

Beyond Proxy War: Local Actors and the Transformation of Sovereignty in Yemen

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Abstract

The conflict in Yemen has fundamentally reshaped the meaning and practice of sovereignty through the increased role of non-state actors. A plethora of existing scholarship frames the Yemen conflict as a proxy war dominated by the Houthis and the Saudi-supported coalition. But this perspective underscores the critical role played by other non-state actors, particularly the Southern Transitional Council (STC), tribal networks and localised militias. This paper argues that sovereignty in Yemen has become fragmented and spatially differentiated, and the state no longer enjoys a monopoly over legitimate authority. The paper draws its theoretical framework from Max Weber and Charles Tilly and conceptualises sovereignty not as a rigid attribute of the state but as an evolving and contesting process influenced by conflict dynamics. Methodologically, the paper employs a qualitative approach and relies on secondary data sources. It analyses how the non-state actors in Yemen perform core state functions, including security, territorial control, and dispute settlement. For instance, the STC functions as a proto-state authority in Yemen, while the militias exercise localised authority that challenges the centralised state apparatus. The paper also demonstrates that this fragmented authority creates a hybrid system of governance with overlapping jurisdiction and competing claims to legitimacy. This power configuration intensifies peace-making efforts, as multiple actors reduce the possibility of a consolidated political settlement. Therefore, the Yemen conflict highlights the lack of a state-centric framework in understanding intra-state conflicts and calls for a reconceptualisation of sovereignty that explains the growing importance of non-state actors in conflict-affected states.

Keywords: Sovereignty, Fragmentation, Houthis, Legitimacy, Civil War

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Introduction

The Yemen conflict escalated drastically in 2015 and is widely regarded as one of the most complex and disastrous crises in the contemporary world. It has led to the collapse of state institutions and caused immense humanitarian suffering. However, existing analysis of this conflict has been primarily framed through a geopolitical lens where the conflict is portrayed as a proxy war between Saudi Arabia and Iran (Clausen, 2019; Juneau, 2021). Though this perspective explains a significant dimension of the war, it offers only a partial understanding of the trajectories shaping Yemen's political order. A predominant focus on external powers and the Houthis movement would tend to overlook the convoluted and layered realities on the ground where multiple local actors exercise their authority and challenge the traditional and classical notions of sovereignty. Recently, scholars have acknowledged that civil wars are not entirely contests between states but are often caused by the presence of multiple actors who compete and coexist within divided political landscapes. (Kalyvas, 2006; Staniland, 2012). Yemen is the perfect example of this phenomenon. Besides the role of Houthis and the Saudi-led coalition, this conflict has witnessed the emergence of various non-state actors, particularly STC, tribal groups and local militias. These actors are not passive players, but they are pivots to the governance of parts of the country. They control resources, administer justice and provide security, functions that are traditionally associated with the state (Arjona, Kasfir, & Mampilly, 2015).

The core argument of the paper is that the Yemen conflict has fundamentally transformed the nature and form of sovereignty. Contrary to the classical notion of sovereignty that focuses on a centralised and indivisible authority, Yemen portrays a fragmented system where power is diffused across various centres (Meininghaus, 2026). In this context, Yemen lacks monopolistic control over the legitimate use of force, nor does it have exclusive authority over governance. Instead, the authority in the state is decentralised and geographically differentiated, reflecting the true nature of a conflict situation in which various actors assert claims to authority and legitimacy (Philips, 2017). The traditional definition of the state by Max Weber is based on the idea that the state has the legitimacy to use violence within a given territory (Weber, 1958). Historically, this concept has served as the cornerstone of political science and international relations theory. But the case of Yemen highlights the limitations of this framework, where the state's authority to enforce decisions is sternly diminished. Similarly, Charles Tilly has emphasised the role of war in strengthening and consolidating state power (Tilly, 1990). This idea also does not completely account for countries where conflict causes fragmentation. In Yemen, the war has produced multiple centres of power instead of building a strong state. The central question that this paper seeks to answer is: How do several non-state actors transform the idea of sovereignty in Yemen? The research moves beyond descriptive and historical accounts of conflict and

delves into an analytical study of the constitution, exercise and contestation of authority. It focuses specifically on three types of non-state actors: the Southern Transitional Council, tribal networks, and local militias. All these actors represent different forms of governance, allowing a comprehensive analysis of how sovereignty is reconfigured and reconceptualised.

The significance of this research is not just in its contribution to the study of Yemen but also in its wider implications for comprehending contemporary conflicts. In many conflict-affected countries, the diminishing of state sovereignty has opened the gates for alternative forms of governance that challenge the traditional notions about the state and sovereignty (Hoffmann & Kirk, 2013; Malejacq, 2020). While analysing the Yemen conflict, the paper adds to the existing body of literature that seeks to reconceptualise the concept of sovereignty as a fluctuating process rather than a fixed institutional characteristic. It also demonstrates the significance of taking into account the role of non-state actors in restructuring the political order and also highlights the need for analytical frameworks that can examine the dynamics of fragmented authority. Furthermore, the paper has some important practical implications. Attempts to resolve the conflict have been impeded by focusing on a limited set of actors, particularly the remaining part of the centralised state and the Houthis. These approaches disregard the plurality of actors who hold power on the ground, and without whom the possibilities of a peaceful settlement are negligible (Palik et al., 2020). By stressing the role of these actors, this paper urges the necessity of a more comprehensive and inclusive approach to peace and stability.

Therefore, the paper argues that the Yemen conflict should not be conclusively understood as a proxy conflict or humanitarian crisis, but a multi-dimensional process that is transforming the nature and foundations of political authority. By looking at the role of non-state actors, it provides a comprehensive understanding of the way sovereignty is redefined in protracted conflict settings. The paper contributes to both theoretical debates and practical endeavours to solve one of the most critical conflicts of our time.

Existing scholarship on the Yemen Conflict

There has been a growing literature on the conflict in Yemen, and it has generated substantial interest among researchers, though this growing literature remains fragmented analytically, which, as a result, privileges a certain kind of narrative while other narratives remain neglected. The existing literature and scholarship on Yemen can be broadly classified into three dominant strands, i.e., first, the framework of proxy war; second, the Houthi-centred strand; and third, the humanitarian crisis (Lackner, 2023). Though all these strands individually and collectively provide insights that are valuable while studying Yemen and conflict in the country in particular. The shortcomings of these three strands are

that they fall short in comprehending the intricacies of governance and authority in Yemen, and in particular, the role that non-state actors other than Houthis Play in the country. Those scholars who adopt the proxy war strand conceptualise the conflict in Yemen as a frontier for regional dominance primarily between Iran and Saudi Arabia. The focus of the proxy war strand is on the strategic competition, regional security dynamics and the larger geopolitical rivalry (Darwich, 2020). In this context, Juneau (2016) argues that both Iran and Saudi Arabia seek to expand their influence beyond their borders through local allies, and Yemen provides a fertile ground to fulfil that aspiration. On similar lines, Salisbury (2015) emphasises that intensified and prolonged conflict in Yemen is a consequence of the external intervention, which is also transforming this conflict into a broader struggle for regional supremacy. Recent literature has focused greatly on the internationalised aspect of the conflict in Yemen, which has consequences for the localised efforts towards peacebuilding (Clausen, 2021). There is no doubt about the application of the literature focusing on the internationalised aspect of the conflict, but this greater focus on it reduces the Yemeni story to a passive battleground for regional supremacy. In this process, the local actors involved in the conflict are underestimated, as a result of which the internal political dynamics and authority at the local level are seen either as secondary players or the consequence of the interests of the external players (Al-Muslimi, 2021).

The rise and evolution of the Houthis movement as the major non-state actor in the conflict in Yemen is part of the second strand of literature. The military, ideological and political dimensions of the Houthis are traced by scholars while tracing their origins to grievances in northern Yemen and the subsequent expansion into a dominant force. Brandt (2017), for instance, provides an account of Houthis historical development and their ability to mobilise support through a combination of political strategy and religious identity. On similar lines, Day (2012) emphasises that the internal fractures within Yemen are enabled by the rise of Houthis. The transition of Houthis from an insurgency to a de facto state authority by monopolising taxation and local administration in the north has been highlighted by contemporary analysis. Though these studies on Houthis are critical for comprehending the important and primary actor in the conflict but, these studies have focused on Houthis disproportionately as a result of which other non-state actors in this conflict are either understudied or entirely neglected, which further means that the fragmented authority within Yemen remains uncharted.

The humanitarian crisis, which represents the third major strand of the conflict literature in Yemen, unravels one of the worst humanitarian crises with mass displacement of people, outbreak of diseases and widespread famine. The devastating impact of the conflict on the human population has been documented by scholars who highlight the collapse of the healthcare system in the country, disruption of the basic necessities, services and food insecurity (Dureab, et al., 2020). The humanitarian crisis

has been further aggravated by the weaponisation of aid and economic blockade, which has drawn significant attention from health scholars globally (Jomaa, Issa & Naja, 2021). Though this body of work on the humanitarian crisis is greatly helpful in drawing attention towards the human cost of war, the governance in the country is often framed as either dysfunctional or absent altogether. The alternative forms of governance that emerge in the absence of a functioning state are overlooked. The role of non-state actors has been mentioned in several instances, but their primary contribution has been shown as the patrons of instability rather than governance providers (Meininghaus, 2021).

In the shadow of these dominant strands of literature on conflict in Yemen, there has been a growth of a body of literature that explores the concept of governance in conflict settings, particularly focusing on the role of the non-state actors in maintaining law and order and being the providers of public goods. In this context, Arjona (2016) argues that in civil wars like that in Yemen, groups often establish a system of governance that not only extracts resources but also regulates civilian life. On similar lines, Mampily (2021) showcases that insurgent groups can develop administrative structures that are sophisticated and correlate with those of the formal structure of the state. In order to gain legitimacy, the administrative structure of the insurgent groups often mimics the state bureaucracy (Floera, 2020; Stewart, 2021). The assumption that governance is the exclusive monopoly of the state is challenged by these studies, which provide a framework that is helpful in comprehending the case of Yemen. As there is a diversity of non-state actors in Yemen who present a complex and layered picture of authority, this approach has not been fully applied as yet (Gaston & Al-Dawsari, 2022).

Specifically in the context of Yemen, a significant gap remains in the literature regarding actors such as the tribal networks, local militias and the Southern Transitional Council (STC). Though actors like these are referenced occasionally in journalistic accounts and policy reports, they hardly become the focus of academic investigation. The governance practices of the STC and their implications on the sovereignty of Yemen have received limited scholarly attention, while the STC, on the other hand, has emerged as a powerful military and political actor which advocates autonomy for the southern part of the country (Forster, 2020). On similar lines, the tribal authorities which have played a central role in Yemeni society historically are not adequately integrated into the contemporary governance and conflict analysis (Al Dawari, 2022). Another unexamined category of actors is the local militias; these groups operate at different scales. They are highly diverse, forming large units to small community-based formations, and are also aligned with the regional powers. These groups are often subsumed under the broader categories of the “armed groups” or relegated to the margins despite controlling resources and territory. The anchoring role played by local militias in shaping the localised forms of authority and governance is obscured by the lack of differentiation, especially in maintaining the ev-

everyday security in fractured regions of the country (Heinze, 2021; Kendall, 2022). The greater part of the existing literature neglects these militias; as a result, there is an absence of a systematic analysis of these actors, which also has implications for how sovereignty is understood in the context of Yemen. Krasner (1999) argues that sovereignty is often a contested concept and redefined in practice rather than being static or absolute. Building on this, contemporary regional scholars argue that sovereignty in the Middle Eastern region is increasingly being defined by the hybrid and polycentric political orders (Lynch, 2023; Philips, 2021). With the proliferation of non-state actors in Yemen, the concept of sovereignty is seen as fragmented across multiple layers of authority rather than being centralised.

The main purpose of this paper is to attempt to address this gap by a comprehensive focus on the role of non-state actors beyond the Houthis and examine their contribution to sovereignty transformation and its fragmentation (Transfeld, 2022). This study aims to provide a more comprehensive understanding of the political order in Yemen by integrating insights from literature on proxy wars, insurgent governance and humanitarian crisis. While attempting to fill that gap, this study engages with the border theoretical debates on statehood and authority and moves beyond the descriptive account of the conflict. The existing scholarship on Yemen remains largely focused on the external actors, the Houthis and humanitarian outcomes, though it has made important contributions to the field of study. The diverse range of non-state actors operating within Yemen and their role in shaping sovereignty and governance needs a deeper understanding and analysis. The present study seeks to address this gap and contribute to a more analytically robust and nuanced understanding of the conflict in Yemen.

Theoretical Framework

Analysing the transformation of sovereignty in Yemen requires a theoretical framework that transcends traditional and state-centric approaches and engages with theories that could explain the process of fragmentation, forms of competing authorities and the resurgence of governance networks in conflict arenas. Drawing on the classical idea of Max Weber and Charles Tilly, the study incorporates recent scholarship on sovereignty, hybrid regimes and non-state actors, which are remarkable in the study of contemporary conflicts (Mac Ginty, 2021; Malejacq, 2020). Max Weber is most closely associated with the traditional conception of the state, where he defines the state as “that (successfully) claims the monopoly of the legitimate use of physical force within a given territory” (Weber, 1978). This implies that sovereignty is unified, indivisible, territorially rigid and structurally coherent. Therefore, the state is the final source of authority, and all other agencies and institutions come under its control and remain subordinate. This state-centric approach often hides the actual governance patterns in post-colonial settings in which the state remained incomplete even during peacetime (Migdal, 2001; Philips, 2017).

However, this model proves inconsistent in explaining political realities in unstable societies such as Yemen. The longstanding war has immensely derailed the capacity of the state to sustain control over the population and resources. Hence, multiple actors undermine the presumption of an integrated and unified authority by exercising power in their specific controlled regions. Therefore, the idea of sovereignty as a fixed attribute of the state must be reconceptualised according to the existing power distribution. Scholars of Middle Eastern studies have opined that civil conflicts often produce poly-centric orders and plural sovereignties (Lynch, 2023; Meininghaus, 2021). Another theoretical lens to understand the changing nature of sovereignty is Charles Tilly's idea of war. Tilly argued that "war makes states", implying that longstanding violence in Europe led to the establishment of a centralised authority. Because of war, the administrative capacity of rulers developed, which helped in resource extraction and the elimination of enemies. Yet, this is not an appropriate model to explain the case of Yemen. Rather than contributing to state-building, the conflict has instead resulted in territorial and political divisions. This divergence highlights the methodological limitations of applying European models of state-making to the contemporary conflicts in the Middle East. Contemporary scholars argue that modern conflicts are more likely to weaken the state institutions and exacerbate violence rather than make a state according to the Weberian model. (Kaldor, 2012).

The paper utilises the concept of fragmented sovereignty to understand the dynamics of authority in Yemen. Fragmented sovereignty refers to the presence of multiple actors in a state who control different parts of the state territory (Krasner, 1999). According to the fragmented sovereignty concept, sovereignty does exist, but in overlapping forms. All three non-state actors in Yemen exercise different degrees of authority, thus creating a plural system of governance. This fragmentation is both functional and territorial in nature because different regions are controlled by different groups performing multiple governance functions. Recent field studies demonstrate that such territorial division has localised the political geography, and administrative boundaries are negotiated and renegotiated constantly (Kendall, 2022; Transfeld, 2022). Similar to this is the concept of hybrid governance, where state and non-state actors coexist, interact and take part in governance functions (Boege et al., 2009).

The concept of hybrid governance challenges the binary between state and non-state authority by highlighting the idea that governance is not unified but shared and contested. In Yemen, the state institutions, the tribal systems and the militias all operate simultaneously. These mixed arrangements are examples of a hybrid political system in which power is not monopolised but distributed across all in different capacities. Therefore, Yemen is a classic example of hybrid governance, where formal and informal institutions function independently (Gaston & Al-Dawsari, 2022; Heinze, 2021).

Another integral component of this study is the concept of *de facto* authority, which focuses on the

pragmatic aspect of power, regardless of formal authority. As noted by Arjona (2016) and Mampilly (2011), in civil conflicts, non-state actors usually establish governance systems that provide security, maintain order and extract resources. These non-state actors might not be internationally recognised, but they act as powerful governing authorities. Many non-state actors in Yemen perform core state functions such as security and dispute settlement, thus exercising *de facto* sovereignty over territories under their control. This phenomenon coincides with the scholarship on rebel governance, which suggests that armed groups act as the state bureaucracy to seek public support and take control over resources (Florea, 2020; Stewart, 2021). The idea of militia governance further broadens this investigation by analysing the practices of armed groups. Opposite to the idea that militias primarily work as instruments of violence, the current literature demonstrates that they operate through structured systems of governance (Mampilly, 2011). Such systems include administrative machinery, economic institutions, and legal authorities. Local militias in Yemen operate major checkpoints and make rules to regulate trade. This type of institutionalisation in the country attracts positive public opinion, which further strengthens their local authority and claims to legitimacy (Baron, Tariq, & El-Taraboulsi-McCarthy, 2019).

Collectively, these perspectives challenge the classical notion of sovereignty as a centralised and state-bound concept. Instead, they indicate a more evolving and relational conception of authority, in which sovereignty is frequently produced and reproduced through exchanges among various actors. To put it differently, the sovereignty of Yemen is not eroded or weakened but is layered and contentious. As a result, authority comes through a process of multiple negotiations strongly ingrained in local social relationships (Reno, 2015). Moreover, this framework creates space for a comprehensive understanding of legitimacy. In politically fragmented states, legitimacy is not purely rooted in formal institutional structures but is derived from local acceptance. Non-state actors that enforce law and order, settle disputes and ensure the security of their people are often perceived as legitimate, though they lack international recognition. This perspective is key to understanding the adaptability of non-state agents in Yemen. Thus, the transition from *legation* authority to performance-based legitimacy is a core feature of protracted conflicts (Schmelzle & Stollenwerk, 2018).

This shift from legal-rational legitimacy to performance-based legitimacy is a defining feature of protracted civil wars, where civilian allegiance often follows the provision of basic public goods. While applying the above-discussed theoretical framework, this paper treats sovereignty as an objective and empirical phenomenon rather than a purely legal construct. It analyses the exercise of authority in real situations and also examines how governance responsibilities are allocated and how different stakeholders interact in a politically fragmented country. This paper further provides a deeper under-

standing of sovereignty in Yemen and significantly contributes to the debates on state-building and regionalism. Ultimately, this study further seeks to decolonise and reconceptualise the idea of political authority in the Global South (Hagmann & Hoehne, 2009).

Methodology

This paper draws on a qualitative-analytical research design and employs a case study approach to investigate the nature of sovereignty in Yemen. Because of the intensity of conflict and the diversity of non-state actors, a qualitative approach is appropriate for this study in order to examine multifaceted political processes, patterns of conflict, and the nature of authority. The paper relies primarily on secondary data sources, which include peer-reviewed academic literature, policy reports, reports from national and international bodies such as the United Nations, think tanks, governmental and non-governmental agencies, etc. Moreover, credible journalistic accounts are specifically utilised to augment and contextualise the research findings. This triangulation of multiple sources strengthens the authenticity of the study and the depth of analysis. The paper also adopts a comparative analytical framework, where it focuses on three types of non-state actors: the Southern Transitional Council, local militias and tribal groups. The rationale behind the typology is that they represent distinct forms of authority, ranging from formal institutions to informal power networks. The paper identifies patterns of governance and fragmentation of sovereignty in Yemen by examining the roles these multiple actors play in security, taxation and overall welfare. Furthermore, the nature of research is interpretive, as it draws on thematic analysis to identify concepts like ‘de facto authority’, ‘hybrid governance’ and ‘fragmented sovereignty’. Instead of looking at sovereignty as a rigid legal concept, the study portrays it as a continuously evolving process conditioned by everyday processes.

Role of Non-State Actors

The political landscape of Yemen is highly complex, in which multiple non-state actors exercise varying degrees of authority and shape the meaning and structure of sovereignty. While the prevailing explanations focus on the role of Houthis and other external powers, a close analysis exposes that local elements - specifically the Southern Transitional Council, tribal factions and local militias - play a pivotal role in the state’s governance. They not only function within the state institutions but also actively create alternative systems of governance that challenge the Yemeni state. A plethora of recent literature reveals that this mixed model of government is the defining attribute of the state and alters the way local people interact with authority (Transfeld, 2022).

1. Southern Transitional Council

The Southern Transitional Council (STC), created in 2017, has evolved as one of the leading and prominent non-state actors in Yemen in the Southern region of the country. STC was formed in reaction to the enduring discontents, such as political marginalisation and economic deprivation, and it advocates for political independence of Southern Yemen. STC indicates the longstanding historical divisions within the country and the prospects created by the fall of the centralised government during the conflict (Day, 2012). The organisation has taken control over major territories, which include the strategic port city of Aden, on various instances during the conflict. Its institutionalisation in the southern region has successfully created a ‘state within a state’, exploiting the southern region to legitimise its rule and establish formal institutions for dialogue (Al-Mekhlafi, 2023; Forster, 2020). STC’s control over the territories is managed by the organised armed groups and other institutions that correspond to those of a sovereign government. In this sense, the STC reflects attributes that are of a proto-state that administrates, enforces laws, and engages in political negotiations (Mampilly, 2011).

Importantly, the STC carries out a range of governance functions traditionally associated with the state. The core functions are providing security from external threats, providing public services, and distributing resources. These governance practices are not just symbolic but have a practical impact on the lives of local people. The STC acts as a direct challenge to the internationally recognised government in Yemen. Instead of operating as a sub-national actor, it establishes its own independent government that bargains with the state for power and legitimacy. This complex system represents the fragmentation of authority, as multiple power centres exist and exercise authority within the same territory (Krasner, 1999). This pattern conforms to the trends in the Middle East, where local power centres dominate the formal state prerogatives and redefine sovereign borders (Lynch, 2023).

2. Tribal Authorities

Tribal governance is a longstanding feature of Yemeni society. It particularly operates in regions where state institutions are weak or have become functionally dormant. These tribal structures are based on ethnic ties, traditional laws and deep-rooted social practices, providing a groundwork for independent formal structures (Brandt, 2017). In times of conflict, tribal authorities show resistance and fill the vacuum after the state’s collapse. The leaders perform a broad range of functions that are necessary for maintaining order. Some of the core functions are security, dispute settlement through customary laws and resource allocation. Some studies suggest that customary systems (urf) have been more successful in securing justice for the public than the existing central government (Al-Dawsari, 2022). In most of the cases, local judicial mechanisms are more accessible and efficient than the formal system of jurisprudence, especially in areas where state authorities cannot reach.

The source of tribal legitimacy is traditions, social cohesion, and local norms, contrary to the legal-rational frameworks. The immediate and context-specific legitimacy enables the local leaders to maintain their control in highly fragile environments. As Arjona (2016) argues, in conflict settings, local governance structures depend more on social cohesion than formal structures. Also, tribals act as mediators between politicians and the local public. They help in mediation and negotiations and facilitate resource distribution, thus playing a critical role in the political economy of the state. As emphasised by Nevola (2020), tribal mediation is the most efficient mechanism for security and stability in Yemen at present. They have emerged as alternative forms of authority that function parallel to the state and, in some instances, against the state.

3. Local Militias

The most fragmented component of the Yemen state is its local militias. These groups differ in terms of their objectives, size, and the nature of their organisations. Some are associated with larger political fronts, while others function independently in isolation, influenced by regional interests (Salisbury, 2017). Though there exists a diversity of militias in Yemen, they all have certain common characteristics. They capture territories that are strategically important from where they can regulate their daily affairs. They also perform basic economic functions such as informal trade and taxation to finance their daily operations. These localised economic systems support and sustain these armed militias in their everyday survival (Carboni, 2021).

Apart from their role in the political economy of Yemen, like STC and tribal authorities, these militias also provide security and maintain law and order in their areas of control. Though sometimes these militias use coercion, their active role significantly contributes to the peace and stability of the region. Mampilly (2011) argues that armed groups regulate civilian life and ensure adherence by developing governance structures. Unlike the centralised state agencies, these militias particularly focus on resources, survival, and local obedience. Importantly, the militias foster the emergence of what can be called ‘micro-sovereignties’, where militias perform particular governance functions and make rules for law and order. This creates overlapping authorities, causing further fragmentation. As a result, the process of peace-building gets further complicated, because now every national settlement must take into consideration the vote of multiple sovereign groups (Heinze, 2021).

Transformation of Sovereignty in Yemen

The emergence of non-state actors in Yemen has significantly changed the notion of sovereignty from a unified and integrated system into a dispersed and multilayered system. This shift can be explained through three processes: territorial fragmentation, functional sovereignty, and competing legitima-

cies.

1. Territorial Fragmentation

Fragmentation of sovereignty is the most apparent expression of this transformation. The state of Yemen is no longer unified but decentralised and broken into various control zones, each with a sovereign actor. Whether STC, tribals or militias, each is exercising their share of authority in specific regions. This fragmentation compromises the traditional practice of sovereignty. Now the authority remains territorially dispersed, and people show allegiance to local actors in different corners of the country. Also, to treat Yemen as the sole player in diplomatic meetings neglects the regional ruptures and halts peace processes (Kendall, 2022). Krasner (1999) also argues that this type of fragmentation demonstrates the planned hypocrisy of sovereignty, where formal and informal claims to authority coexist.

2. Functional Sovereignty

In conjunction with the territorial fragmentation, the notion of sovereignty is also transforming in its functional aspects. This phenomenon, where the non-state actors perform functions of a classical state, often refers to functional sovereignty. The capacity of these actors to challenge the state reflects the flexibility of governance structures in conflict zones (Meininghaus, 2021). In Yemen, different groups assume the commitment to different sides of governance. In many regions, a hybrid service delivery system has emerged where multiple actors: NGOs, militia, tribal, etc. temporarily manage public affairs.

3. Competing Legitimacy

The most visible manifestation of sovereignty transformation in Yemen is found in the emergence of contesting claims to legitimacy. The internationally recognised government of Yemen, along with the three major actors, all assert their right to rule. The sources of their claims are multifaceted and include local support and historical injustice. Thus, legitimacy in Yemen is structured by contextual factors and is not purely singular. Finally, this realignment from formal institutional to local and function-based legitimacy redefines the political realities of Yemen today (Schmelzle & Stollenwerk, 2018). This creates a highly complex political landscape where power and legitimacy are continuously bargained for.

Implications

The process of transformation of sovereignty in Yemen, triggered by the emergence of non-state

actors, has serious implications for state-building, conflict resolution, and wider theoretical frameworks within international politics. The Yemen conflict does not represent a temporary breakdown of state machinery but a complete reconfiguration of authority, where power is entrenched in local institutions. The first implication of this investigation is the hurdle it poses to the future of Yemen as a central political authority. The classical model of Weber, which sees the state as the only source of power, is no longer an appropriate model for explanation. The current situation in Yemen moves away from the Weberian model, as multiple power centres exist in the country at present. Because of this, the return to a strong and unified state is very unlikely in the short term. Rather, Yemen is moving towards a federal system or a long-term state of fragmentation. In this case, authority remains decentralised and in the hands of multiple actors. This weakens the efforts of state reconstruction that aim to restore the pre-war institutional settings.

The system of decentralised sovereignty in Yemen also has major implications for the peace dialogues and dispute settlement processes. The traditional peace processes revolve around the assumption that a conflict involves a limited number of parties and are usually centred on state actors. However, the case of Yemen is slightly peculiar because of the presence of various stakeholders seeking their own distinct interests and biases. All these make it difficult to achieve comprehensive desired agreements. Because of the exclusion of local tribal leaders and militias, even the high-level negotiations fail to convert into sustainable peace plans. Such a type of fragmentation boosts the chances of temporary peace, where conflict survives regardless of formal agreements at the national level.

Furthermore, the prevalence of competing systems implies that a nationwide agreement cannot be enforced by a single actor. This impairs the effective implementation of treaties and agreements and sustains the cycles of conflict. Consequently, there is a need to adopt a more inclusive and democratic approach that engages the local agents and acknowledges the realities of a fragmented sovereignty. Apart from this, the Yemen conflict also carries important implications for theoretical understandings in international relations. Classical theories of international politics, such as realism, assume that states are the only significant units of analysis. According to this framework, sovereignty is a fixed and stable characteristic of states. However, the complexities of the Yemen conflict counter these assumptions. The presence of multiple actors exercising power in the same territory depicts the limitations of state-centric models. As Charles Tilly notes, war has a consolidating effect on state power, but in the case of Yemen, it has the reverse effect, i.e. fragmentation. Thus, there is a need to reconceptualise the idea of sovereignty as a dynamic and changing phenomenon. Concepts such as 'hybrid governance' and 'fragmented sovereignty' are analytical frameworks for explaining and revisiting political order in states like Yemen. Scholars can better understand realities beyond the state and comprehend the

role of non-state actors by applying these perspectives. Thus, the Yemen conflict not only challenges the classical notions of sovereignty but also influences the internal political landscape of the country.

Conclusion

The conflict in Yemen is mainly shown as a proxy war between the dominant regional powers in the Middle East. Such an interpretation is partially complete, though it captures the important dimensions of the conflict and disregards the deep-rooted localised transitions of authority that have taken place in the country. This paper has argued that the conflict has essentially transformed sovereignty, reshaping it from a unified state-controlled idea into a fragmented system where several local non-state actors exist simultaneously and exercise authority. The paper draws theoretical insights from Charles Tilly and Max Weber and argues that classical forms of sovereignty do not adequately describe the political realities in Yemen. On the other hand, the authority has become decentralised across various factions, including the Houthis, STC and local militia groups. These localised groups not only challenge the Yemeni government, which is internationally recognised, but also perform various key state functions. The paper has argued how local actors contribute to the emergence of alternative governance systems. On the one hand, the STC acts as a proto-state in the southern part of Yemen. On the other hand, the tribal groups provide a deeply embedded system of local governance, maintaining social order and ensuring social order. Moreover, the local militias also control some parts of Yemen's territory and economic routes and have established a system of independent institutions. The interplay of these actors has resulted in a political landscape characterised by territorial divisions, alternative state apparatuses and competing claims to legitimacy in the country. Therefore, sovereignty in Yemen is no longer centralised but contested and negotiated across different echelons of authority. This transition highlights the development of hybrid political systems in which state and non-state elements coexist and compete with each other.

It is essential to understand these dynamics for academic analysis as well as for policy formulation. To resolve the conflict and restructure the state institutions, the realities of fragmented governance must be recognised, and the local actors must be incorporated in the decision-making processes. Ignoring these factors might lead to political instability and undermine the scope for a sustainable peace. Thus, the Yemen case demonstrates how the nature of sovereignty changes in the contemporary world. This study contributes to a more subtle understanding of authority and governance in spaces where the state fails to hold a monopoly over power.

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