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WORKSHOP: War and Identity in the Balkans and the Middle East
WORKING PAPER

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Title: Rebel disarmament and the inadvertent spoiler problem: How Small Arms and Light Weapons (SALW) shape the Houthis identity

Date: 10.04.2018



Abstract

In 2016, the UN-sponsored peace talks in Kuwait failed to terminate the Yemeni civil war because the Houthis and the Yemeni president, Abd-Rabbu Mansour Hadi was unable to find a mutually acceptable bargain. One core demand of the Hadi government was that the Houthis must withdraw from all territory they have occupied since 2014 and to disarm. Achieving a negotiated settlement in a civil war is difficult because of the simultaneous presence of the *time-inconsistency, commitment, and spoiler problems*. If rebels disarm, their bargaining power is considerably weakened. Furthermore, unilateral defection from the peace agreement becomes an appealing solution for the government who can renege on its previous promises and attack the disarmed rebel group. However, it is not just the government who poses a problem to the peace process, but non-combatants too who has the opportunity and willingness to use small arms and light weapons (SALW) and thus evolve to inadvertent spoilers. This paper examines how SALW availability for non-state actors decreases the costs of groups to re-arm and to threaten the peace process. Including SALW availability in the analysis of civil war termination enhances our understanding of the rational actor based theoretical models of civil war. Research into this topic holds *practical relevance* for stakeholders wishing to gain a more nuanced understating of the failure of peace talks between the government of Yemen and the Houthi movement, and *academic relevance* in the assessment of DDR's role in civil wars termination.

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Introduction:

Yemen, the Arab world's most impoverished nation is inhabited by 25.6 million people. According to the latest estimations, the current war thus far has killed at least 10,000 people and 21.2 million people is in dire need of humanitarian assistance (Sharp, 2016). In fact, the military balance remains largely unchanged between the Houthis and the Saudi-Arabia led coalition, while the conflict is getting more devastating due to infrastructural damage, the lack of access to sanitation, famine, and the outbreak of cholera. Furthermore, the UN is not succeeding in securing ceasefire and renewed peace talks between the belligerents. The final outcome of the current Yemeni deadlock is unknown yet, but it is safe to assume that any viable compromise will have to entail a political voice for the Houthis. Hardly any observer had anticipated that what first was a localized religious group aimed at youth in Northern-Yemen would eventually become an organized insurgency and a de facto powerbroker in Yemen. Yemen, as the second most heavily armed nation justify gun ownership not just as a mere tool of defense, but guns are integral part of masculinity, ceremonies and tribal gatherings, thus their symbolic meaning is deeply embedded in the society. "Weapons in Yemen are said to be part of the national character and more linked to heritage, tradition and norms than to violence and killing" (Miller 2003:3).

Insofar as strong identity markers, such as ethnicity, religion or tribal affiliations makes mobilization and recruitment more feasible it is logical to expect these factors to play a role in civil war termination too. Identity is a complex phenomenon, constantly shaped by a number of factors, like the cultural role of weapon ownership. How the availability of small arms and light weapons (SALW) of non-state actors¹ in the post-civil war context influences disarmament policies? This is a serious puzzle, since non-state actors control of SALW by itself is an understudied topic in political science. This paper looks at what roles "gun-culture" play in disarmament, civil war termination and consequently, its implications for the potential recurrence of violence. Gun-culture is not unique to Yemen. Countries such as the United States also views weapon ownership as a more nuanced issue than serving only defensive

¹ Non-state actors in the paper include combatants/rebel groups and non-combatants. For the purpose of this paper rebel groups are defined as organizations "that recognize no higher command authority, have their own leadership and organizational structure (including resources and membership), and actively make demand related to the groups collective aims or status." Bake, Cunningham, and Seymour, *The Plague of Initials*, p.268



purposes, therefore opening up the black-box of non-combatant gun ownerships' impact on civil wars and their termination has the potential to create a cross-national research agenda. This study makes the first step in this direction. The paper proceed as follows. In the second section, the Yemeni civil war and its evolution will be reviewed with a special focus on the evolution of the Houthis' identity. The subsequent, third section introduces the basic rational actor model to civil wars and places disarmament in this context. The fourth section provides an overview of the history and the cultural role of small arms and light weapon ownership in Yemen. The fifth section introduces the *inadvertent spoiler* problem special to the Yemeni case. The concluding section summarizes the findings and offers further avenues for research. The paper is a qualitative, case-study methodology based study in order to provide valid causal inferences. However, theoretical implications – identifying the inadvertent spoiler problem – should inspire larger, cross-case comparative case-research too.

I. From civil to regional and international: The Yemeni war and the Houthis

The Houthis (also known as Ansar Allah) can be categorized in multiple ways. They can be seen as a grass root religious-political movement, a non-state actor aided by various external powers, a distinct religious minority, or as an organized militia. In fact, the movement can assert all of these roles at the same time. In order to gain a more nuanced understanding of the Houthis, one should acknowledge that these identity categories are not mutually exclusive, but they exist simultaneously and often reinforcing each other. It is also relevant to emphasize that identity is not a constant state of being, but a continuous process of becoming.²

Originally, the Houthi movement is a Zaydi Shiite group from the northern, Sa'ada region of Yemen. Currently, Zaydism make up 35 to 45 per cent of Yemen's total population.³ It is important to clarify that although Zaydi Shiism (or the so-called Fivers) is a sub-sect of Shiite Islam, it's doctrinally different from the dominant "Twelver Shiism" which is practiced in Iran, Iraq and Lebanon. In fact, Zaydi religious practices are closer to Sunni Islam. In 2004, after a failed attempt by Saleh to find a political compromise with al-Houthi, the government began its military attack against the Houthis in their mountainous stronghold with the aim of killing the movements leader. Between 2004 and 2010 in the course of six violent conflict (the so-called Sa'ada wars) the Houthis became irreversibly radicalized. After the death of al-Houthi,

² The concept of "change" is at the heart of identity construction. In sum, we should not forget that collective identity is more "than the sum of the individuals involved" (Kinnvall 2004:748).

³ CIA World Factbook: Middle East, Yemen country profile



his father and later his younger brother, Adbu al-Malik took charge of the group. The former leader was “martyred” and the intra-state war further legitimized the Houthi’s cause in the eyes of the population. In 2007 Qatari representatives intervened and offered to broker a peace deal which demanded ceasefire and the compliance with the Yemeni republican political system. However, this attempt was only a short-lived initiative. The war ended with the heavy-handed involvement of the Saudi Air Force in November 2009.⁴ The Sa’ada wars inevitably transformed the Houthi movement from a student organization to a popular resistance movement. The conflict took place almost exclusively in the Zaydi minority’s stronghold in the northern governorate of Saada adjacent to the Saudi border.

The latest milestone in the Houthis identity transformation took place during the region wide Arab Uprisings. In 2011, the Houthi’s gained a real political momentum, as the 33-year long autocratic rule of Saleh ended.⁵ In March 2011, a month after the beginning of an uprising against President Saleh’s rule, Maj. Gen. Ali Mohsen al-Ahmar, the commander of the 1st Armoured Division, defected to the side of the protesters taking hundreds of troops and several tanks to protect protesting citizens. The Yemeni Spring was a peculiar case of the Arab uprisings, because the political transition was externally negotiated by the Gulf Cooperation Council (GCC). The post-Saleh era meant to alter the *status quo ante* and to develop the sufficient political representation of previously marginalized groups. This window of opportunity was most successfully utilized by the Houthis who were able to portray themselves as principal defenders of the entire Yemeni society. After months of protracted protests and negotiations Saleh had to resign in exchange for immunity for him and his relatives. Besides, he was allowed to remain in the country and continue to be the first man his party, the GPC. The ultimate goal of the deal was to place former Vice President Hadi in power, who as the only candidate during the 2012 elections won with more than 99 per cent of votes. As Saleh could remain in the country, he was able to utilize his extensive patronage network to sabotage the transition and eventually support the Houthi’s advance and territorial gains. Policy-planning failures, such as the lack of inclusivity made the GCC initiative a failure in the long-run.

⁴ During these six years an estimated 150.000 displaced people and thousands of casualties suffered from the conflict. (Salmoni, Loidolt, Wells 2010:10).

⁵ At the wake of the uprising, AQAP associated militias capitalized on the emerging security vacuum and seized territory in the southern part of Yemen. Soon after, the United Nations, Saudi Arabia and other members of the international community brokered a political compromise in order to halt the region-wide escalation of the conflict.



Subsequently, in 2014 when the government wanted to remove the fuel subsidies, as part of the economic reforms, the Houthis called for mass protest and launched a military offensive against the various tribal allies of President Hadi. In September, different pro-Saleh forces joined their resistance and together they were able to take over the capital. This move meant that the Houthis were able to considerably expand their area of control from their traditional northern stronghold. Moreover, as dissatisfaction with the Hadi government constantly grew, the Houthis were able to recruit new members at this time not only Shiites, but Sunnis as well. The Houthis successfully popularized their cause, they were able to capitalize on the widespread resentment against the transitional government and they were able to utilize the Saleh's support. In January 2015, the Houthis placed president Hadi under house arrest. Later, he escaped to the port city of Aden and then to Riyadh, where he established a government in exile. Subsequently, the Houthis dissolved the parliament and established the Supreme Revolutionary Committee, as an interim authority which however remained unrecognized by the international community. In March 2015, the Saudi Arabia led international coalition began its military attack in Yemen against the Houthis. The coalition includes Kuwait, the United Arab Emirates, Bahrain, Egypt, Morocco, Jordan, Sudan, and Senegal. The Saudi-led coalition also relies on local Yemeni forces to carry out most ground operations. These allied units comprise a mix of Yemeni army units, tribal forces, Islamist militias, and southern separatists opposed to Houthi rule.

In the same year the United Nations Security Council adopted Resolution 2216, which imposed sanctions on individuals undermining the stability of Yemen and authorized an arms embargo against the Houthi-Saleh forces. Resolution 2216 also demanded that the Houthis withdraw from all territories seized during the conflict, and to hand on weapons seized from military during the fighting. In addition, the resolution authorizes member states to prevent the transfer or sale of arms to the Houthis or to former President Saleh and allows Yemen's neighboring countries to inspect cargo suspected of carrying arms into Yemen for the rebels.

In 2016 the Houthis merged their forces with former Yemeni president Abdullah Saleh's. The alliance ended in 2017 after Saleh's assassination by the Houthi rebels.⁶ For today the Saudi-led coalition retook the port city of Aden and the mostly Sunni inhabited southern areas of Yemen. Despite the massive air strikes, the maritime blockade, and the coalition support for

⁶ Aljazeera: Yemen: Ex-President Ali Abdullah Saleh killed, 10 December 2017



local Yemeni opposition groups, the Houthis managed to consolidate their territorial gains.⁷

The Houthis along with Southern Movement and the Al-Qaeda in the Arabian Peninsula (AQAP) poses a critical security challenge to stability in Yemen. Why the Houthis were able to outperform other groups? In short, they managed to overcome the *collective action*, the *coordination* and the *time-consistency problems*.⁸ The Houthi's kin networks (in the form of tribes), the group's religious homogeneity (Zaydism), the geographic concentration (smaller distance should make mobilization easier), their previously established network (in the form of the Believing Youth organization) gave al-Houthi the social capital essentially for mobilization. Little is known about the internal matters of the Houthis, especially regarding their governing structure. According to secondary sources the group is loosely organized. They are not listed in the Non-State Actors in Armed Conflict Dataset (NSA).⁹ According to the UCDP database the group has been involved in the state-based and non-state categories of UCDP organized violence, but they haven't included the rebel group in the dataset until 2014 "due to the lack of stated incompatibility"¹⁰ which means that little is known about the group, especially in their formative years during the Saada wars. The lack of knowledge regarding their internal matters is further complicated by the heavily restricted, and often biased media access in Yemen.

Civil war research and game theory

The rational actor model views civil wars as bargaining processes. The outbreak of a domestic conflict is essentially a failure between the government and the rebel group to arrive at an *ex ante* settlement. From a rational actor perspective, an immediate post-conflict environment is anarchic and characterized by a special security dilemma in which rebels are unwilling to give up their arms, because they must ensure their survival. Implicit in this logic is that weapons empowered rebels and became an integral part of their identity. The other, inextricable linked challenge is the *commitment problem* which creates incentives for cheating from both sides. It

⁷ Many of the airstrikes have been unlawful, where the coalition bombed residential neighborhoods, markets and educational facilities, thereby further worsening the ongoing humanitarian crisis in Yemen.

⁸ At the same time, it is necessary to highlight that CAP is not just an in-group phenomenon. The several ceasefires that were established during the conflict were unable to provide lasting solutions because of the mistrust between the government and the Houthi rebels. For further information on the game theoretical problems rebel face, see: Collier 1999

⁹ To access the database, see <http://privatewww.essex.ac.uk/~ksg/eacd.html> Cunningham, David; Kristian Skrede Gleditsch & Idean Salehyan (2013) Non-state actors in civil wars: A new dataset, Conflict Management and Peace Science 30(5): 516–53

¹⁰ UCDP: actor, Ansar Allah, available at: <http://ucdp.uu.se/#actor/1091>



is quite logical to assume that the government who had just regained its monopoly over the use of force is likely to take revenge on rebels and attack them once they are not capable of fighting back. The governments' aggressive response can be motivated by deterrence aims to portray strength and therefore prevent the emergence and the violent attacks of other rebel groups. Disarmament fundamentally changes the environment in which the government and rebels previously engaged in and the balance of power between them. From a rebel perspective, giving up their arms translates to an erosion of their bargaining power. Rebels response to these challenges vary: some completely refuse to give up their arms, others might give up only a fraction and hide personal stockpiles for potential future usage.

Disarmament and inadvertent peace spoilers:

The study of disarmament belongs to the study of civil war termination. Disarmament of a combatant group in a civil war is usually embedded in overall disarmament, demobilization, and reintegration (DDR) process which seek to establish post-conflict peace. Disarmament is the most immediate and short-term tangible effect a successful war termination bargain can achieve. To reiterate, the general aim of ex-combatants' disarmament is to reestablish the status quo ante regarding the monopoly of the use of force in favor of the state apparatus. At this phase of the peace process the state's aim is to prevent other groups to re-arm, and to ensure ex-combatants compliance to the peace agreement. Disarmament¹¹ encompasses the handover of weapons and ammunition to the government or a designated authority, their registration, safe storage, and if necessary the destruction of these weapons (Swarbick 2007). DDR programs were first initiated in the late 1980s and they were endorsed by such multilateral international organizations as the World Bank, IMF, and the United Nations. Empirical evidence regarding DDR's success and effectiveness however shows a mixed result. (Schulhofer-Wohl and Sambanis 2010) It is important to clarify that DDR programs are aimed at ex-combatants and not at civilians. (Humphreys and Weinstein 2007, Muggah 2009) According to Ashkenazi, local community norms and practices related to SALW are rarely taken into account during disarmament processes. (Ashkenazi 2014:243) As a consequence, disarmament can either accommodate some local community practices and norms (1), or it can take a zero-sum approach and suppress traditional practices (2). In the later case, further

¹¹ Not every disarmament is the same though. *Voluntary* and *forced* disarmaments are results of different types of bargaining processes. Whereas a voluntary disarmament process is most often the result of a negotiated termination of a civil war, forced disarmament reflects a more unilateral approach.



challenges are expected to arise, as external actors' legitimacy will most likely be questioned or denied by local community members. The lack of legitimacy then might lead to rearmament, and at the end DDR programs become counter productive and generate more rather than less violence. Establishing trust between parties who opposed and killed each other for years is not an easy task. Disarmament is a fragile process, where peace spoilers and inadequate timing can quickly reverse steps taken towards peace. Former combatants have to feel secure enough to get rid of their arms after years of fighting. It is useful to recall Marsh's (2007) argument here, according to which the measurement of disarmament's success should not take an exclusively quantitative stand, as it does not depend on the number of weapons handed in. In other words, there is no necessary causal link between disarmament and peace. The decisive factor is whether the parties are genuinely devoted to the peace process or not. It is expected that either the least functioning weapons, or just a fraction of the entire stockpile will be handed on. The medium and long-term faith of the remaining weapons will partly be determined by the structure of the rebel group. If the organization was tightly controlled, and strictly managed then weapons are more likely to be hidden somewhere known by only a selected few, as it was the case with the Colombian FARC rebels.¹² In contrast, if a group is loosely organized then weapons are more likely to be left behind and spread around the country.

Thus far, only ex-combatants' weapons were taken into account. But what happens to those weapons that are under the control of non-combatants? Civilians who did not fight in the civil war, but had their own weapons. First and foremost, these weapons constitute a potential future base for rearmament. As such, at least theoretically they enhance the commitment problem. Secondly, they decrease the costs of re-armament. Generally, re-armament costs to be low, the following three conditions have to be satisfied: (1) the price of weapons is low (note that this is generally the case in post-conflict contexts where there is an excessive supply of SALW), (2) state policies and arm control laws are not enforced, (3) carrying and/or wearing weapons openly in public is a socially accepted practice. The most important question after a peace agreement is that how easily a group can re-initiate violence? This question leads to the spoiler-problem. According to the seminal article of Stephen J. Stedman (1997) peacemaking is a "risky business" because of the presence of spoilers – leaders and parties who "believe that peace emerging from negotiations threatens their power, worldview, and interests, and use

¹² Colombia Reports: Even Colombia's FARC rebels surprised by how many weapons they have, May 8 2017 accessed: <https://colombiareports.com/even-colombias-farc-rebels-surprised-many-weapons/>



violence to undermine attempts to achieve it.” Generally, being a spoiler translates into some active, deliberate actions which result in the recurrence of violence on purpose. Spoilers are considered as ex-combatants. This study however argues that the spoiler problem has to be disaggregated. Non-combatants might constitute a new category in post-conflict settings by becoming inadvertent spoilers. Inadvertent spoilers have the opportunity and the willingness to initiate violence in the post-conflict environment. They have the opportunity to do so because of the pre-civil war high level availability of small arms and light weapons, the inadequate government control, and the further proliferation of these weapons during the civil war. Inadvertent spoilers’ willingness, or motivation to attack fully or partly disarmed ex-combatants is straightforward: rebels during civil war harm civilians, commit sexual violence, recruit child soldier, damage infrastructure, commit crime and banditry and cause lasting psychological, economic, social, and political suffering. According to Miller and Karp (2003:184) in Yemen “retribution killing is common, and is a socially recognized and tolerated practice” with its own rules. Retaliation for past atrocities is thus a highly likely scenario. The simultaneous presence of opportunity and willingness creates a peculiar security dilemma for the ex-combatants. They need to fear a counter attack from multiple parties, including the government (who might renege on its previous promises and attacks the disarmed ex-combatants), and from non-combatants, as inadvertent peace spoilers (who might utilize the relative decline of the coercive capacity of former combatants to commit retribution killings). In a fragile post-civil war environment a local level violent clash can easily create spill-overs and destabilize the peace agreement.

Operationalizing the Yemeni gun-culture

It is of utmost importance to begin the analysis of the Yemeni gun-culture by noting that the mere presence of small arms and light weapons does not cause conflict, violence or civil war. In order for these weapons to cause conflict particular mechanisms have to be present. Theoretically, the presence of small arms reduces the costs of violent conflict resolution. It is simply easier to resort to violence during a dispute, as weapons are readily and widely available. Small arms and light weapons can thus undermine traditional, non-violent mediation processes. When gun ownership is so culturally embedded, disarmament policies need to be specifically tailored.

According to Collier’s and Hoeffler’s (2004) seminal article on civil war, rebellion is viable – among other factors – because the *conflict specific capital* is unusually cheap in the civil war



ridden country. Marsh (2007) offers a comprehensive overview of the role of SALW in civil war onset, fighting and termination. This study relies on his definition regarding SALW control and availability. According to Marsh (2007: 60) availability “is understood to be the extent to which groups objectives are not constrained by a lack of specific weapons and ammunitions.” Furthermore, he argues that “the most important factor in determining the availability of weapons to insurgents is the availability of states forces to defend their own stockpiles”. (Marsh 2007:61) As we will see however, the Yemeni case slightly alter this definition. As military officials were selling their weapons to the rebels, a more appropriate definition would be the “*availability and willingness*” of state forces to defend their own stockpiles

According to the 2007 Small Arms Survey, Yemen was the most heavily armed nation in the world per capita after the United States. (Small Arms Survey 2007) In Yemen, guns are not just mere tools of violence. They communicate “masculinity, prestige, wealth, identity, communal role, and potential use of violence for micro deterrence purposes” (Miller and Karp 2003: 179). “Weapons play a role as actual instruments used in conflict, but also as statement about identity” (Miller and Karp 2003:179) Gun culture is a difficult concept to operationalize. Ashkenazi (2014:231) defines gun culture as a special characteristic of a society where “guns are fairly common and look on by some identifiable, normative element of the population as desirable goods in some way”. Heinze (2014) further strengthen the symbolic argument related to weapons in Yemen by citing examples of poems which were written about guns, or traditional ritual dances that were centered around guns. The custom of celebratory firing in the air is an additional sign that weapons are accepted within a community. Tribalism, the underlying social structure of Yemen is particularly strong in the northern region. Weapons, their trade and their socio-cultural acceptance is concentrated in the very area of the Houthi-government contestations. Saada for instance is home to Suq al-Talh, the largest weapons market in the entire country (Salmoni et.al 2010:31) which operates like a “grocery store” with no formal requirement to purchase a weapon. The exact number and types of weapons remain challenging to assess. Older estimates claimed the number to be between 40 million to 60 million.¹³ According to Miller and Karp (2003:172) however a more realistic number is between 6 and 9 million. This translates to an average 33 and 50 guns per 100 people.¹⁴

¹³ United Nations Security Council (2015): Letter dates 20 february 2015 from the Panel of Experts on Yemen established pursuant to Security Council resolution 2140 (2014) addressed to the President of the Security Council

¹⁴ Note that this figure is based on both pre-war SALW data and population data. In 2003 the population of Yemen was 10 million less than today, approximately 18 million people.



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According to a 2010 IRIN article, citing a local professors survey, there were 9,9 million SALW, including 1,5 in the hands of government security and military forces, and around 30,000 available in arm shops.¹⁵ Despite these shocking numbers Yemen experiences comparatively low rates of crime, as reflected in the official crime statistics.¹⁶

The diffusion of firearms in Yemen is however a relatively new phenomenon.¹⁷ SALW were brought to Yemen during the Ottoman and the British colonial period. The bipolar era and the competing international support of the United States and the Soviet Union considerably shaped SALW availability in Yemen. From the mid-1960s until the end of the Cold War, the colonial-era weapons were gradually replaced by the Soviet Union shipments mostly concentrated in the southern tribal areas. At that time, Northern-Yemen was supported by Saudi Arabia and Egypt. The end of the bipolar era severely impacted Southern Yemen, as Soviet military support quickly dried up. Even though the northern Yemen Arab Republic (YAR) and the Southern Peoples' Democratic Republic of Yemen were unified in 1990, their integration was not successful. The devastating 1994 civil war between the north and the south resulted in northern victory and cemented the suppression of southern tribes. The civil war was especially beneficial for the northern tribes, because as the fighting ceased, small arms used in the conflict were not collected centrally by the government, but as part of the cooptation based patronage system, they were redistributed among northern tribes. (Miller 2003)

SALW availability is determined by exogenous and endogenous factors to rebel groups. Internal sources entail the pre-civil war level of SALW availability, purchases from domestic vendors, capturing from the military, and military officials' involvement in the black market. External sources refer to diaspora support, smuggling, and illicit trade. At the same time, the ratio of internal/external factors is subject to variation in the different phases of the conflict, as SALW generally become diffused during a conflict. Furthermore, the illicit trade of weapons

¹⁵ Refworld: Yemen: Small Arms Sales Heading Underground, 14 February 2010, published by IRIN, accessed: <http://www.refworld.org/docid/4b7ba8dc2.html>

¹⁶ Political violence was the predominant type of armed violence in Yemen in 2009, with 95 incidents, resulting in 475 dead and 518 injured. Social conflict was the second most commonly reported, particularly in terms of the numbers killed (in both absolute terms and per incident), followed by criminal violence. This fits with a general sense that

¹⁷ Miller and Karp notes that "it is almost certainly the case that virtually every type of rifle developed in Europe after 1850 could probably be found somewhere in Yemen." The early stages of this process of diffusion were the followings. Colonial presence, major power rivalry, and trade. (Miller and Karp 2003:174)



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and the lack of effective governmental regulation, makes Yemen a favored destination of various terrorist groups like al-Qaeda in the Arabian Peninsula (AQAP).

Small arms ownership and carrying in Yemen is a highly gendered phenomenon being strongly associated with the masculine tribal identity. Gun-culture is most prevalent in rural tribal areas in the northern highlands of the country. It is commonplace to see young males to openly carry AK-47s. Likewise, the *jambiya*, a curved dagger worn attached to a belt is routinely carried by men. Houthis obtain their weapons from the Yemeni black market and from the Yemeni military itself. Yemeni arms markets sell small and medium arms and heavy weapons too. The influx of arms is also the consequences of regional conflict patterns, and the constant fighting in neighboring countries like Somalia. Weapon ownership and public portrayal is symbolic in the country. The Houthis initial internal source of SALW is large enough that they could rely less on external sources, which in turn made attacks on the state easier than relying on external sources. The period between 2009-2011 gave them the opportunity to rearm and to reorganize. The failure of the Saleh administration to introduce disarmament at that particular time enabled the Houthis to initiate larger and more coordinated attacks. Subsequently, as the Houthis gradually expanded their territory over control, they were able to conduct successful raids on Yemeni government military bases, acquiring an impressive stockpile of more than 60 missiles and rockets.¹⁸ These weapons were purchased by the government in the 1990s mostly from North Korea.

The Yemeni civil war is further complicated since it became regionalized and internationalized from 2015 onwards. The Saudi opposition views the Houthis as an Iranian proxy, thus they framing the war against the Houthis as an attempt to counter the growing regional influence of Iran. According to a UN expert report, Iran has been shipping weapons to the Houthi rebels since at least 2009.¹⁹ The report details various cases in which Iranian fishing vessels attempted to secretly ship hundreds of anti-tank and anti-helicopter rockets to the rebels. Iran denies the accusations. Since the 2015 Saudi intervention, Houthis have frequently used ballistic missiles

¹⁸ Missile Defense Advocacy Alliance (2017): Houthis, February 2017, accessed: http://missiledefenseadvocacy.org/missile-threat-and-proliferation/todays-missile-threat/non-state-actors/houthis/#_edn1

¹⁹ The New York Times: Iran Violated Yemen Arms Embargo, U.N. Experts Say, Jan 12, 2018, accessed: <https://www.nytimes.com/2018/01/12/world/middleeast/iran-yemen-saudi-arabia-arms-embargo-un.html>



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both within and outside Yemen. In 2017 for instance, the Houthis launched a short-range ballistic missile from Amran which exploded near King Khalid International Airport.²⁰

Attempts to control firearm possession at the societal and state level are often in conflict. The central government has a limited capacity to control small arms in the country. Yemen has a peculiar dual-governance structure, in which the central government has limited power and legitimacy in the periphery. At the same time, this does not mean that periphery areas are *ungoverned* territories. Rather, unwritten tribal rules and traditions govern those areas.²¹ The main legal provision regulating the ownership, carrying, and trade of firearms, ammunition, and explosives is Law No. 40 of 1992. According to the Small Arms Survey (2003) „Article 9 establishes the right to own firearms (‘rifles, machine guns, revolvers, and hunting rifles’) for the purpose of ‘legitimate defence’. Carrying—i.e. possessing—arms in cities is regulated by Article 10, which introduces a licensing system for all urban dwellers other than a list of stated exceptions. Licence holders, who must be at least 18 years old, are only permitted to carry one licensed weapon at any one time (art. 14). Licences, which according to Article 53 cost YER 50 (USD 0.25),⁷⁰ are valid for ‘three renewable years’. Importantly, no controls are described relating to rural areas. Furthermore, no limit is mentioned on the number of weapons that may be owned (as opposed to carried).” The enforcement of this particular piece of legislation is however not adequate in the northern tribal areas, where weapons are the most abundant.

Prior to the start of the latest campaign to control arms, launched in 2007, arms were openly sold in Yemen in at least 18 arms markets, with roughly 300 retailers in total. The law further states that arms and ammunition retailers and repairers should be regulated through a system of licensing. Other practical measures – such as the 2004 closure of the largest weapon market, Souq al-Talh – or legislative changes, both meant to establish a stricter control over SALW and to overrule pre-existing societal control mechanisms in the northern tribal areas however with limited success. Despite the government’s effort to halt the proliferation of arms, these measures created a black market for arm sells.²² Arm dealers now work in shops that are not displaying weapons, but they take buyers to their home to conduct business there. The 2011 uprising and the subsequent war made these efforts practically non-existent. The war and

²⁰ Middle East Eye: Iran denies providing missiles to Yemen’s Houthi rebels, 20 December 2017, accessed: <http://www.middleeasteye.net/news/iran-denies-providing-missiles-yemens-houthi-rebels-21459693>

²¹ At the same time some authors (Heinze 2014) pointed to the erosion of these traditional practices due to the extensive and damaging patronage system built up by Saleh.

²² Refworld: Yemen: Small Arms sales heading underground, 14 February 2010, published by IRIN, accessed: <http://www.refworld.org/docid/4b7ba8dc2.html>



especially its internationalization resulted in the massive proliferation of small arms and heavy weapons and a further decrease of government control over them.

Conclusion

Since small arms and light weapons have been the primary weapons of most armed conflicts since 2001, their international, national, and local level regulation deserves considerable attention both from the academia and from policy-makers. Civilians are important for rebels because they provide secrecy, shelter, and serve as a pool to recruit from. Non-combatants role however is more complex than just accommodating rebels, especially in disarmament processes. As we have seen non-combatants can become inadvertent spoilers and threaten the post-conflict prospects for peace.

Disarmament in a post-conflict state is aimed at increasing the costs of rearmament. However, there are peculiar countries where weapons assume multiple role, therefore getting rid of them is neither desirable, nor feasible. In case of Yemen disarmament processes will not eliminate small arms and light weapons, or erode their local level social legitimacy, or de-symbolize them. The post-civil war high level availability of SALW makes conflict recurrence more likely and less costly in the form of criminal activities, banditry or disruption of economic activities. Getting a more fine-grained macro level data and conducting more micro-level case studies which involve the entire universe of cases (both successful and failed disarmaments) help scholars to produce better theories of civil conflicts, to gain a deeper understanding of why some peace settlements fail while others succeed. Just as SALW is not a precondition of war, nor is disarmament to achieve peace. However, a carefully managed disarmament process in combination with policies such as Voluntary Weapon Collection (VWC) programs are able to reduce the potential of violence renewal in a post-conflict setting. This study is aimed at raising the importance of multidisciplinary involvement in DDR processes. Sociologist, and anthropologist with equipped with complex local knowledge are desirable members in DDR programs. Scholars and experts of these disciplines would enhance policy-makers understanding of the demand for small arms, their community level control, and societal importance. Through this more nuanced approach technical experts would be better equipped to design tailor-made peace proposals where spoilers are unlikely to emerge.



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