



## Study of Internal Conflict (SOIC) Case Studies

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### North Yemen 1962–70

#### Executive Summary

The North Yemeni civil war was fought from 1962 to 1970 between the royalists of the Mutawakkilite Kingdom and the insurgents of the Yemen Arab Republic (YAR). This conflict began with a coup d'état carried out by republicans led by Abdullah al-Sallal, who later declared North Yemen a republic under his presidency. Israel, Jordan, and Saudi Arabia backed the royalists. The United Arab Republic (UAR), a political union of Egypt and Syria that existed from 1958 to 1961, supported the republicans. Zaydi tribesmen initially sided with the royalists, as they believed they were entitled to political rule in the form of an imamate.<sup>1</sup> Another prominent tribe, the Shāfi'ī, allied with the republicans. This conflict cannot be viewed as being fought along strictly sectarian or tribal lines.<sup>2</sup> The war developed into a proxy war between Saudi Arabia and the UAR, backed by Egypt, but the Yemeni coup that initiated it was the culmination of two decades of anti-imam sentiments from a new generation of Yemenis that preceded Egyptian President Gamal Abdel Nasser's intervention.<sup>3</sup>

Nasser's intervention in North Yemen was driven by multiple factors.

1. A victory there could help him recover his reputation throughout the Arab world.
2. A victory could help the UAR recover from its separation from Syria in 1961.
3. It could put him in a position to confront Saudi Arabia.

The Egyptian leader believed the Saudi royal family had undermined his country's union with Syria. The aerial and artillery support the Egyptians provided to the republicans for five years of the conflict prevented a full-scale royalist advance on Sanaa, the North Yemeni capital.<sup>4</sup> Increased UAR control in Yemen was to the detriment of the civilian population, however, as politics and newly established institutions were no longer under Yemeni control. Egypt's military defense evolved into a UAR occupation and administration of Yemen, which left little room for Yemeni national politics to evolve.<sup>5</sup>

UAR forces assembled on the Saudi border, and on July 23, 1965, Nasser threatened to invade Saudi Arabia. The Saudis responded by assembling 10,000 troops to repel the invasion.<sup>6</sup> Saudi Arabia supported the imam, which provided them two major strategic advantages:

1. the northern tribes that bordered Saudi Arabia were advocates for the Yemeni imam and were not likely to support the republicans; and
2. by supporting Muhammad al-Badr, leader of the royalists, the Saudis avoided domestic tensions with their Zaydi tribesmen.<sup>7</sup>

At the beginning of the conflict, the tribesmen fought on the royalist side because of their opposition to the YAR, but they eventually abandoned the royalists, as they were unaccustomed to lengthy siege warfare and were frustrated by the arrival of foreign reinforcements.<sup>8</sup>

## Assessing the Five Factors

### 1. Was the country at the time of the conflict a nation?

**Yes.** Despite tribal differences, North Yemen's population maintained a collective Yemeni identity. North Yemen, declared an independent sovereign state after the Ottoman Empire collapsed in 1918, remained independent until the royalists' defeat in the civil war.

### 2. Was the government perceived as legitimate by 85 percent of the population?

**No.** Roughly two thirds of Yemenis supported the royalist government.<sup>9</sup> Many Yemenis supported the republican insurgents, however, due to internalized resentment toward the monarchy. The YAR's supporters viewed their revolution as a part of Nasser's greater vision and allowed Egypt to control their operations until the conflict ended.

### 3. Did the government maintain or achieve security control over roughly 85 percent of the country's overall population?

**No.** Egyptian military forces deposed Muhammad al-Badr the same year he was crowned, took control of Sanaa, and formed the Yemen Arab Republic. The YAR seized the media and censored the information disseminated about the conflict, which enabled them to mobilize Yemenis against the royalist government. The royalists could not overtake the republicans and were eventually defeated.

### 4. Did the rebel movement have persistent access to external sanctuary in a neighboring country to a militarily significant degree?

**Yes.** Although sanctuary was available, the YAR insurgents did not seek it during the conflict, as they were backed by the Egyptian government. When necessary, Egyptian fighters could return to their own country.

### 5. Was there a government army or armed constabulary force in existence at the start of the conflict?

**Yes.** The royalists and the YAR both had armed forces but relied on foreign armies to fight in the conflict. The insurgents did not get much of a modern military establishment out of the civil war, as it was mostly fought by Egyptian forces who had almost exclusive use of the modern weaponry introduced to Yemen at the time.<sup>10</sup>

NORTH YEMEN 1962–70	
NATIONAL IDENTITY	YES
GOVERNMENT LEGITIMACY	NO
POPULATION SECURITY	NO
EXTERNAL SANCTUARY	YES
EXISTING SECURITY FORCES	YES

## Outcome

Government defeat. The failed siege of Sanaa, known as the Seventy Day Siege, was the turning point of the war. The combination of a lengthy siege with limited funds, diminishing royalist numbers, and an increase in foreign aid and fighters for the YAR eventually broke the siege.<sup>11</sup> The republican prime minister kept control of the city, and by February 1968, the royalists lifted the siege. The republicans retained the seat of power and achieved international legitimacy because the royalists failed to recapture the city. Yemen's civil war became notable in the larger Arab Cold War that lasted until the late 1970s because it marked another Arab country that underwent the toppling of a conservative regime that was then replaced with a revolutionary republican government. The conflict began to resolve once the Yemenis decided to continue fighting without further outside influence. Clashes between the royalists and the YAR continued, along with peace talks, until 1970, when Saudi Arabia recognized the republic, and a ceasefire came into effect. This conflict supports the Five Factors model.

## Endnotes

1. Ali Saeed, "Yemen: Tribalism and Zaydism: Roots of the Sa'ada Conflict," *The Yemen Times*, May 13, 2010.
2. David M. Witty, "A Regular Army in Counterinsurgency Operations: Egypt in North Yemen, 1962–1967," *The Journal of Military History* 65, no. 2 (April 2001): 401–39.
3. Asher Orkaby, *Beyond the Arab Cold War: The International History of the Yemen Civil War, 1962–1968* (Oxford University Press, 2017), 11.
4. Orkaby, *Arab Cold War*, 198.
5. Robert D. Burrowes, "The Yemen Arab Republic's Legacy and Yemeni Unification," *Arab Studies Quarterly* 14, no. 4 (Fall 1992): 41–68.
6. Witty, "Egypt in North Yemen."
7. Orkaby, *Arab Cold War*.
8. Orkaby, *Arab Cold War*, 199.
9. Orkaby, *Arab Cold War*, 199.
10. Burrowes, "Yemeni Unification."
11. Orkaby, *Arab Cold War*, 199.



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