



Yemen: Ongoing Crisis and Future Scenarios in a Context of Complexity

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Abstract

Introduction

Yemen's protracted crisis is among the world's longest-running humanitarian tragedies. It began with the 2011 uprising, the collapse of the Ali Abdullah Saleh regime, and the disintegration of state institutions, and escalated with the capture of Sanaa by the Ansar Allah movement in 2014. Saudi Arabia's intervention in March 2015 internationalized the crisis, while UN Security Council Resolution 2216 unilaterally recognized the Hadi regime as legitimate and sanctioned Ansar Allah, without mentioning the Saudi-led coalition's attacks. Today, more than twenty-two million Yemenis are in need of assistance as famine, disease, and displacement caused by the siege have devastated society. A UN-brokered ceasefire in 2022 closed the front lines, and a 2023 Saudi-Iranian political agreement eased regional tensions, but the crisis remains unresolved. Territorial control is divided between Ansar Allah, which controls much of the western provinces, and Saudi- and Emirati-backed factions and separatists who control the oil-rich eastern and southern regions. The war is fueled by government collapse, sectarian divisions, foreign intervention, and economic collapse. The theoretical foundation of this study is drawn from complexity theory, which views both the natural and social worlds as systems whose behavior arises from the interactions between their components, rather than from the components themselves. Unlike Newtonian models that assume linear and predictable relationships, complexity theory emphasizes nonlinearity, sensitivity to initial conditions, self-organization, and emergent "strange attractors." In such systems, small perturbations can have large effects, control is partial and distributed, and elements adapt to changing conditions. The Yemeni crisis illustrates these principles: external interventions aimed at restoring order have produced disproportionate humanitarian consequences and have reinforced alternative power structures, while local actors have created new institutions in response to the collapse of the regime. The research question guiding this study is therefore: What relevant variables shape the Yemeni conflict and what future scenarios can emerge from their interactions? Since scenario planning is exploratory, no specific causal hypotheses are tested. Instead, the underlying assumption is that the crisis is a complex adaptive system in which multiple drivers interact to produce a range of possible futures.

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Methodology

To address the research question, this study uses scenario planning with interaction analysis. First, a panel of thirteen Yemeni experts was formed. Through structured questionnaires, the panel identified sixteen variables that were identified as pivotal to the crisis. These variables were grouped into four dimensions: geopolitical (e.g., political dysfunction, foreign influence, prospects for the formation of a nation-state, regional agreements), geocultural (e.g., tribal and sectarian divisions, ideological fragmentation), geosecurity (e.g., tensions between the resistance axis and Israel, coalition attacks, consequences of the Gaza war), and geoeconomic (e.g., siege, access to oil and gas, poverty, and unemployment). The experts then assessed the interaction effect of each variable on every other variable using a seven-point scale from completely negative to completely positive. The resulting interaction matrix was analyzed using Scenario Wizard software, which generated a set of internally consistent combinations of stimuli. To manage complexity and focus on the most distinct possibilities, the principle of maximum inconsistency was applied to select four representative scenarios from the larger set. The scenario planning process followed specific steps: formulating the main question, listing key factors, identifying driving forces, ranking them by importance and uncertainty, selecting critical uncertainties, constructing scenario logic, analyzing the consequences of each scenario, and creating strategic indicators for monitoring.

Result and discussion

The first scenario, “return to the past,” envisions a resurgence of Saudi hegemony accompanied by renewed airstrikes and partial easing of the blockade. The political structure remains dysfunctional, tribal and sectarian divisions persist, and Saudi Arabia uses aid and coercion to shape local actors. Short-term humanitarian relief may result from reopened ports, but deeper cleavages and reliance on foreign patronage would continue to fuel violence. Complexity theory warns that reinstating old patterns can exacerbate instability because non-linear feedbacks amplify unintended consequences.

The second scenario, “empowered Yemen,” imagines Ansarallah consolidating control in the north and west with continued Iranian support. Access to oil and gas revenues allows the movement to build governance structures, illustrating self-organisation. However, this empowerment provokes resistance from southern separatists, extremist groups and external actors, potentially drawing Yemen deeper into regional conflicts. Small shifts in resource flows or alliances can cascade into broader confrontation, demonstrating sensitivity to initial conditions.

The third scenario, “continuation of the status quo,” depicts a prolonged stalemate in which no side achieves a decisive victory.

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Ansarallah maintains its strongholds; Saudi and Emirati proxies control the south; sectarian and tribal divisions endure; and the economy remains crippled by blockade and corruption. Sporadic escalations, such as attacks on Red Sea shipping or retaliatory strikes, interrupt periods of relative calm, while humanitarian conditions worsen. The system operates at the edge of chaos, oscillating between disorder and fragile equilibrium. Without transformative change, Yemen risks settling into permanent fragmentation and humanitarian emergency.

The fourth scenario, “national reconciliation,” foresees a negotiated power-sharing arrangement involving Ansarallah, the Southern Transitional Council and the Presidential Leadership Council. Regional sponsors agree to reduce military involvement; ports and oil fields reopen; and a unity government begins rebuilding institutions. Economic recovery gradually follows as humanitarian assistance evolves into development aid. Yet the scenario is fragile: distrust among former combatants and unresolved disputes over resource allocation could derail it. A new attractor emerges, but the system must overcome path dependence built by years of war and sectarianism. Notably, the Iran–Saudi agreement of 2023 serves only as a facilitator; it does not resolve Yemen’s internal fractures.

Across scenarios several patterns emerge. The most influential drivers are the dysfunctional political structure, deep ethno-sectarian cleavages and the absence of an inclusive national government. External interventions, economic collapse, the blockade and regional conflicts shape outcomes but cannot substitute for inclusive governance. Removing one driver will not end the crisis if others persist. The analysis underscores that while the Iran–Saudi détente can reduce regional hostility, it has minimal impact on Yemen’s political fragmentation or socio-economic distress.

Conclusion

The scenario exercise demonstrates that Yemen’s conflict is a complex adaptive system: interventions often produce disproportionate and unforeseen effects, and local actors continually adapt to changing incentives. Sustainable peace requires a comprehensive strategy that addresses structural drivers simultaneously. Establishing an inclusive national government that incorporates Ansarallah, southern factions and diverse civic groups is crucial for overcoming political dysfunction. Bridging tribal and sectarian divides through power-sharing, decentralisation and transitional justice can mitigate identity-based grievances. Economic revitalisation—lifting the blockade, restoring infrastructure, and ensuring equitable distribution of oil and gas revenues—will help break the vicious cycle of poverty and violence. External actors should pivot from military competition to supporting Yemeni-led dialogue and reconstruction. The Iran–Saudi agreement offers a diplomatic opening but must be

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supplemented by steps to halt aerial bombardments, regulate arms flows and support local reconciliation processes. Policymakers should remain cognisant of the butterfly effect: small initiatives, such as recognising local councils or funding community projects, can redirect the system toward stability or renewed conflict. Future research should integrate granular socio-economic data and examine how grassroots initiatives interact with macro-level diplomacy. Embracing complexity enables scholars and decision-makers to craft adaptive strategies that respond to emergent dynamics and help Yemen transition from a war-torn arena of regional rivalry to a resilient polity built on inclusive politics and shared prosperity. This promotes stability.

Keywords: Yemen crisis, futures studies, scenario, complexity theory, internal structure.

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