

# CLOSE ENCOUNTERS IN WAR

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## Special Issue: Close Encounters in Irregular and Asymmetric Warfare

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## Storming the Palace: The Houthi Insurgency in Yemen

By Gian Marco Longoni

**Abstract:** In January 2015, a group of rebels known as the “Houthi” toppled the government of Yemen after eleven years of armed struggle. How did the Houthi manage to do so? The article argues that the main variables that explain rebel victory in civil wars, rebel capacity, state (in)capacity, and external support, can explain how this rebel group managed to oust the government of Yemen. The analysis demonstrates that the Houthi high mobilising and military capacity, the external support of the former ruler of Yemen Ali Abdullah Saleh, and, most importantly, the low capacity of the state, resulting from a chronic institutional weakness of Yemen’s regimes, incompetence of the armed forces, and unsoundness of the counterinsurgency strategy, are the factors that can explain why and how the Houthi have managed to wage an effective rebellion that caused the collapse of the government of Yemen.

**Keywords:** *Civil war, insurgency, counterinsurgency, Yemen, Houthi*

Over the last fourteen years, Yemen has been ravaged by a brutal civil conflict. The ongoing Saudi-led intervention in Yemen is only the latest phase of a civil strife that began on June 2004, when the government of Yemen reacted to the demonstrations of a group commonly referred to as the “Houthi.” Throughout the following eleven years, this group has waged a fierce insurgency that culminated in the overthrow of the government presided by Abed-Rabbo Mansour Hadi in January 2015. How did the Houthi manage to oust the government of Yemen?

Civil wars are incredibly complex phenomena whose outcome is the result of multiple interacting factors. The literature on civil wars has identified three main variables that can explain rebel victory in these contexts. Firstly, rebel victory depends significantly on their overall capacity, a composite measure that includes their mobilising capacity, offensive capacity, and resource-richness. Secondly, it depends largely on the (in)capacity of the state, a composite measure that comprises its institutional, political, and military capacity. Lastly, rebel victory depends on the external support they receive from third parties. In this article, I argue that these variables, although the civil war in Yemen is far from being over and the rebels are far from achieving a decisive victory, best explain how the Houthi managed to oust the government of Yemen.

Through a cross-examination of sources and evidence, ranging from UN Security Council reports and United States diplomatic cables, to reports and scholarly articles of experts who conducted research in the field, this paper reconstructs the dynamics of the several stages of the Yemeni civil war, up until the ouster of the government at the hand of the Houthi. From the examination of these dynamics, this exploratory article concludes that the Houthi overall capacity, in both mobilising and military terms, the external support they received as of 2013 from the former ruler of Yemen Ali Abdullah Saleh, and most importantly the incapacity of the state, resulting from a chronic

institutional weakness of Yemeni regimes, incompetence of the armed forces, and unsoundness of the counterinsurgency strategy, are the factors that can explain why and how the Houthi have managed to overthrow the government of Yemen.

### 1. *Sine quibus non* of rebel victory

Insurgency has always been considered peripheral to conventional, inter-state war.<sup>1</sup> The subordination of insurgency as a minor form of war has motivated the intermittent interest on the topic, both within academia and military circles (Rich and Duyvesteyn, *The Study of Insurgency and Counterinsurgency*: 1). The 9/11 attacks and the outbreak of insurgencies in Afghanistan and Iraq brought the issue back to the fore, stimulating a renewed cross-disciplinary interest on the topic. Today, insurgency is not only a form of warfare likely to continue in the future (Hammes, *War Evolves into the Fourth Generation*: 205-206), but it “is assumed to constitute the likely challenge that the major Western powers will confront in the future” (Smith and Jones, *The Political Impossibility of Modern Counterinsurgency*: 48). Accordingly, insurgencies deserve the utmost attention and this section aims to identify which variables can explain why rebels succeed in civil wars.

In previous studies on civil wars, three variables have been found to be related to a higher likelihood that a civil war terminates in rebel victory: rebel capacity, state capacity, and external support.

#### 1.1. Rebel capacity

The scholarship on civil wars has focused to a large extent on the capacity and characteristics of the regimes involved in these conflicts, giving much less attention to the capacity of their opponents (Cunningham, Gleditsch and Salehyan, *It Takes Two*: 571). Rebels cannot be entirely removed from the conflict equation and it is axiomatic that their overall capacity can have an impact on civil war outcomes that empirical studies cannot afford to overlook. Previous research has established that the stronger the rebels are in relation to the incumbent regimes, or even the closer they are to being at parity with the regime in terms of strength, the more likely they will achieve a decisive victory (Gent, *Going in when it Counts*: 725; and Cunningham, Gleditsch and Salehyan, *It Takes Two*: 590). While these findings are straightforward, “rebel capacity” requires further definition.

The rebel mobilising capacity is certainly one of the most important factors that compound in the composite measure of capacity. Being insurgencies predominantly struggles aimed at undermining the political legitimacy of the incumbent regime, the capacity of the rebels to mobilise the population and produce a shift in its allegiance from the regime to them is vital (Kalyvas, *The Logic of Violence in Civil War*: 92). The greater the popular support they manage to attain, the stronger they are *vis-à-vis* the incumbent regime in the contest for legitimacy. For this reason, rebels strive to captivate the population through the formulation of compelling causes, convincing narratives (Tomes, *Relearning Counterinsurgency Warfare*: 21), appeals to common identities (Byman,

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*Understanding Proto-Insurgencies*: 167), and the creation of efficient systems of governance in the areas under their control (Weinstein, *Inside Rebellion*: 163-197).

Certainly, an insurgency is not a contest fought entirely on political or ideological grounds and the rebel military capacity is another important component of the overall capacity measure. Rebels that manage to inflict damages to the opponent in a regular manner pose an unsustainable threat to the authority and the very existence of the incumbent regime. Previous research has demonstrated that civil wars are more likely to terminate in a decisive victory for the rebels when they can count on a high military capacity (Cunningham, Gleditsch and Salehyan, *It Takes Two*: 590; and Sullivan and Karreth, *The Conditional Impact of Military Intervention on Internal Armed Conflict Outcomes*: 280). Military capacity refers to the ability of the rebels to impose unbearable costs on the incumbent regime, both material by targeting its armed forces and assets, and immaterial by threatening its authority.

The effectiveness of the tactics that the rebels have used to impose such costs has been object of discussion. It is widely maintained that guerrilla warfare is the set of tactics best suited for insurgencies (see for example Nagl, *Counterinsurgency Lessons from Malaya and Vietnam*; and Kilcullen, *Counterinsurgency*). Other scholars, however, have found that rebels are more likely to succeed when they can count on conventional capabilities and fight in a symmetric fashion (Balcells and Kalyvas, *Does Warfare Matter?:* 1409), or when they use the opposite strategy to the one used by the incumbent, fighting in a conventional manner when the opponent is fighting in an unconventional manner (Arreguín-Toft, *How the Weak Win Wars*: 105). This possibility, however, is often precluded to the rebels. Rebels resort to guerrilla warfare out of necessity as they rarely possess the conventional capabilities to fight the incumbent regime in a symmetric manner. This is not necessarily a weakness and rebels that are highly skilled at waging guerrilla warfare can impose intolerable costs on the government in office.

Resource-richness is another important element of the overall capacity of the rebels. Resource-richness allow the rebels to buy weapons, pay their fighters, and more generally sustain their effort. With these means of funding the rebellion, the capacity of the rebels to challenge the incumbent regime increases (Weinstein, *Inside Rebellion*: 7).

From the literature, thus, it can be inferred that rebels that have a high mobilising and military capacity, and possess the resources to fund their struggle, have greater chances to achieve a decisive victory.

## 1.2. State capacity

Several studies have shown that state capacity is central to the dynamics of civil wars. A number of studies have concluded that civil wars where one of the belligerents is a high-capacity regime are more likely to terminate in decisive victory for the regime (Mason, Weingarten and Fett, *Win, Lose, or Draw*: 259; DeRouen and Sobek, *The Dynamics of Civil War Duration and Outcome*: 311; and Lyall, *Do Democracies Make Inferior Counterinsurgents?:* 180). But if these findings are not surprising, the concept of state capacity requires further definition. It

has been argued that state capacity must be understood as a multidimensional concept (Sobek, *Masters of their Domains*: 270; and Hendrix, *Measuring State Capacity*: 280). In the same vein, I suggest that state capacity must be understood as a composite measure that includes the institutional-political capacity and military capacity of the state.

With regard to the institutional-political capacity of a state, one of the long-standing debates in the literature revolves around whether the type of regime might influence the outcomes of civil wars. A number of studies have postulated that democracies are fundamentally prone to lose intra-state wars, due to the constraints imposed by the typical characteristics of democratic regimes on the measures these could take to counter an insurgency (see Mack, *Why Big Nations Lose Small Wars*; and Merom, *How Democracies Lose Small Wars*), whereas authoritarian regimes fare much better because their action is not subject to any constraint (Bapat, *Insurgency and the Opening of Peace Processes*: 710; and Zhukov, *Examining the Authoritarian Model of Counter-insurgency*: 458). In contrast, many studies conclude that the type of regime is irrelevant (DeRouen and Sobek, *The Dynamics of Civil War*: 311; Gent, *Going in when it Counts*: 725; Lyall, *Do Democracies Make Inferior Counterinsurgents?*: 179; and Getmansky, *You Can't Win if You Don't Fight*: 722). Similarly, I argue that the regime type does not necessarily have an impact on the outcomes of civil wars, but rather it is its institutional-political capacity that counts. In 1974, Gurr introduced the concept of anocracy (*Persistence and Change in Political Systems, 1800-1971*: 1487). As Hendrix pointed out, contrary to what some studies have assumed, anocracies are not regimes characterised by authoritarian and democratic tendencies, but regimes that lack centralised power and institutionalisation (*Measuring State Capacity*: 279). Thus, it is not the type of regime per se that affects how well a state fares in counterinsurgency, but rather the lack of fundamental capacities in terms of centralised power and institutionalisation. Due to this crucial deficiency, anocracies can be expected to be incapable of controlling and repressing the internal dissent compared to stable democracies and stable autocracies.<sup>3</sup> They can also be expected to be unable to exercise the power of the state in such a manner that could preserve the regime's legitimacy. Anocracies are unable or unwilling to implement those virtuous measures that are linked to higher chances of government victory in civil wars, such as the provision of goods to the population (see Keefer, *Insurgency and Credible Commitment in Autocracies and Democracies*), and practices of good governance aimed at addressing the underlying grievances of the conflict through political reform (Cohen and others, *Principles, Imperatives, and Paradoxes of Counterinsurgency*: 49; and United States government, US Army, *Field Manual FM 3-24*: 1-9). Those regimes with low institutional-political capacity, thus, are expected to be deficient vis-à-vis the rebels, increasing the chances of the latter to achieve decisive victory.

The incapacity of the regime to control or repress internal dissent points to another crucial dimension of state capacity: its military capacity. It has been demonstrated that powerful regimes in military terms are more likely to defeat the insurgency compared to regimes with low military capacity (Mason, Weingarten and Fett, *Win, Lose, or Draw*: 259; and Bapat, *Insurgency and the Opening of Peace Processes*: 710). Military capacity is not as easy to estimate as it

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might appear. Some authors have used the size of the army as a measure of the military capacity (see for example Mason, Weingarten and Fett, *Win, Lose, or Draw*; DeRouen and Sobek, *The Dynamics of Civil War*; and Brandt and others, *When and how the Fighting Stops*). This measure, however, is not entirely convincing since it does not necessarily capture the effectiveness of the security forces of a state. Effectiveness does not entirely depend on the structural characteristics and material capabilities of the state's security forces, but it depends also on the way force is employed, especially in the context of asymmetric warfare. A persistent debate in the literature opposes two different approaches to counterinsurgency. A minoritarian view favours enemy-centric approaches to counterinsurgency as opposed to population-centric ones (see Luttwak, *Dead End*), but there is a consensus among scholars and practitioners that the adoption of the latter would benefit the incumbent's effort. Despite the criticism that the population-centric approach has attracted, either because it is excessively influenced by Maoist conceptualisations of modern insurgencies (Kilcullen, *Countering Global Insurgency*: 606-608; Kilcullen, *Counter-Insurgency Redux*: 111; Hoffman, *Neo-Classical Counterinsurgency?*: 71-73; and Metz, *Rethinking Insurgency*: 3) or grounded on misinterpretations of past counterinsurgency operations (see Bennett, *The Other Side of COIN*; and Bennett, *Minimum Force in British Counterinsurgency*), the superior effectiveness of this approach has been demonstrated (Paul, Clarke and Grill, *Victory Has a Thousand Fathers*: 88; and Enterline, Stull and Magagnoli, *Reversal of Fortune?*: 189). Most observers agree that this approach is effective because it prescribes a predominantly political response rather than an exclusively military one. This precept is anchored on the firm assumption that, being insurgencies principally contests of political legitimacy, strategies entirely based on the use of force are not effective (Sepp, *Best Practices in Counterinsurgency*: 10; Petraeus, *Learning Counterinsurgency*: 8; and Lyall and Wilson, *Rage Against the Machines*: 89). The use of indiscriminate coercion is believed to have detrimental effects, as it moves the support of the population away from the incumbent regime (Greenhill and Staniland, *Ten Ways to Lose at Counterinsurgency*: 404-406). Coercion, this approach postulates, must be limited and targeted. The objective is to strike only the rebels while simultaneously attempting to separate and protect the civilian population from them (Sepp, *Best Practices in Counterinsurgency*: 10; Cohen and others, *Principles, Imperatives, and Paradoxes of Counterinsurgency*: 50; United States government, US Army, *Field Manual FM 3-24*: 10-7; and Kilcullen, *The Accidental Guerrilla*: 265).

In summary, incumbent regimes with a low military capacity, due to their lack of military capabilities and/or reluctance to take countermeasures of proven efficacy, can be expected to be less effective in countering an insurgency. If low military capacity is complemented with low institutional-political capacity, the difficulties for the regime become insurmountable.

### 1.3. External support

A large volume of studies has demonstrated the important impact of external support on the outcomes of civil wars. External support can come in different forms: indirect if it is limited to the provision of weapons or financial assistance,



direct if it entails the involvement in combat. External support can also come from different patrons, both states and non-state actors (Grauer and Tierney, *The Arsenal of Insurrection*: 4). Several studies have concluded that external support in favour of the rebels significantly facilitates their effort, regardless of its form and provenience (Byman, *Trends in Outside Support for Insurgent Movements*: 83-102; Balch-Lindsay, Enterline and Joyce, *Third-Party Intervention and the Civil War Process*: 356; Sullivan and Karreth, *The Conditional Impact of Military Intervention*: 279; and Jones, *Altering Capabilities or Imposing Costs?:* 58). Whilst there is a wide consensus about the impact of rebel-biased external support on the outcomes of civil wars, findings on the impact of regime-biased assistance are contradictory. Some studies have found that regime-biased assistance does not necessarily improve the incumbent regime's chances to defeat the insurgency (Connable and Libicki, *How Insurgencies End*: 50), whilst others claim exactly the opposite (Balch-Lindsay, Enterline and Joyce, *Third-Party Intervention*: 356). Gent argues that regime-biased direct support does not necessarily translate in increased chances of government victory because third parties tend to intervene in the toughest situations, once realised that the regime is unable to resist autonomously (Gent, *Going in when it Counts*: 724). Despite these contradicting findings, no study has indicated external support as detrimental to the regime's effort. Accordingly, regimes are expected to be better off when they can count on some sort of external support rather than nothing. From the existing literature, it can be inferred that rebels' chances to defeat the government increase when they are the recipients of external support, especially when the regime is not as fortunate.

As for all complex social phenomena, none of these variables can individually explain why a civil war terminates in a victory for the rebels. Rather, it is their cumulative impact that produces this particular civil war outcome. In the following pages, although the Yemeni civil war is far from being over and the rebels are far from achieving a decisive victory, I will demonstrate that these variables can explain how and why the Houthi have managed to oust the government of Yemen. Before moving onto the analysis, a brief historical overview of the Houthi insurgency is in order.

## 2. Historical overview of the Houthi insurgency

The civil war in Yemen began in June 2004 and initially opposed the Houthi and the regime presided by Ali Abdullah Saleh. The conflict between the Houthi and Saleh's regime is commonly divided in six phases. The first phase began when the regime ordered the arrest of hundreds of worshippers that were shouting anti-US and anti-Israel chants in Saada. The initial skirmishes caused by this response escalated in a three-month open confrontation between the regime and the Houthi. During this first phase, the regime killed the leader of the Houthi, Hussein al-Houthi (Winter, *Conflict in Yemen*: 103). The parties agreed to resort to mediation but to no avail and, on March 2005, the hostilities broke out again. During this second phase, the Yemeni regime attempted to dismantle the Houthi leadership and focused its operations on the areas of North Yemen where it was believed these leaders were hiding (Salmoni, Loidolt and Wells, *Regime and Periphery in Northern Yemen*: 134). The same operational

pattern was followed during the third phase of the conflict, started on December 2005. In the fourth phase, Saleh's regime "appeared unrestrained, mercilessly attacking Houthi locations and staying on the offensive throughout the conflict's duration" (143). Only in 2008, the parties agreed to a ceasefire. This ceasefire, however, collapsed following the abduction of nine foreign aid workers in Saada. The kidnapping, of which the Houthi were accused, reignited the hostilities and provoked Saleh's overreaction (Hill, *Yemen Endures*: 192). In the sixth round of conflict, the most brutal until that moment, Saudi Arabia decided to join the conflict against the Houthi with air forces, artillery, and ground forces (Salmoni, Loidolt and Wells, *Regime and Periphery*: 156). Despite the considerable deployment of forces, the Houthi managed to resist and, by the time the ceasefire was reached in February 2011, the "Arab spring" broke out.

Yemen was part of the wave of protests that shook North Africa and the Middle East in 2011. After two months of demonstrations, the regime's overreaction to the protests brought it to collapse. The disintegration of the regime was facilitated by the mutiny of the General Ali Mohsen al-Ahmar and part of the military loyal to him, who sided with the protestors (Carapico, *Yemen between Revolution and Counter-Terrorism*: 37). Support for Saleh was on decline and the US too, traditionally supportive of his rule, began contemplating the option of regime change (Hill, *Yemen Endures*: 210). This idea gathered momentum and the Gulf Cooperation Council (GCC) prepared a proposal that would grant immunity to Saleh in exchange for his resignation (Brehony, *Yemen and the Huthis*: 238). Only after strenuous resistance and an assassination attempt, Saleh finally agreed to resign (Hill, *Yemen Endures*: 241).

Following the demotion of Saleh, the vice-president Abed-Rabbo Mansour Hadi was appointed as interim president for a period of two years. In this period, a national dialogue conference (NDC) was supposed to bring the various parties and Yemeni elites to the round table to discuss a new constitutional framework (Brehony, *Yemen and the Huthis*: 238). During this transition period, the Houthi managed to exploit the power vacuum and consolidate their control on the northern regions of Yemen, at the expenses of the most influential actors that were emerging in the post-Saleh era, Ali Mohsen and the Ahmar tribal network (Winter, *The Ansar of Yemen*). Ali Mohsen and the Ahmar tribal network happened to be Saleh's sworn opponents too. Following ten years of bitter opposition, Saleh and the Houthi now shared common enemies and the former president, whose power base and network had remained intact, used his influence to facilitate the Houthi's effort. Hadi's lack of authority contributed to further weaken the regime vis-à-vis the powerful elites of the country. Emboldened by the alliance with Saleh, the Houthi placed Hadi under house arrest and assumed control of the government.

### **3. Rebel capacity: Houthi's mobilising and military capacity**

Previous studies have suggested that the capacity of the rebels is one of the crucial variables that can explain rebel victory. In this section, the crucial impact that the Houthi's capacity had on their effort and the way it culminated in the ouster of the Yemeni government are examined.

### 3.1. Houthi's mobilising capacity: identity, causes, narratives

The Houthi have demonstrated to be quite skilled at attracting the support of significant portions of the Yemeni population. From the analysis, it emerges that three main factors can explain how the Houthi managed to mobilise the population behind their insurgent effort: the appeals to a common Zaydi identity, the formulation of compelling causes, and the promulgation of captivating narratives.

The confessional identity of the Houthi has played an important role in attracting the support of the North-Yemen population. The Houthi depicted themselves as the doctrinal and ethical essence of Zaydism (Winter, *Conflict in Yemen*: 113).<sup>3</sup> Such self-representation is grounded on the Houthi's claims of being direct descendants of the Zaydi imams. The connection between the Houthi and Yemen's imams is important in terms of identity definition. The imams derived their legitimacy from their status of "sayyid", a status that only who is direct descendant of the prophet can claim. The Houthi regard themselves as sayyids and, accordingly, to be descendant of Muhammad (International Crisis Group, *Defusing the Saada Time Bomb*: 2). The possession of said status had clear influence on the level of support the Houthi could gather and it can be considered as the main driver of their religious authority. Despite the attempts of the ruling *echelons* to delegitimise the sayyids after the fall of Yemen's imamate (Salmoni, Loidolt and Wells, *Regime and Periphery*: 24), this status still grants their possessors the popular recognition of their religious authority. The religious identity of the Houthi had a significant role in mobilising the population of North Yemen, as demonstrated by the large numbers of individuals that were involved in the "Believing Youth" (BY), a network of social mobilisation founded by the Houthi (Winter, *Conflict in Yemen*: 106).

The causes put forward by the Houthi are not self-evident. The rebels have never produced a manifesto in which goals or inspiring principles were clearly specified. Despite this lack of clarity, their activity does suggest that the Houthi had a set of causes at heart: the defence of Zaydism from the Wahhabi encroachment and the reaction to the long-standing neglect of North Yemen. The opposition to the Wahhabi infiltration in Zaydi regions has been a recurring theme in Houthi's discourse. The Zaydi population perceived the Wahhabi encroachment as a threat to the integrity of traditional Zaydism and calls to react to this infiltration were a leitmotif of Hussein al-Houthi's religious discourse (Alblosi, *Ideological Roots of the Hūthī Movement in Yemen*: 156). During the 1990s, the spread of Wahhabism was facilitated by Saleh, who co-opted the Wahhabi preachers into his patronage network with the aim of undermining the position of prominence of the Zaydi elites (Salmoni, Loidolt and Wells, *Regime and Periphery*: 24). Through the BY and the religious revival it set in motion, the Houthi could react to the Saleh-backed Wahhabi intrusion and create inter-tribal and inter-generational networks of popular support (Winter, *Conflict in Yemen*: 106; and Brandt, *Sufyān's "Hybrid" War*: 125).

The reaction to the long-standing neglect of the poorest area of North Yemen was another cause that resonated with the disenfranchised population of North Yemen. Saleh always favoured some tribes at the expenses of others. While

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certain tribes were always or intermittently part of his patronage network, others, like the Houthi, were constantly excluded from the redistribution of the spoils (Jones, *The Tribes that Bind*: 906). This policy further aggravated the pre-existing condition of socio-economic neglect of the Northern regions and generated popular resentment (Brehony, *Yemen and the Huthis*: 237). The Houthi exploited this resentment to exert pressure on the regime for increased political and economic inclusion (Juneau, *Yemen*: 139). If initially the Houthi demands were limited to greater political inclusion, as the conflict progressed, their cause evolved from a reaction to the long-standing neglect to an open opposition to the government that entailed direct calls for the demotion of Saleh (International Crisis Group, *Defusing the Saada Time Bomb*: 5; King, *Zaydī Revival in a Hostile Republic*: 442). Towards the end of the conflict with Saleh's regime, the opposition to the government was the primary cause put forward by the Houthi (Boucek, *War in Saada*: 4). By playing on the local resentment resulting from years of social and economic marginalisation, the Houthi managed to attract significant support from the tribes that had been excluded from Saleh's patronage system, reaching also those segments of the population beyond their immediate confessional circle of supporters (Phillips, *Cracks in the Yemeni System*: 1).

The attractive potential of these causes was enhanced by a compelling two-pronged narrative, carefully crafted to depict the Houthi as acting in self-defence and the regime as pro-American, pro-Saudi, and enemy of the Yemenis. In order to depict the insurgency as an act of self-defence, the Houthi have stressed the regime's corrupt nature and heavy-handedness. According to this narrative, the regime had long been repressing the Zaydi religious practices and targeted the existence of the Zaydi community (International Crisis Group, *Defusing the Saada Time Bomb*: 12). By framing the conflict with the government as defensive, this narrative portrayed the insurgency as a necessary act to protect the population's confessional and constitutional rights, and as a legitimate resistance to the regime's aggression (Hamidi, *Inscriptions of Violence in Northern Yemen*: 171; and Granzow, *Violent vs. Non-Violent Struggle*: 171). By doing so, the Houthi deflected any characterisation of them as a militant armed group and depicted themselves as 'a dedicated group of locals who are merely defending their rights' (Salmoni, Loidolt and Wells, *Regime and Periphery*: 229). The narrative was coupled with the representation of the government as an American and Saudi puppet that persistently acted against the interest of the Yemenis (International Crisis Group, *Defusing the Saada Time Bomb*: 12). This representation is consistent with the Houthi's intention to exploit the post-Iraq invasion resentment against the US. The Houthi perceived that this hostility could be used to arouse the population and attract the support to the insurgency at the expenses of the regime following its involvement and cooperation in the American-led war on terror (Freeman, *The al Houthi Insurgency in the North of Yemen*: 1009; and Hill, *Yemen Endures*: 180). The captivating power of this narrative resides in its capacity to channel shared feelings of resentment into an interpretive framework in which the insurgency is portrayed as a legitimate act in response to persistent injustices perpetrated by the government.

The appeals to the Zaydi identity and the compelling causes and narratives have enabled the Houthis to attract the support of various segments of the population. Their support base, however, included also segments of the population that sided with the rebels to maximise their own interests at the expenses of other tribes (United Nations Security Council, *Final Report of the Panel Experts on Yemen S/2016/73*: 15). Thus, it was also opportunism that contributed to the mobilisation of the population. This political opportunism, however, does not overshadow the crucial role that the rebels' confessional identity, causes, and narratives had in attracting the support of the population and contributing to the armed struggle that eventually led to the ouster of the Yemeni regime.

### 3.2. Houthi's military capacity: from guerrilla to hybrid warfare

The Houthi displayed their military prowess since the outbreak of the insurgency. During the conflict against Saleh's regime, the Houthi resorted to an extensive range of guerrilla tactics. The operations were conducted by small squads that usually attacked army units of almost equivalent size (Salmoni, Loidolt and Wells, *Regime and Periphery*: 209). Through a large use of ambushes, the rebels managed to harass army officers, seize their equipment and weapons, and gain control of the areas that the military outposts were supposed to guard. The Houthi also resorted to harassment fire against military barracks and outposts, exploiting the elevated terrain of Saada for this purpose, and proved to be skilled at producing Improvised Explosive Devices (IED). With IEDs and snipers, the rebels targeted military officials, government representatives, and local tribal leaders who were siding with the regime (Salmoni, Loidolt and Wells, *Regime and Periphery*: 204-207; and Freeman, *The al Houthi Insurgency*: 1013). Through the use of these tactics, the Houthi could inflict considerable damages to the armed forces, which struggled to withstand the attacks of the rebels.

The decision of the former ruler Saleh to coalize boosted the rebels' military capacity. Once the coalition was formed, the rebels could count on the assistance of the Republican guards and other defectors from the armed forces that Saleh controlled even after his demotion. The presence of former officers, who possessed specialist knowledge on how to use medium and heavy weaponry, resulted in a shift from mere guerrilla warfare to a more effective hybrid warfare that skilfully blended guerrilla with conventional tactics (United Nations Security Council, *Final Report of the Panel Experts on Yemen S/2016/73*: 16).

From the analysis, it emerges that the military ability of the rebels allowed them to impose unbearable costs to the regime in a consistent and incremental manner. If initially, when the balance of power was largely in favour of the regime, regular ambushes and harassment contributed to the enfeeblement and demoralisation of the regime's armed forces, once the coalition with Saleh was formed, the rebels could carry out large-scale operations and cripple the regime's armed forces and opposing militias.

#### 4. State capacity: regime weakness and dysfunctional armed forces

From the discussion on state capacity, it emerged that low-capacity states, in political-institutional and/or military terms, are particularly weak vis-à-vis the rebels and, compared to high-capacity states, much more likely to be defeated. Yemen, with its chronic institutional weakness and incompetent armed forces, can certainly be considered a low-capacity state. The lack of capacity of the state has largely facilitated the effort of the rebels.

Yemen has been the first country in the Arabian Peninsula to adopt a democratic system of government based on universal suffrage (Phillips, *Yemen's Democracy Experiment in Regional Perspective*: 47; and Phillips, *Yemen and the Politics of Permanent Crisis*: 39). However, it has long been a façade democracy. During the three decades of presidency of Saleh, the peculiar prerogatives of a parliamentary democracy were weakened by an uneven distribution of power, a widespread corruption, and an extensive patronage network managed by the president himself. Saleh's regime has been described as neopatrimonial, a kind of regime in which the informal patrimonial loyalties between the patron and client permeate into formal political institutions and "political parties, civil society organizations, and parliaments [...] are used in conjunction with traditional informal organizations by the leaders to expand their patron-client networks" (Phillips, *Yemen's Democracy Experiment*: 4; and Phillips, *Yemen and the Politics of Permanent Crisis*: 55). Since the beginning of his rule, Saleh co-opted relatives and tribal leaders in his patronage network (Alley, *The Rules of the Game*: 387). This network was inclusive and almost any elite could expect to be included if its activity or characteristics fit in Saleh's political calculations. The inclusiveness of this network ensured that the diverse factions within the Yemeni social strata were kept in check, guaranteeing the regime's longevity (393; and Juneau, *Yemen*: 135). When Yemen fell into an economic crisis, this patronage network became untenable (Alley, *Yemen Changes Everything... and Nothing*: 77; and Brehony, *Yemen and the Huthis*: 234). As soon as Saleh reduced the number of clients included in the network and concentrated the redistribution of spoils to his relatives, the former clients had no more reasons to be loyal to the regime, which became increasingly vulnerable to local uprisings.

When Hadi was appointed president following Saleh's demotion, he could not count on any of the elements that ensured the longevity of the previous regime. He inherited a hollowed-out state, whose institutions had been depredated of any decisional power, and he could not count on the patronage network that had enabled Saleh to stay in power. With Saleh working against the transition of power, the regime, having lost its central institutional power and the monopoly of violence, was too weak to respond to the attacks to its authority. The regime was absent from the theatre of operations and, with exception of the part of armed forces aligned with Ali Mohsen and the Ahmar tribal network - which fought for their own political interests more than the state's - no one was standing in the Houthi's way, who could exploit the power vacuum and proceed with the takeover of the government (United Nations Security Council, *Final Report of the Panel Experts on Yemen S/2015/125*: 21; and Hill, *Yemen Endures*: 271).

Yemen was deficient not only in terms of institutional-political capacity, but also in terms of military capacity. Its military apparatus has always been a highly dysfunctional entity built for internal rather than external security (Cordesman and Al-Rodhan, *Gulf Military Forces in an Era of Asymmetric Wars*: 518). Its efficiency has been impaired by internal divisions, personal interests, and ineptitude. As much as any other institution in Yemen, the security apparatus was part of Saleh's patronage network. Since the beginning of his rule, Saleh attempted to coup-proof his regime by extending his dominance to the military through the appointment of relatives and members of his tribe in high-rank military positions (Noman and Sorenson, *Reforming the Yemen Security Sector*: 11). To ensure his position of safety and avoid a concentration of power on single corps, Saleh created parallel militaries, at the head of which he appointed close relatives. Many of them covered positions of high prestige whilst the remaining high-rank posts were allocated to influential tribesmen loyal to the president (Knights, *The Military Role in Yemen's Protests*: 274). This distribution of power generated internal tensions within the military and competition among the different corps. The appointment of inexperienced relatives in position of prominence, such as Saleh's son Ahmed Ali Saleh, has been a very divisive issue within the security apparatus (275). These internal tensions have hindered the efficiency and the operational capabilities of Yemen's security forces, as the internecine between Ahmed Ali Saleh and Ali Mohsen shows. The corps under their command, respectively the Republican guards and the first armoured division of the Yemeni army, were both deployed in Saada during the hostilities between the rebels and Saleh's regime. This hostility directly favoured the Houthi since the two commanders have exploited the battlefield and the forces under their command to fight one another in a parallel war (Jane's Information Group, *Changed Dynamics of Yemen's Northern Houthi-Salafist Conflict*: 2). For this reason, the security forces that were supposed to fight the rebels did not act as a unified and cohesive front, limiting their operational efficiency and chances to suppress the insurgency (Winter, *Conflict in Yemen*: 109; and Hill, *Yemen Endures*: 190). The split between these two opposing camps within the military had a significant role in the collapse of Saleh's regime because, as soon as the Arab spring started, Ali Mohsen and the large portion of the army he commanded sided with the protestors (Knights, *The Military Role*: 278; and International Crisis Group, *Is Peace Possible?*: 1).

When Hadi became president, he inherited a security apparatus divided along these lines of loyalty. Saleh maintained a firm grip over a large part of the security forces, including the entire air forces (United Nations Security Council, *Final Report of the Panel Experts on Yemen S/2015/125*: 19). Despite Hadi's strenuous attempts, the dismantlement of Saleh's patronage network proved to be a Herculean task and these attempts resulted in the fragmentation of the security forces (Hill, *Reforming Yemen's Military*; Simonsen, *Haunting Past*: 5; and Seitz, *Ties that Bind and Divide*: 65). Despite the support of Ali Mohsen, Hadi had a weak control over the security apparatus, certainly not enough to mount a campaign to defeat the Saleh-Houthi alliance (United Nations Security Council, *Final Report of the Panel Experts on Yemen S/2015/125*: 13).

Lack of cohesion was not the only factor that explains Yemen's military ineffectiveness. Since the outbreak of the insurgency, the regime manifested a reticence to address the underlying popular grievances and the desire to suppress the uprising with iron-fist. The regime never showed any intention to address these popular grievances or engage with the political and social dimension of the insurgency (Novak, *Comparative Counterinsurgency in Yemen*). Rather, reckless repression was the chosen course of action. Although the resort to coercive methods has been interpreted as instrumental for reasserting the regime's territorial sovereignty in Saada (Wedeen, *Peripheral Visions*: 179), it is more plausible that the regime regarded the insurgency as an unacceptable challenge to its authority. According to Alley, moderate attempts of the elites to reposition themselves within Saleh's patronage network or to reform the political system were circumscribed by red lines that the regime set (*The Rules of the Game*: 400). The Houthi insurgency clearly crossed these red lines and the decision of the regime to suppress the rebellion forcefully is not surprising.

At the beginning of the operations, the regime tried to pursue a decapitation strategy. As the regime could not count on cutting-edge intelligence and surveillance systems to surgically enact this strategy, it resorted to a large use of artillery, tanks, and helicopters (Salmoni, Loidolt and Wells, *Regime and Periphery*: 136). When the conflict progressed, the regime increased the use of indirect fire with mortars and artillery against Houthi positions (Novak, *Comparative Counterinsurgency*). Although these methods proved to be ineffective, the regime did not amend its strategy for the entire length of the confrontation against the rebels. By 2009, the government was still making large use of indirect fire and air forces, and had deployed ten armoured brigades, amounting to half of Yemen's available forces (Knights, *The Military Role*: 270). The results were still poor. These kinetic operations were complemented with other punitive measures, such as road-blocks to prevent the movement of people and goods, and induced starvation (Salmoni, Loidolt and Wells, *Regime and Periphery*: 188). The indifference displayed by the government to the discrimination between combatants and non-combatants and the minimisation of the collateral damages resulting from this excessive use of force significantly increased the hostility of the locals, inducing them join the insurgency (Boucek, *War in Saada*: 9; Salmoni, Loidolt and Wells, *Regime and Periphery*: 168; and Winter, *Conflict in Yemen*: 109). The choice of the government to use an iron-fist approach to suppress the insurgency proved to be particularly detrimental as it did not only motivate the participation of sympathetic tribes to the insurgency, but also the adjunction of all those segments of the population that initially did not sympathise with the Houthi's causes (International Crisis Group, *Defusing the Saada Time Bomb*: 13; and Alley, *Yemen Changes Everything*: 76). In sum, the rebellious effort of the Houthi was greatly facilitated not only by the weakness of the armed forces but also by a deeply flawed counterinsurgency approach.

##### **5. External support: Iranian influences and Saleh's support**

The vital impact of external support on the likelihood of rebel victory is widely documented. In the case under analysis, the support of two actors that can be deemed external to the Houthi group, a state actor, Iran, and a non-state actor,



the former president Saleh, and the impact it had on the conflict process is examined.

Since the outbreak of the insurgency, the Houthi have been accused of receiving support from Iran but, at least for the period under consideration in this article, evidence to back these accusations is contradictory. According to some sources, the support in terms of money, weapons, and training that Iran and Hezbollah have allegedly provided to the rebels has not been proved (Embassy of Sana'a, *Al-Houthi Rebellion*; and Boucek, *War in Saada*: 11). Other sources suggest that these allegations have been used by the regime to discredit the rebels and as a justification for its inability to counter the insurgency (Freeman, *The al Houthi Insurgency*: 1014; and Hill, *Yemen Endures*: 194). Conversely, more recent reports seem to indicate that Iran provided material support to the Houthi at least during the final stage of the insurgency and in the current conflict against the Saudi-led coalition (United Nations Security Council, *Final Report of the Panel Experts on Yemen S/2015/125*: 15; and United Nations Security Council, *Final Report of the Panel Experts on Yemen S/2016/73*: 24).

Whilst from the evidence available no conclusion can be drawn regarding the contribution of the Iranian support to the Houthi struggle, it can be firmly argued that the support of Saleh has been crucial in this respect. Saleh can be considered an external actor for two main reasons: first, as ruler of Yemen, he has been the primary enemy of the Houthi for almost the entire duration of the insurgency, until he was forced to step down; second, the two actors have not merged in a unitary entity, but rather their coalition has always been a mere alliance of convenience. This alliance was formed in 2013. The rebels shared with Saleh the desire to undermine the political framework that emerged from the post-2011 transition period, which largely favoured their common political opponents (International Crisis Group, *Is Peace Possible?*: 7). If initially Saleh's support was limited to mere non-belligerence and non-resistance (United Nations Security Council, *Final Report of the Panel Experts on Yemen S/2015/125*: 21; and Hill, *Yemen Endures*: 269), in 2014 the level of support increased, entailing the provision of funds, the military expertise of the Republican guards, and the direct involvement in the fight (International Crisis Group, *The Huthis*: 3; United Nations Security Council, *Final Report of the Panel Experts on Yemen S/2015/125*: 33; and International Crisis Group, *Is Peace Possible?*: 7). Although the Houthi had already the upper hand by the time the coalition was formed, Saleh's support shuffled the cards on the deck in their favour.

### Concluding remarks

Yemen has been ravaged by a civil war almost uninterruptedly for the last 14 years. Compared to other on-going civil wars, the conflict in Yemen has not received much attention, both in the media and in academia. The intent of this article was to shed light on an under researched civil war and explain why and how the Houthi have succeeded in ousting the government of Yemen.

The literature on civil wars indicates three variables that are related to a higher likelihood that a civil war terminates in rebel victory: rebel capacity, state capacity, and external support. Rebels are more likely to achieve their

objectives when they can stimulate the supportive mobilisation of the population and have enough military capability to inflict damages to and withstand the countermeasures of the government; when the government that they fight is deficient both in political-institutional and military terms; and when they receive support from third parties. The analysis demonstrated that, although the civil war in Yemen is not over and the Houthi have not achieved a decisive victory, these variables can largely explain why and how the Houthi have managed to overthrow the government. About the capacity of the rebels, it has been shown that their ability to mobilise a significant popular support and impose unsustainable costs to the regime through violent action have had a central importance. It has also been shown that the external assistance of the former ruler of Yemen, Ali Abdullah Saleh, has indeed further increased the capacity of the rebels. It was also thanks to his assistance that the Houthi could inflict a decisive blow to the regime.

Certainly, no matter how strong the rebels are, functioning states are always more likely to emerge as winners in civil wars. The Houthi have demonstrated to be skilled both politically, through the construction of compelling causes and narratives, and militarily, through the sapient use of tactics of guerrilla first and of hybrid warfare later on. However, their insurgency has been a very localised phenomenon for several years, especially during their struggle against Saleh's regime. A capable and functioning state could have isolated and annihilated their uprising before it could gain momentum. Yemen however, neither during Saleh's era nor during Abed-Rabbo Mansour Hadi's inter-reign was governed by a capable and functioning regime. The government could have taken advantage of its large military superiority relative to the rebels to quell the insurgency, but the internecine within the armed forces and unsoundness of the countermeasures taken led the government to squander this advantage. This military incapacity was coupled with an endemic weakness of the state's political institutions. Such a chronic weakness resulted in the total inability of the government not only to exert control over its security apparatus, but also to keep the Yemeni elites in check and secure the support of the urban and southern population. With that extent of political delegitimization, especially during the Hadi's administration, it is no wonder that the state struggled to respond effectively to a well-organised uprising such as the one mounted by the Houthi. In conclusion, it is evident that the main reason why the Houthi have been able to overthrow the government of Yemen is its lack of military and political-institutional capacity.

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<sup>1</sup> Insurgency is defined as “a struggle to control a contested political space, between a state (or a group of states or occupying powers), and one or more popularly based, non-state challengers” (Kilcullen, *Counter-Insurgency Redux*: 112).

<sup>2</sup> Despite the slightly different conceptualisation of anocracy, Tilly reaches very similar conclusions (*The Politics of Collective Violence*: 49).

<sup>3</sup> Zaydism is a branch of Shi'a Islam, separate from the dominant branch of the “Twelver” Shi'a. This distinct branch, also referred to as “Fiver” Shi'a, originated from the dispute among the Shi'ites over who, between the two great-grandsons of Ali ibn Abi Talib, the prophet's son-in-law and first Imam, had to be considered the fifth Imam.

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