian war since there is still the potential that the challenged elite will create a sectarian war in Yemen as certain the sectarian dimensions and strategies have now also been implemented by the Houthi side of the conflict.

a. The limited sectarian war rhetoric and homogenization of ethnic spaces

The rhetoric observed from the government side is not solely sectarian. For example, in an official statement by Saudi Arabia's ambassador to the United States, Adel Jubeir stated that "the objective is to defend the legitimate government of President Hadi from the takeover attempts by the Houthi militias in Yemen" (Arwa Rights). General Ahmed Asiri, the spokesperson for Arab alliance who has been interviewed by several national and international media outlets has stated several times that the Houthis are a local militia, the 'us' is not defined in sectarian terms, but rather in nationalistic terms the Yemeni people. "We are looking to accomplish three goals," he said, "first, to preserve the Yemeni state, secondly, to reduce the dangers to Yemeni citizens and thirdly to protect the Saudi borders. We have been able to accomplish a substantial part of our objectives" (NCR Iran, 2017). King Salman of Saudi Arabia stated that he was "supporting the brotherly people of Yemen as well as Yemen's legitimate government in order to achieve security and stability in Yemen" (Al Arabiya News, 2017). The same observation is made in a statement by the government of Yemen, as it was noted that: "the Government stresses that liberating areas under the control of the Houthi/Saleh forces is at the core of the Government's responsibility and duty to protect its citizens, and is aimed at alleviating the suffering of the Yemeni people in these areas by putting an end to the grave human rights violations committed by the putschists, including arbitrary arrests, enforced disappearances, forced child and youth recruitments, unlawful killings, denial of aid access, and bombing of residential houses" (Statement by the Government of Yemen). The pro-government forces and Saudi Arabia have quite clearly defined the Houthis Shia group that is backed by Iran that is threatening the peace and stability of the country and the Arab world. They view the Houthis as Iranian puppets and clearly state so. However, they define the Houthis as an illegitimate rebel/militia and or insurgent group and not always as a sectarian one. They also do not define themselves purely as Sunnis, or of one ethnicity. They more clearly define themselves as the legitimate protectors of the Yemeni people. Moreover, there are only few examples of the homogenization of ethnic space (this may be due to the lack of information of what is

happening on the ground). This does influence the fact that there is no complete reconstruction of ethnic spaces therefore also limiting its desired effect of creating a social reality where there is only one identity. The lack of full implementation of the different practices explain also why the conflict is not fully sectarian and only has some sectarian dynamics to it.

b. Risk of full sectarian war

Even if the war in Yemen is not fully sectarian, this does not mean the demobilization and homogenization practices do not have the potential of becoming self-fulfilling prophecies (Gagnon, 1996, p.136). This section shows that the Houthis have also developed a sectarian narrative and their own demobilization and homogenization practices. As the pro-Houthi groups are being challenged in reverse by the pro-government groups they have a similar rhetoric, but then reversed of course, where describing their opponents as sectarian and as a threat to their own being. They used terms such as: 'takfirist' ("the practice of excommunicating other Muslims – it is also a word used to describe extremist Sunni Islamism") or 'daeshites' (from the term Daesh, the Arabic word for the Islamic State) (Al-Muslimi, 2015). In an interview with the Associated Press, the heads the rebels' Revolutionary Council, Mohammed al-Houthi stated that "Yemen is facing a real genocide" (Al-Haj, 2015). The Houthis have not only vilified the 'them' in sectarian terms, they have also glorified the 'us' as they have named their brigades 'Hussein brigades' the comes from Hussein bin Ali bin Abi Taleb, an important figure that has a strong religious and historical connotation to Shia Islam. Referring to a historical legacy, in the 18th century Hussein bin Ali bin Abi Taleb was a "young military leader famous for his role in the seventy-day siege of the capital city of Sanaa in from 1967 to1968" (Al-Muslimi, 2015). Although not major, the Houthis have also started to revive and impose certain religious ceremonies in the areas that they are holding. It is believed that "modern identity politics is thus reviving an ancient grudge between the Shia supporters of Hussein and their Sunni opponents" (Al-Muslimi, 2015). Moreover, as mentioned earlier, the Houthis' slogan (God is Great. Death to America. Death to Israel. Curse upon the Jews. Victory to Islam) has a very important sectarian connotation, which portrays themselves as the defenders of Islam and protecting Islam from Zionists and Americans. Both sides, challenged by each other have a rhetoric based on sectarian divisions with historical connotations that is framing the other as a threat to their religion from whom they need to be protected. With such narratives, identities are separated between groups where the people will then choose to which side they then belong, the

Houthis, defending from imperial and extremist Sunnis, or the government, defending itself from Shias that are threatening the country as a whole.

Once the Houthis had taken Sanaa by the end of 2014, they also perpetrated many infringements on the freedom of the press. State-run TV stations were attacked, Islah affiliated TV stations, press and media were harassed, detained, raided, attacked and killed (Freedom House, 2015; 2016). "Internet service providers, apparently acting on orders from Houthi authorities, also blocked numerous online news sources" (Freedom House, 2016). Certain radio stations have more and more a sectarian rhetoric that demonizes the Sunnis (Al-Muslimi, 2015). "The increased threat of violence and arbitrary detention contributed to self-censorship among journalists, as did smear campaigns and other threats" (Freedom House, 2016). The Houthis have also started to simply arrest whomever disagrees with them as "the Houthis began sweeping crackdowns in Sanaa and cast opponents as wide-ranging as Muslim Brotherhood members to secular feminist activists as American-backed Al Qaeda supporters, working at the behest of Saudi interlopers" (Baron & Al-Muslimi, 2016). Since the conflict escalated, both sides have been trying to influence the narrative, not only by creating their own but by actively silencing the others and the media. The information given in different controlled areas (from both sides of the conflict), is thus restricted.

Forced displacement of people, the homogenization of ethnic spaces, from a certain region is not only committed by the government, the Houthis have expulsed Salafis (after a deal was made with the government), conservative Sunnis, who had to leave their residences in Dammaj. In an interview with the Yemeni Times, Yemeni human rights activist Mohamed Al-Ahmadi spoke about the 'agreement' forcing the Salafis to leave Dammaj, he noted that "the Salafis had only two choices: either to die at the hands of the Houthi militia (…) or to leave Dammaj and live" (Al-Hassani, 2014). "Following three months of violent Salafi-Houthi clashes in the Dammaj area of Sa'ada that left hundreds dead and injured (…) about 30,000 residents were forced to leave Sa'ada following the [government's] six wars in the governorate, and previously, the Al-Salem Jews were also expelled. The Salafis didn't leave their area to go on a stroll! They left because they were subject to murder, displacement and siege" (Al-Hassani, 2014). The Houthis have gone a step further by reconstructing the religious composition of regions, as they have started to replace high-level government positions with Zaydis, they have set up "large billboards depicting divisive religious figures, such as the secretary general of Lebanon's Hezbollah, Hassan Nasrallah, and the supreme leader of Islamic Revolution in Iran, Ayatollah Khomeini" (Baron & Al-Muslimi, 2016). These are also not fully implemented policies of homogenizing ethnic and political spaces

while having a sectarian narrative, however they are present, and are shaping the social reality of the conflict in Yemen. Meaning that they have the potential to influence to what extend the conflict in Yemen is sectarian.

9. Conclusion

As noted at the beginning of this thesis, the war in Yemen has had a serious humanitarian cost, and does not seem to be reaching an end. It is therefore important to understand what the actual dynamics of the war are, including analysing its sectarian dynamics, whether or not the war itself is sectarian. This thesis did just that, questioned what the sectarian dynamics of the Yemeni war are. Gagnon's theory shows the importance of understanding the process of identification of ethnicities and how this is used by elites who wish to maintain power. A set of three arguments were put forward: (1) the elite that has the power is challenged; (2) the challenged elite will have a demobilization strategy based on a sectarian narrative in order to make ethnicity the only relevant identity and to undermine the opposing narrative that is challenging the elite; and (3) the challenged elite will have a homogenization strategy in order to create a homogenous ethnic space and therefore a homogenous political space. The latter is done by silencing and eliminating the opponent and by making of a homogenous ethnic space ensuring that ethnicity is the only relevant identity. These arguments contributed to guiding the research and to proving the overall argument of the thesis, which is that the conflict in Yemen does have sectarian dynamics and that these are a deliberate strategy of the challenged elite in an attempt to maintain power.

The elite that is in power in Yemen is challenged. More precisely, the Houthis have been challenging the elites of Yemen for the past decade and in 2014 succeeded in becoming a grave threat to the president as they took over control of the capital to the point where Hadi had to flee the country. This challenged elite then implemented a strategy of demobilization and homogenization in order to silence, undermine and eliminate Houthi movement and popular uprising that was challenging them. They did so by using a sectarian narrative that frames the Houthis as a sectarian group that is threatening the Sunnis, by controlling the information and media in order to control the narrative, by creating a homogenous ethnic space, displacing northerners (traditionally seen as Zaydi) that live in the southern regions of Yemen (traditionally seen as Sunni), and by creating a homogenous political space by eliminating opposing politicians, journalists or intellectuals. Demobilization and homogenization are thus deliberate strategies of the challenged elite in an attempt to maintain power.

There are some limitations to findings of the thesis. Even though there are demobilization and homogenization strategies at play, these are limited and not implemented on a full, national/structural scale. Which in turn also explains why Yemen is not a purely sectarian war. The narratives surrounding the conflict have not only been sectarian as pro-government groups have defined the Houthis as an illegitimate rebel/militia and/or insurgent group and thus not always as a sectarian group. Additionally, they also do not define themselves purely as Sunnis, or as being of one particular ethnicity. They more clearly define themselves as the legitimate protectors of the Yemeni people. Moreover, there are only few examples of the homogenization of ethnic and political spaces. The demobilization and homogenization strategies are limited but as are the sectarian dimensions of the war. This does not however mean that there is no risk of the conflict becoming a full scale sectarian war as we have seen that the opposing party, the Houthis, have used similar demobilization and homogenization strategies, framing the conflict as sectarian, controlling the media and trying to create a homogenous ethnic and political space.

As in Gagnon's theory, it is important to acknowledge the change in the social realities of a certain conflict. The increased intensity and violence of the conflict, in addition to the fact that both sides are purposefully creating sectarian dynamics to the conflict, will change the social realities of what is happening in Yemen. This means that there is a risk of religion becoming the only relevant identity and that the war may then turn into a full sectarian war. This is an important implication for the future of the conflict and also shows the relevance of analysing conflicts and understanding how social realities influence social actors and their choices. In turn such analyses will not only help explain and understand conflicts but can also help avoid them into turning into full ethnic wars.

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