
International Organizations, Rebel Diplomacy, and Civil Conflict Duration

How External Intervention Prolongs the War in Yemen (2014-Present)

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Abstract: Why does foreign intervention, in the name of civil conflict termination, overwhelmingly produce opposite outcomes? This paper looks into the Yemeni Civil War (2014-present)—one of the most grievous ongoing intrastate wars despite intense participation of external actors—to contribute to the theoretical framework on the adverse effects external intervention poses on civil conflict duration. The author argues that shifting alliances and domestic institutional plurality as a result of multilateral organizations' intervention and the absence or failure of rebel diplomacy under external influence could prolong civil wars. The case of Yemen provides an example for this rationale, with negative consequences attributed to the controversial intervention of the Gulf Cooperation Council and the obstructed rebel diplomacy between the Houthis and external actors.

Keywords: *civil war, conflict duration, external intervention, rebel diplomacy*

Introduction

While foreign intervention and support, in theory, seek to bring quicker peace and re-stabilization to regions in civil conflict, this is usually not the case in practice.^① The war in Yemen presents a distinct example. Since the initial intervention of a foreign coalition consisting of Saudi Arabia, the United States, and a number of other Western and Middle Eastern states in 2015, Yemen has already experienced another six years of civil war. The war has caused more than 250,000 casualties and serious famine, and led to one of the most urgent humanitarian crises to date.^② Similar situations arose during Israel and Syria's intervention in the Lebanese Civil War (1975-1990), the intervention in the Sierra Leone Civil War (1991-

① Patrick M. Regan, "Third-Party Interventions and the Duration of Intrastate Conflicts," *Journal of Conflict Resolution* 46, no.1 (2002): 56.

② Daniel Egel et al., *Building an Enduring Peace in Yemen* (Santa Monica: RAND Corporation, 2021), 1.

2002) by the Economic Community of West African States Monitoring Group (ECOMOG), and many more.^①

Existing theories can be applied to explain such phenomenon to a certain extent, yet more aspects of the correlation between external intervention and civil conflict duration have been largely overlooked. Thus, this paper looks to explore the role of foreign actors in the Yemeni Civil War and their influence on the longevity of the war, in order to contribute new perspectives to the existing theoretical model on how external intervention affects civil war duration.

By conducting an exploratory case analysis of the war in Yemen and incorporating existing explanations, this paper argues that shifting alliances and institutional plurality with the engagement of multilateral actors, as well as challenges for rebel diplomacy when external states intervene, may supplement the existing arguments on how foreign intervention prolongs—rather than terminates—intrastate wars.

Existing Theories on External Intervention and Civil Conflict Duration

Previous studies debate the effect external intervention has on civil conflict duration. While Balch-Lindsay et al. (2008) finds third-party interventions supporting one side only effective in shortening the length of civil wars by increasing the “likelihood of negotiated settlement,” more scholars expect negative results on civil conflict duration when foreign actors are engaged, though they tend to reach such conclusions based on different conditions.^②

Collier et al. (2004) reveal that the duration of civil wars depends on the side with which the intervener aligns, and external military intervention only shortens civil conflicts when foreign actors solely support the rebels rather than the government, though the authors have not extensively discussed why this is the case.^③ Regan (2002) shares this conclusion by testing foreign interventions with support to both sides of the conflict, which shows that such interventions have a tendency to lead to stalemates, but not to an end of the war.^④ Sullivan and Karreth (2015) further elaborate on the argument by adding that pro-rebel interventions are most effective when the rebels’ major disadvantage lies in their conventional military capacity.^⑤

Some other scholars find the identity of the interveners important, with a distinction between state actors and multilateral organizations. For instance, DeRouen and Sobek (2004) suggest that interventions by

① David E. Cunningham, “Blocking resolution: How external states can prolong civil wars,” *Journal of Peace Research* 47, no.2 (2010): 127.

② Dylan Balch-Lindsay, Andrew J. Enterline, and Kyle A. Joyce, “Third-Party Intervention and the Civil War Process,” *Journal of Peace Research* 45, no.3 (2008): 360.

③ Paul Collier, Anke Hoeffler, and Måns Söderbom, “On the Duration of Civil War,” *Journal of Peace Research* 41, no.3 (2004): 261, 267.

④ Regan, “Third-Party Interventions,” 71.

⑤ Patricia L. Sullivan and Johannes Karreth, “The conditional impact of military intervention on internal armed conflict outcomes,” *Conflict Management and Peace Science* 32, no.3 (2015): 269.

multilateral parties, especially UN interventions, could positively affect conflict duration by facilitating negotiations for conflict settlement or armistice.^① Doyle and Sambanis (2000) also reiterate this argument, having obtained quantitative results verifying the tendency of intervention by international organizations to improve the prospects of civil war resolution.^② On the other hand, the involvement of foreign state actors tends to complicate and prolong civil wars as they make civil wars “multi-party,” which creates conditions for longer conflicts, including “shifting alliances and incentives,” complexified settlement bargaining, and progressively asymmetrical intelligence.^③

However, these rationales cannot explain the duration of many civil wars in full, including the case of Yemen. For instance, multilateral organizations have intervened in the Yemeni war, but they have not had any substantive impact on preventing the continuation of the war. In addition, though scholars like Collier et al. (2004) have recognized the limited effect of external interventions on civil conflict duration (when fighting against rebel groups), further research is required to explain and theorize such phenomena.^④

Therefore, by exploring the case of Yemen in depth, this paper seeks to supplement the existing theoretical model of external intervention and civil conflict duration by identifying new determining factors, and fill some of the foregoing research gaps left by previous studies. For example, the Yemeni case can be used to support the correlation between intervention efforts against rebel groups and prolonged civil wars, and how international organizations may exacerbate civil war dynamics and lead to more enduring conflicts, diverging from what some existing research suggests.

Theoretical Argument

Built upon previous studies and an exploratory case analysis of the Yemeni Civil War, this paper proposes two additional factors associated with external intervention that could prolong civil conflicts: 1) institutional plurality and shifting alliances caused by international intervention, including those by multilateral organizations; and 2) the absence or failure of rebel diplomacy attributed to foreign interventions siding with the *de jure* government.

This paper considers these two factors relevant and significant for several reasons. First, existing theories underscore the positive effects brought by multinational organizations on civil war duration and condemn external state actors for creating “multi-parties.” However, international organizations may also possess negative “potentials” when they overwhelmingly represent state interests and risk alliance shifts and

① Karl R. DeRouen Jr and David Sobek, “The Dynamics of Civil War Duration and Outcome,” *Journal of Peace Research* 41, no.3 (2004): 317.

② Michael W. Doyle and Nicholas Sambanis, “International Peacebuilding: A Theoretical and Quantitative Analysis,” *American Political Science Review* 94, no.4 (2000): 779.

③ David E. Cunningham, “Veto Players and Civil War Duration,” *American Journal of Political Science* 50, no.4 (2006): 875, 878.

④ Collier, Hoeffler, and Söderbom, “On the Duration of Civil War,” 267.

institutional plurality. Second, diplomacy—as opposed to direct confrontations or sanctions—can play a crucial role in altering civil war dynamics as it facilitates communication between rebels and the international community, and can thereby reduce misperceptions and increase the likelihood of peace negotiations.^① However, when major foreign actors side with the government against rebel groups, formal diplomatic ties between the rebels and the outside world may be hindered, reflecting the existing observations that pro-government external interventions are generally ineffective in quickly ending wars.

The remainder of this paper explores these two dimensions in further detail with the case of Yemen. The case selection is appropriate, as the Yemeni Civil War—one of the few ongoing intrastate conflicts—provides a distinct example of civil conflicts accommodating extensive and enduring external interventions. Moreover, given the contemporary nature of the war in Yemen, information about foreign interventions in this case is well-documented and readily accessible, as compared to other long-lasting and foreign-aided civil wars in the past.

Case Analysis: The Yemeni Civil War

Following an overview of the war in Yemen, this analysis elaborates on the aforementioned theoretical argument and exemplifies the impact of multilateral intervention and rebel diplomacy on civil conflict duration with the Yemeni case. In particular, this section addresses the role of the Gulf Cooperation Council (GCC) in the Yemeni war and the obstruction of rebel diplomacy channels between the Houthis and external actors as a result of delegitimization efforts and Iranian influence.

The War in a Nutshell

When the tribal elites of Yemen decided to take a role in the Arab Spring to alter their nation's bleak economy and fragile state of security in 2011, little did they know that they would end up with a new regime far from what they intended.^② The Yemeni uprisings in 2011 overthrew the longstanding authoritarian government under Ali Abdullah Saleh and replaced him with Sunni politician Abd Rabbuh Mansur Hadi under the effect of the GCC Initiative.^③ Yet within three years, the Hadi government had a hard time catering to the fundamental demands of its people and resolving the most urgent issues that Yemen was facing. The Sunni identity of this leadership was no help for the situation, given the large discontented Zaidi Shia population in the north.^④ The Sunnites and the Zaidi Shiites are the two major denominations of

① Patrick M. Regan and Aysegul Aydin, "Diplomacy and Other Forms of Intervention in Civil Wars," *Journal of Conflict Resolution* 50, no.5 (2006): 754.

② Khaled Fattah, "Yemen: A Social Intifada in a Republic of Sheikhs," *Middle East Policy* 18, no.3 (2011): 81-82.

③ Thomas Juneau, "Yemen and the Arab Spring: Elite Struggles, State Collapse and Regional Security," *Orbis* 57, no.3 (2013): 415.

④ Bruce Riedel, "Who are the Houthis, and why are we at war with them," *Brookings Institution*, December 18, 2017, <https://www.brookings.edu/blog/markaz/2017/12/18/who-are-the-houthis-and-why-are-we-at-war-with-them/> (accessed December 23, 2021).

Muslims in Yemen, with the former constituting around 65% of the state's population and the latter contributing to a majority of the rest, and have maintained deep-rooted divisions.^① Therefore, when the Sunni administration once again failed the state by cutting fuel subsidies, which would further aggravate poverty, the Houthis—a Zaidi Shia armed force—organized extensive protests and marched southward, eventually seizing the Yemeni capital Sana'a from the *de jure* government of Hadi in late 2014 and early 2015.

Since then, Yemen has been in a state of insurgency that thus far has no sign of alleviation. In March 2015, alarmed by the potential for serious disturbances and rising Shia influence in its neighborhood, the predominantly Sunni Saudi Arabia led a coalition of Sunni Muslim states (e.g., the UAE) into Yemen to support the Hadi government against the Houthi rebels—who were perceived to be backed by Shia Iran—through military supplies, missile attacks, and more.^② The civil conflict thus began to involve international stakeholders: on one side stood the *de jure* Hadi administration supported by the Arab coalition, while on the other was Iran aiding the self-declared Houthi regime. However, the Saudi Arabian coalition alone could hardly keep abreast with the rebel alliance and thus turned to western countries, including the US, UK, and France, for further support in the form of intelligence and other logistical support.^③ Multiple international organizations, including the UN Security Council, the European Union, the GCC, and numerous humanitarian NGOs, also entered the scene. As a result, foreign actors were even more heavily involved in the Yemeni Civil War.

International Organizations, Shifting Alliances, and State Fragmentation

While existing arguments place a major emphasis on the impact of foreign state actors on shifting alliances, exacerbated state fragmentation, and conflict duration, the effect of interventions by international organizations also requires significant attention. Unlike what previous scholars have said about the predominantly benevolent role of multinational players in contributing to peacemaking efforts and conflict termination, this paper observes that in multiple civil wars (the Yemeni war being a distinct example), international actors also carry the risk of shifting alliances and furthering state fragmentation. Further, though peacemaking negotiations are more likely when international organizations intervene, these do not necessarily result in shorter wars, and could even lead to opposite outcomes.

By looking into the case of Yemen, this paper suggests that international organizations may complicate the dynamics of civil conflicts in two primary aspects: shifting alliances caused by international

① Anthony H. Cordesman, "America, Saudi Arabia, and the Strategic Importance of Yemen," *Center for Strategic & International Studies*, March 26, 2015, <https://www.csis.org/analysis/america-saudi-arabia-and-strategic-importance-yemen> (accessed February 26, 2022).

② Emile Hokayem and David B. Roberts, "The War in Yemen," *Survival* 58, no.6 (2016): 170-71.

③ *Ibid.*, 165.

organizations' function in representing the stakes of powerful member states, and institutional plurality within the conflict as a result of failed peacemaking efforts.

Realists and neo-Gramscians would agree on international organizations' function in pursuing the interests of member states—especially the powerful ones—rather than holding a high level of institutional autonomy and reflecting unbiased rationales in their decisions.^① In the context of a civil war, international organizations' decisions on whether to intervene, when to intervene, and who to support reflect the preferences of member states with strong voting power. For instance, actions carried out by the UN Security Council for “maintaining international peace and security”—including intervening in intrastate conflicts—are decided by procedural votes of the 15 member states, including the five permanent members with veto powers to reject operations unfavorable to their own interests.^② In this sense, it is true that peacemaking interventions by international organizations largely represent the interests of powerful member states, and international organizations can have the same impact as external state actors on multiplying divisions within states in civil conflicts and leading to longer wars. Moreover, international organizations, like state actors, may have inconsistent objectives under different circumstances when member states' interests diverge, which could result in switching alliances during wartime, further complicating the dynamics of the conflict and extending the war.

The GCC, a regional political and economic alliance which is practically dominated by Saudi Arabia, testifies this argument in the case of the Yemeni war.^③ As Saudi Arabia holds major decisional power within the institution, the GCC has long demonstrated an apparent preference for Sunni regimes in the Arab Peninsula. Since the Arab Spring, the GCC's choice of alliance has consistently reflected Saudi preferences. When Saudi Arabia was primarily concerned about regional stability during the early stages of the uprisings in Yemen, the GCC provided full support for the Saleh government against rebel elites who were attempting to overthrow it.^④ Nonetheless, Saudi Arabia's considerations changed when it realized that the Saleh administration did not possess the sufficient capacity and resolve to restore peace. The GCC quickly followed Saudi Arabia's lead and switched support to the transitional government.^⑤ The alliance shift seemed to have temporarily restored stability within the new Hadi administration, yet led to greater mistrust between the GCC and Yemen, laying the foundation for the long duration of the subsequent civil war.

① Robert W. Cox, “Gramsci, Hegemony and International Relations: An Essay in Method,” *Millennium* 12, no.2 (1983): 172.

② United Nations Security Council, *Voting System*, <https://www.un.org/securitycouncil/content/voting-system> (accessed December 23, 2021).

③ Gertjan Hoetjes, “The Gulf Cooperation Council and the Failure of Peacebuilding in Yemen,” *The International Spectator* 56, no.4 (2021): 155.

④ Michael D. Rettig, “International Institutions, Institutional Duality, and State Fragmentation: The Case of Yemen,” *Social Science Research Network*, December 15, 2012, https://papers.ssrn.com/sol3/papers.cfm?abstract_id=2201920#references-widget (accessed January 3, 2022).

⑤ *Ibid.*

Additionally, institutional plurality as a result of multinational organizations' intervention also hinders state consolidation and civil conflict termination. Borrowing insights from Rettig's (2012) theory of institutional duality, institutional plurality refers to division within the same institutional system—in other words, state fragmentation.^① Interventions by international organizations have the potential to facilitate such conditions in a civil war, as the negotiations they draft and enact more often reflect the interests of their powerful members than those of the state in conflict. Consequently, such negotiations may advance some interest groups' prospects at the expense of other institutions within the same state and system, thereby encouraging divisions among the state.

In the case of the Yemeni Civil War, the GCC multilateral alliance directed the initiative that brought Hadi to power and ended the 2011 conflicts, which, on the surface, may be considered a successful intervention. Yet this consideration is deemed problematic by many due to the current fragmentation of Yemen and the duration of the ongoing war. The GCC, in accordance with the Saudi interests of restoring regional peace and ensuring Sunni leadership, brokered the initiative with Yemeni “politically relevant elites (PRE)” without the presence of students, tribal elites, and others who together constituted the majority of activists in the uprisings.^② During the conflict's temporary hiatus, most of the essential socioeconomic problems (that had led to the uprisings in the first place) were neglected and the GCC even attempted to marginalize some of these groups after 2011.^③ Scholars thus refer to the Arab Spring in Yemen as a “hijacked revolution” that failed to resolve any of the state's key grievances and instead triggered additional divisions between activist groups that had originally pursued similar objectives, such as between tribal elites and PREs.^④ The GCC initiative—despite resulting in a temporarily effective peace settlement—created more long-term state fragmentation. The unresolved grievances brought about another round of intrastate conflict in Yemen after three years and state fragmentation only further complicated the stakes and prolonged the war.

Obstructed Rebel Diplomacy

In addition to alliance shifting and state fragmentation, foreign actors can also alter civil conflict duration by affecting the course of rebel diplomacy. Rebel diplomacy is a form of public diplomacy that connects rebel groups with foreign actors through formal communication channels. Common methods of rebel diplomacy include dispatching representatives as “diplomats” to established offices abroad, posting on mainstream social media platforms (e.g., Facebook and Twitter), and arranging interviews with foreign

① Rettig, “International Institutions.”

② Atiaf Z. Alwazir, “Yemen's enduring resistance: youth between politics and informal mobilization,” *Mediterranean Politics* 21, no.1 (2016): 171.

③ Hoetjes, “The Gulf Cooperation Council,” 159.

④ Letta Tayler, “Yemen's Hijacked Revolution: New Protests Pushed Aside by Old Rivalries in Sana'a,” *Human Rights Watch*, September 26, 2011, <https://www.hrw.org/news/2011/09/26/yemens-hijacked-revolution> (accessed January 5, 2022).

media.^① Previous research on rebel diplomacy has determined these methods generally productive in achieving the rebels' goals, whether they be seeking foreign support or publicizing their grievances and appeals, and often lead to considerable improvement to exchanges between rebel groups and foreign state and non-state actors.^{②③} Regan and Aydin (2006) further supplement the argument by analyzing whether diplomacy indeed has a significant effect in reducing the expected duration of civil conflicts.^④ They offer a possible rationale for such a tendency, suggesting that successful diplomatic communication may facilitate combatants' perceptions and calculations regarding the capacity and resolve they and the government possess, which often make peace settlements more likely.

Therefore, rebel diplomacy can be a significant variable in determining the duration of a civil war. Not only does it facilitate mutual understanding and increase the likelihood of peace negotiations, but it also prevents third parties (those that serve as a middle ground for indirect communication between rebels and external actors) from pursuing their own interests, which would further complicate war dynamics and prolong the conflict.

However, scholars also note that such diplomatic efforts by rebel groups are significantly blocked when foreign actors exclude them from the international stage, as seen in the case of Ansar Dine in the Mali War (2012-present).^⑤ Categorized by the US as a terrorist group, the Ansar Dine struggled to obtain international recognition and was kept from pursuing digital diplomacy on mainstream social media.^⑥ It is reasonable to expect similar outcomes when foreign actors align with the government, as such alliances would distance the rebel groups from the outside world and result in biased perceptions, which could further lead to the complete isolation of the rebel groups from any diplomatic channels.

In the case of Yemen, direct rebel diplomacy was essentially disabled. Cautious of "legitimizing" the Houthis, embassies of foreign interveners relocated from Sana'a to other Arab states after it was taken by the rebels, with the exception of Iran, leaving little space for diplomatic communications.^⑦ The Trump administration designated the Houthis a foreign terrorist organization (FTO) in January 2021, leaving no space for international recognition of the group and normalized communication between the Houthis and external players.^⑧ On account of the diplomatic blockade, foreign actors must now rely on third-party

① Reyko Huang, "Rebel Diplomacy in Civil War," *International Security* 40, no.4 (2016): 94, 100;

Michèle Bos and Jan Melissen, "Rebel diplomacy and digital communication: public diplomacy in the Sahel," *International Affairs* 95, no.6 (2019): 1335-37.

② Bos and Melissen, "Rebel diplomacy," 1342-46.

③ Benjamin T. Jones and Eleonora Mattiacci, "A manifesto, in 140 characters or fewer: social media as a tool of rebel diplomacy," *British Journal of Political Science* 49, no.2 (2017): 739.

④ Regan and Aydin, "Diplomacy and Other Forms," 753.

⑤ Bos and Melissen, "Rebel diplomacy," 1339-42.

⑥ *Ibid.*, 1341-42.

⑦ Farea Al-Muslimi, "Why isolating the Houthis was a strategic mistake," *Chatham House*, November 5, 2021, <https://www.chathamhouse.org/2021/11/why-isolating-houthis-was-strategic-mistake> (accessed January 5, 2022).

⑧ Imad K. Harb, "Pompeo's Departing Sabotage in Yemen," *Arab Center Washington DC*, January 19, 2021, <https://arabcenterdc.org/resource/pompeos-departing-sabotage-in-yemen/> (accessed January 5, 2022).

states—in this case, Iran and Oman—for formal communication with the Houthis regarding their demands. However, such communication channels have been deemed largely unreliable in delivering accurate messages.^① Furthermore, Trump’s categorization of the Houthis as a terrorist group has only irritated the self-declared regime, making them even more reluctant to cooperate and reach a settlement with foreign actors and the previous government. In response to this “foreign sabotage,” the Houthis further raised the stakes for settlement and normalized diplomacy by demanding complete withdrawal of external forces from Yemen, leading the diplomatic situation into a stalemate.^②

Most ironically of all, despite the Arab coalition initially intervening in the war with the hope of restoring stability and containing Iranian (Shia) expansion, their abandonment of direct diplomatic opportunities with the Houthis has only consolidated—if not strengthened—Iranian influence in the region. Nor has peace returned.

Conclusion

By studying the war in Yemen with insights drawn from previous theories, this paper has identified two additional arguments supporting the correlation between external intervention and conflict duration. First, interventions by multilateral organizations that primarily represent member states’ interests can prolong civil conflicts by causing alliance shifts and state fragmentation, even when negotiations seem to be in place. Second, failed or limited direct rebel diplomacy due to unreliable communication channels and self-serving foreign intervention can extend civil war duration. To consolidate these arguments, the author recommends further research to explore a wider range of civil conflicts and conduct quantitative verification.

This study also provides insights for international policymakers into the Yemeni conflict by addressing additional aspects of the war that may be responsible for its duration but may have been overlooked. For instance, relevant parties may want to establish diplomatic ties with the self-declared Houthi office and quickly move to the negotiation stage. In terms of potential future settlements, peacemakers should learn from the GCC’s failure and give more consideration to the appeals of the already divided interest groups within the state in order to achieve and maintain peace.

① Al-Muslimi, “Why isolating the Houthis was a strategic mistake.”

② Nadwa Al-Dawsari, “The Houthis and the limits of diplomacy in Yemen,” *Middle East Institute*, May 6, 2021, <https://www.mei.edu/publications/houthis-and-limits-diplomacy-yemen> (accessed January 5, 2022).

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