

Divergent Endings: A Comparative Analysis of Conflict Termination in the Syrian and Yemeni Civil Wars

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Abstract:

The Syrian and Yemeni civil wars are conventionally analysed together. Both originated in the political ruptures of 2011, both drew Iran and the Gulf monarchies into sustained proxy competition, both generated humanitarian emergencies of exceptional severity, and both were repeatedly described as intractable. By 2026 their trajectories have sharply diverged. Syria's war terminated abruptly in December 2024, when an eleven-day offensive led by Hay'at Tahrir al-Sham collapsed a government that had survived thirteen years of insurgency, and the country entered a contested five-year transition under President Ahmed al-Sharaa. Yemen's war has neither ended nor resumed: frontlines between the Houthi movement and the internationally recognized government have remained substantially frozen since the truce of April 2022, while the most consequential violence of 2025 and 2026 occurred within the anti-Houthi coalition rather than across the principal cleavage. This article applies a structured focused comparison across five analytic dimensions—conflict origins, patterns of internationalization, humanitarian consequences, extremist exploitation, and termination dynamics—to explain the divergence. It argues that the decisive variable was not the intensity of violence, the depth of sectarian division, or the sophistication of mediation, but the relationship between each principal belligerent and its external patrons. The Assad government had become almost wholly dependent on Russian air power and Iranian-directed ground forces; when both patrons were degraded and distracted in 2024, the regime's capacity to resist collapsed within days. The Houthi movement, by contrast, exercises indigenous territorial control and derives its cohesion from domestic sources, rendering it substantially insensitive to fluctuations in external support. The article further argues that Yemen's stalemate is sustained by the fragmentation of the anti-Houthi coalition, which has produced no unified counterparty capable of concluding a settlement, and concludes that externally dependent regimes are vulnerable to sudden collapse while territorially rooted insurgencies are not—an asymmetry with implications for how internationalized civil wars are expected to end.

Keywords: civil war; conflict termination; Syria; Yemen; proxy conflict; internationalized civil war; humanitarian crisis; transitional governance; Middle East politics; comparative case study

1. Introduction

Between 2011 and 2014 two states on the Arabian Peninsula's northern and southern margins entered civil wars that would come to define the region's post-Arab Spring order. Syria's conflict began with demonstrations demanding political reform in March 2011 and militarized within months following a violent state response. Yemen's conflict is conventionally dated to the Houthi seizure of Sana'a in September 2014, though its origins lie in the failure of the political transition that followed President Ali Abdullah Saleh's resignation in 2012.

The comparison has been drawn frequently and for good reason. Both wars became arenas of Iranian–Saudi competition. Both attracted the direct military involvement of external powers. Both produced humanitarian emergencies that the United Nations characterized in superlative terms. Both defeated repeated mediation efforts. By the early 2020s, both were widely described in the policy literature as frozen or intractable.

That convergence has ended. On 8 December 2024 the government of Bashar al-Assad collapsed after an eleven-day offensive, and Assad fled to Russia, terminating more than fifty years of Ba’ath party rule. Syria has since entered a transitional period governed by a constitutional declaration adopted in March 2025, with al-Sharaa as president, an appointed transitional government, and an indirectly elected legislative assembly seated in October 2025. The transition is contested, violent in places, and its outcome uncertain—but the war that began in 2011 has ended.

Yemen presents the opposite picture. The Houthi movement continues to govern the north, including Sana’a and the majority of the population. The internationally recognized government, directed by a Presidential Leadership Council formed in April 2022, administers the south and east from Aden with Saudi sponsorship. The truce concluded in April 2022 formally lapsed in October of that year, yet major hostilities across the principal frontline have not resumed. The most significant fighting of the past two years occurred in December 2025 and January 2026 between the recognized government and the Southern Transitional Council, a nominal member of its own coalition, and ended with Saudi airstrikes on the separatists, the fall of Aden to government forces on 7 January 2026, and the dissolution of the STC.

Two wars of comparable origin, comparable internationalization, and comparable duration have therefore produced entirely different endings: one abrupt termination through regime collapse, one indefinite suspension without settlement. This article asks why.

Three questions organize the analysis.

1. To what extent were the two conflicts genuinely comparable in origin, actor structure, and pattern of external intervention, and where does the conventional pairing obscure more than it reveals?
2. What accounts for the abrupt termination of the Syrian conflict in December 2024 after thirteen years of apparent stalemate, and why has no equivalent rupture occurred in Yemen?
3. What do the divergent outcomes indicate about the conditions under which internationalized civil wars end, and what follows for mediation strategy in conflicts of this type?

2. Methodology

The study employs a structured focused comparison of two cases selected on a most-similar-systems logic. Syria and Yemen share a substantial number of independent variables ordinarily held to influence conflict duration: authoritarian pre-war governance, an Arab Spring precipitant, sectarian cleavages available for political mobilization, Iranian sponsorship of one belligerent and Gulf sponsorship of another, direct external military intervention, the presence of transnational jihadist organizations, and sustained United Nations mediation. They differ in outcome. This configuration permits the elimination of shared variables as sufficient explanations for the divergence and directs attention to the dimensions on which the cases genuinely differ.

The comparison is structured across five analytic dimensions applied identically to each case: conflict origins and drivers; the structure and depth of external intervention; humanitarian consequences; exploitation by transnational extremist organizations; and termination dynamics. It is focused in that it

addresses only the question of conflict termination and does not attempt a comprehensive account of either war.

The evidence base consists of secondary sources: parliamentary and congressional research briefings, United Nations reporting, publications of the Human Rights Watch and Amnesty International monitoring programmes, academic literature on civil war termination, and contemporaneous reporting from established news organizations. Three limitations should be stated. First, the Syrian transition is ongoing and its consolidation cannot be assessed; the claim advanced is that the war ended, not that the transition will succeed. Second, casualty and displacement figures for both conflicts are contested, and those cited should be treated as orders of magnitude rather than precise counts, particularly for Yemen, where indirect mortality from disease and malnutrition dominates and is poorly measured. Third, a two-case design supports analytic generalization to comparable cases but not statistical inference.

3. The Yemeni Civil War

3.1 Origins and Political Background

The Republic of Yemen was formed in May 1990 through the merger of the Yemen Arab Republic in the north and the People's Democratic Republic of Yemen in the south, under the presidency of Ali Abdullah Saleh. Unification was administrative rather than substantive. A brief civil war in 1994 confirmed northern political dominance, and southern grievances concerning the distribution of resources, employment in the state apparatus, and control of the oil-producing governorates persisted without resolution. The Southern Movement emerged in 2007 as an organized expression of these grievances.

The Houthi movement, formally Ansar Allah, developed in the Zaydi Shia highlands of Sa'dah governorate from the 1990s as a religious revivalist current opposed to the expansion of Saudi-financed Salafi institutions and to the marginalization of Zaydi communities. Six rounds of fighting between the movement and the Saleh government between 2004 and 2010 hardened it into a capable insurgent organization with substantial local support.

Popular protests in 2011 produced a Gulf Cooperation Council-brokered transition under which Saleh transferred authority to his vice-president, Abdrabbuh Mansur Hadi, in exchange for immunity. A National Dialogue Conference convened in 2013 to draft a new constitution and reorganize the state into a federal structure. The Houthis participated but rejected the proposed federal boundaries, which would have left their territory without access to the sea or to significant resources. In September 2014, in alliance with military units still loyal to Saleh—the same forces they had fought for six years—Houthi fighters took Sana'a. Hadi placed under house arrest, escaped to Aden in early 2015 and subsequently to Riyadh. A Saudi-led coalition began military operations in March 2015.

3.2 Drivers

Four drivers merit emphasis, and one common characterization requires qualification.

Governance failure is primary. The transitional government lacked the fiscal capacity, institutional control, and political legitimacy to implement the National Dialogue outcomes. Fuel subsidy reductions in mid-2014 provoked widespread protest that the Houthis mobilized effectively.

Tribal and regional fragmentation supplied the terrain. Yemeni political authority has historically been mediated through tribal confederations whose allegiance is contingent and transactional. Neither Saleh nor Hadi commanded a state apparatus capable of operating independently of these arrangements, and the war has been fought substantially through shifting tribal alignments rather than between coherent armies.

Economic collapse both preceded and deepened the conflict. Yemen was the poorest state in the Arab world before 2011, dependent on imports for the substantial majority of its food and fuel, with declining oil production and severe water scarcity. Wartime restrictions on imports, currency fragmentation between the Aden-based and Sana'a-based monetary authorities, and the suspension of public salaries converted a poor economy into a destitute one.

Regional rivalry internationalized the conflict but did not cause it. Iranian support for the Houthis was modest before 2015 and expanded substantially after the coalition intervention, a sequence indicating that intervention deepened the Iranian relationship rather than responding to a pre-existing one.

The sectarian framing common in early coverage requires qualification. Zaydism is doctrinally distinct from the Twelver Shiism of Iran and historically proximate to Sunni jurisprudence; Zaydi and Shafi'i communities coexisted in Yemen for centuries without confessional conflict on the Syrian or Iraqi pattern. Sectarian identity in Yemen is better understood as an instrument of wartime mobilization, adopted by both the Houthis and the coalition, than as an underlying cause.

3.3 Actors

- Ansar Allah (the Houthis) govern the northern highlands including Sana'a, Sa'dah, and Hodeidah, and administer territory containing an estimated seventy per cent of Yemen's population. They operate a functioning if coercive administration, collect revenue, and maintain substantial missile and uncrewed aerial capabilities. The United States designated the movement a foreign terrorist organization in 2025.
- The internationally recognized government has been directed since April 2022 by an eight-member Presidential Leadership Council chaired by Rashad al-Alimi, which replaced President Hadi and consolidated the principal anti-Houthi factions. Its authority over territory nominally under its control has been limited throughout.
- Saudi Arabia led the 2015 intervention and is now the recognized government's principal sponsor and security partner. Its objective has shifted materially since 2022, from defeating the Houthis to securing its southern border and exiting the conflict.
- The United Arab Emirates intervened alongside Saudi Arabia, withdrew the bulk of its forces in 2019, and has since exercised influence through southern proxies, principally the Southern Transitional Council and the Giants Brigades.
- The Southern Transitional Council, formed in 2017 and seeking southern independence, joined the Presidential Leadership Council in 2022 while pursuing an incompatible objective. It seized the oil-producing governorates of Hadramawt and al-Mahra in December 2025, prompting Saudi military intervention against it, and was dissolved following the loss of Aden in January 2026.
- Iran provides the Houthis with weapons technology, training, and technical assistance, mediated substantially through the Islamic Revolutionary Guard Corps and Hezbollah advisers. The relationship is one of alignment rather than command; the Houthis have demonstrated considerable operational autonomy.
- Al-Qaeda in the Arabian Peninsula and the Islamic State's Yemen affiliate have exploited the collapse of central authority, though AQAP's territorial holdings have contracted substantially from their 2015–2016 peak.

3.4 Humanitarian Consequences

The United Nations has repeatedly characterized Yemen as among the world's most severe humanitarian emergencies. Estimates of conflict-related mortality exceed 375,000, of which the substantial majority is attributable to indirect causes—malnutrition, untreated disease, and the collapse of water, sanitation, and

health infrastructure—rather than to combat. More than four million people have been internally displaced. Cholera has recurred in successive epidemic waves since 2016, in what has been among the largest outbreaks recorded.

Access constraints have compounded the crisis. Coalition restrictions on imports through Hodeidah severely limited food and fuel supply during the intensive phase of the war. Since 2024 the principal constraint has shifted: Houthi authorities have detained substantial numbers of United Nations and non-governmental organization personnel on espionage allegations, prompting the United Nations to relocate its principal offices from Sana'a to Aden. The World Food Programme announced the termination of operations in Houthi-controlled areas in March 2026. The population in greatest need is therefore located in the territory to which humanitarian access is now most restricted.

3.5 Trajectory since 2022

The United Nations-mediated truce of April 2022 halted major offensive operations, reopened Sana'a airport to limited commercial flights, and permitted fuel imports through Hodeidah. It formally lapsed in October 2022, but its core provisions have been substantially observed and the principal frontlines have not materially shifted since. The Chinese-brokered normalization of Saudi–Iranian relations in March 2023 further reduced the incentives for escalation, and Omani-mediated Saudi–Houthi talks have continued intermittently without producing a comprehensive agreement.

Two developments have nonetheless altered the strategic picture. From November 2023 the Houthis conducted sustained attacks on commercial shipping in the Red Sea and Bab el-Mandeb in declared solidarity with Palestinians in Gaza, provoking United States and United Kingdom strikes and substantially rerouting global container traffic. Attacks were suspended following the October 2025 Gaza ceasefire, with the movement signalling readiness to resume should the war restart. The campaign transformed the Houthis from a domestic insurgent movement into an actor with demonstrated capacity to disrupt global commerce, and correspondingly strengthened their negotiating position.

The second development was the fracture of the anti-Houthi coalition. The Southern Transitional Council's seizure of Hadramawt and al-Mahra in December 2025 crossed a Saudi red line, given the governorates' proximity to the Saudi border and their oil resources. Saudi airstrikes on STC positions, including at Mukalla, were followed by the recapture of the southern governorates and the fall of Aden on 7 January 2026. The STC was expelled from the Presidential Leadership Council and dissolved. The recognized government has since sought, with Saudi support, to consolidate command over the reorganized anti-Houthi forces, though its effective reach remains limited and southern self-determination sentiment persists.

4. The Syrian Civil War

4.1 Origins and Escalation

Protests began in Deraa in March 2011 following the detention and mistreatment of schoolchildren who had written anti-government graffiti. Demands were initially reformist: the release of political prisoners, the repeal of emergency legislation, and measures against corruption. The government responded with lethal force, and by late 2011 defecting soldiers and armed civilians had organized into the Free Syrian Army and allied formations.

The conflict militarized and fragmented rapidly. By 2013 the opposition comprised hundreds of armed groups spanning nationalist, Islamist, and jihadist orientations, with limited coordination and competing external sponsors. The Islamic State, expanding from Iraq, seized substantial territory in eastern Syria in

2014 and declared a caliphate spanning both states. Jabhat al-Nusra, initially an al-Qaeda affiliate, evolved through successive rebrandings into Hay'at Tahrir al-Sham, which consolidated control of Idlib governorate and progressively distanced itself from transnational jihadism in favour of a territorially bounded governance project.

4.2 Internationalization

External intervention in Syria was deeper and more direct than in Yemen. Iran deployed Revolutionary Guard personnel and mobilized Hezbollah alongside Iraqi and Afghan militias, providing the manpower the Syrian army could not generate after years of attrition and defection. Russia intervened directly in September 2015 with air power that proved decisive in reversing government losses and enabling the recapture of Aleppo in 2016 and subsequent territorial consolidation.

A United States-led coalition intervened from 2014 against the Islamic State, partnering principally with the Syrian Democratic Forces, a predominantly Kurdish formation that established autonomous administration across the northeast. Turkey conducted successive incursions from 2016 aimed at limiting Kurdish territorial contiguity along its border and sponsored opposition factions in the north. Gulf states funded various opposition groups, with support declining substantially after 2017.

The resulting configuration was one of overlapping foreign military presence on Syrian territory, in which the government's survival depended less on its own capabilities than on the sustained commitment of two external patrons.

4.3 Humanitarian Consequences

Estimates of conflict-related deaths exceed 500,000. Approximately 6.8 million Syrians were displaced internally and a comparable number sought refuge abroad, principally in Turkey, Lebanon, and Jordan, with substantial secondary movement into Europe from 2015. The government conducted a documented campaign of arbitrary detention, torture, and enforced disappearance, evidenced most notably by the photographic material smuggled out by the defector known as Caesar. Chemical weapons were used on multiple occasions, most prominently in Ghouta in 2013 and Khan Shaykhun in 2017. Sieges and the systematic obstruction of humanitarian access were employed as instruments of war.

4.4 Collapse and Transition

By 2020 the conflict had settled into what analysts termed a frozen configuration. The government controlled the principal population centres, HTS governed Idlib, the SDF administered the northeast, and Turkey held a northern strip. Frontlines were substantially static for four years, and the policy consensus held that Assad had prevailed and that normalization with Arab states would follow. Syria was readmitted to the Arab League in 2023.

That assessment proved mistaken. On 27 November 2024 HTS launched an offensive from Idlib. Aleppo fell within three days, Hama and Homs in the following week, and Damascus on 8 December. Assad fled to Russia. The government did not negotiate a settlement or conduct a fighting retreat; its armed forces dissolved. Eleven days ended a war of thirteen years.

The explanation lies principally in the condition of the government's patrons. Russian military capacity in Syria had been substantially reduced by the demands of the war in Ukraine. Iranian capability in the Levant had been severely degraded during 2024 by Israeli operations against Hezbollah, which killed much of its senior leadership and disrupted the supply corridors through which Iranian support reached Syria. The Syrian army itself, hollowed by attrition, corruption, unpaid conscription, and thirteen years of dependence on foreign combat power, retained little independent capacity to fight. When the external supports were removed, the structure fell.

A caretaker administration under Mohammed al-Bashir governed from December 2024. Al-Sharaa was appointed president on 29 January 2025 at a conference of the victorious factions. A constitutional declaration adopted in March 2025 established a five-year transitional period pending a permanent constitution and national elections; it concentrates substantial authority in the executive, including over judicial and legislative appointments, and has been criticized on that basis. A transitional government of twenty-three ministers was announced on 29 March 2025. Indirect elections for a transitional legislative assembly were held in October 2025, though not in parts of the northeast.

The transition has been violent in significant respects. Insurgent attacks in the coastal governorates in March 2025 triggered reprisals against Alawite communities involving large-scale killings. Communal violence affected Suwayda in July 2025. Negotiations over the integration of the Syrian Democratic Forces into national structures remain unresolved, and government operations in January 2026 reasserted control over several areas previously held by SDF-aligned forces. Islamic State cells remain active, and the security of detention facilities holding Islamic State fighters has deteriorated.

Externally, the transitional government has achieved substantial recognition. Most Assad-era sanctions have been lifted by the United States and other actors. Al-Sharaa met the United States president at the White House in November 2025 and visited Moscow in October 2025, where Russia secured continued access to its facilities at Tartus and Hmeimim. The transitional authorities have engaged with the International Criminal Court prosecutor and welcomed the case brought by the Netherlands and Canada before the International Court of Justice concerning torture under the former government.

5. Comparative Analysis

Dimension	Syria	Yemen
Precipitant	Mass protest (2011) met with lethal repression	Failed political transition; Houthi seizure of Sana'a (2014)
Principal cleavage	Regime versus fragmented opposition; overlaid confessional divisions	North–south and centre–periphery; confessional framing largely instrumental
Depth of external intervention	Direct: Russian air power, Iranian and allied ground forces, US and Turkish deployments	Indirect: coalition air campaign, limited ground presence, materiel and advisers
Regime dependence on patrons	Near-total after 2015	Low; Houthi authority indigenously rooted
Estimated deaths	In excess of 500,000	In excess of 375,000, predominantly indirect
Displacement	c. 6.8 million internal; comparable number abroad	c. 4.5 million internal; limited external refuge
Extremist exploitation	Islamic State territorial caliphate; HTS governance in Idlib	AQAP and IS affiliate; opportunistic, contracting

Dimension	Syria	Yemen
Mediation architecture	Geneva and Astana processes; both stalled	UN envoy and Omani mediation; truce without settlement
Status as of mid-2026	War terminated; contested five-year transition	Frozen partition; intra-coalition realignment

Table 1: Comparative Overview of the Syrian and Yemeni Civil Wars

5.1 Origins

Both conflicts are conventionally traced to 2011, but the causal pathways differ. Syria's war began with a discrete precipitant and a clear binary: a governing regime and a population demanding its reform, which militarized when reform was refused. Yemen's war emerged from the failure of a transition that had already occurred. Saleh had gone; the question was who would inherit, and the answer was contested among multiple armed constituencies with incompatible territorial projects.

This distinction matters for termination. A conflict organized around a single regime can be ended by removing that regime. A conflict organized around unresolved questions of territorial and constitutional order cannot, because no single removal resolves the underlying dispute. Yemen's war has at least three separable conflicts embedded within it: Houthi versus recognized government, north versus south, and the internal competition among anti-Houthi factions that produced the violence of December 2025.

5.2 Patterns of Internationalization

Both wars became proxy arenas, but the depth of intervention differed by an order of magnitude. In Syria, external actors deployed combat forces that conducted operations directly: Russian aircraft flew close air support and strategic bombing missions, and Iranian-directed formations manoeuvred as ground units. In Yemen, the coalition conducted an air campaign and supplied materiel and advisers, but the substantial majority of ground fighting was conducted by Yemeni forces, and the Houthis were never supplied at a level approaching the Syrian government's dependence on its patrons.

The consequence is a difference in vulnerability. The Assad government was, by 2024, a client whose survival was a function of its patrons' continued investment. The Houthis are not a client in that sense. Iranian support enhances their capabilities materially, particularly in missile and drone technology, but does not constitute them. Were Iranian support to cease entirely, the movement would retain its territory, its administration, its revenue base, and its social constituency.

5.3 Humanitarian Consequences

The humanitarian catastrophes are comparable in scale but different in character. Syria's was dominated by direct violence, urban destruction, and mass external displacement, and generated a refugee flow that reshaped European politics. Yemen's has been dominated by indirect mortality arising from import dependence, economic collapse, and the destruction of health and water infrastructure. Yemenis have had far fewer options for external refuge, with the result that the population has largely remained in place under conditions of extreme deprivation.

Both cases demonstrate humanitarian access as an instrument of war, but by different mechanisms and, in Yemen, with a reversal of the responsible party over time: coalition import restrictions during the intensive phase, and Houthi obstruction of humanitarian operations from 2024, culminating in the relocation of United Nations offices and the withdrawal of the World Food Programme from northern areas.

5.4 Extremist Exploitation

The Islamic State established territorial governance across eastern Syria and western Iraq, provoking a multinational military response that materially reshaped the Syrian conflict, including through the empowerment of the SDF. In Yemen, AQAP and the local Islamic State affiliate exploited the collapse of central authority but never approached comparable territorial or governmental scale, and counterterrorism responses were correspondingly narrow, consisting principally of drone strikes and special operations.

One divergence merits particular attention. The organization that ultimately terminated the Syrian conflict, Hay'at Tahrir al-Sham, was itself a former al-Qaeda affiliate that had spent years governing Idlib, developing administrative institutions, suppressing rival jihadist factions, and distancing itself from transnational objectives. Its trajectory from proscribed insurgent organization to transitional government has no Yemeni parallel, and complicates any straightforward account of extremist organizations as purely destabilizing actors.

5.5 Termination Dynamics

This is the dimension on which the cases most sharply diverge, and it supplies the article's central argument.

Syria's war ended through the sudden collapse of a belligerent whose capacity to fight had become almost entirely externally supplied. The critical sequence was not the November 2024 offensive but the degradation of Russian and Iranian capacity during the preceding two years. The offensive tested a structure whose supports had already been removed. That the collapse required only eleven days indicates that the government's apparent strength in 2020 had been a function of its patrons rather than of itself, and that observers had systematically mistaken external life support for regime resilience.

Yemen exhibits none of these conditions. The Houthis are territorially entrenched, administratively established, and socially rooted in the population they govern. No plausible reduction in external support would produce their collapse. Nor is there a unified counterparty capable of concluding a settlement: the anti-Houthi coalition has fragmented repeatedly, and the events of December 2025 and January 2026 demonstrated that its internal contradictions are capable of producing more violence than the primary conflict. Saudi Arabia's objective has shifted from military victory to exit, which reduces the likelihood of escalation but also removes the pressure that might compel Houthi concessions.

The resulting equilibrium is stable and unsatisfactory. Neither party can win; neither is compelled to settle; the humanitarian consequences continue to accumulate; and the Houthis have acquired, through the Red Sea campaign, a source of international leverage that operates independently of the domestic balance and gives them little reason to accept terms.

DETERMINANTS OF CONFLICT TERMINATION: A COMPARATIVE SCHEMATIC

SYRIA — externally dependent regime

Patron capacity degraded (Russia in Ukraine; Iran and Hezbollah degraded 2024)

→ Regime combat capacity collapses → Eleven-day offensive succeeds

→ Abrupt termination; contested transition begins

YEMEN — indigenously rooted belligerent

Houthi capacity substantially independent of external supply
+ Anti-Houthi coalition fragmented; no unified counterparty
+ Principal sponsor seeking exit rather than victory
→ Frozen partition; no termination, no resumption

Figure 1. Comparative schematic of termination dynamics. The determining variable is the relationship between the principal belligerent and its external patrons: regimes dependent on externally supplied combat power are vulnerable to sudden collapse when that supply is withdrawn, whereas territorially and socially rooted belligerents are not.

6. Findings

The analysis supports four findings.

First, the conventional pairing of the two conflicts obscures a decisive structural difference. Their similarities are genuine but concern inputs—origins, sponsors, humanitarian outcomes—rather than the internal organization of the belligerents. On the variable that governed termination, the dependence of the principal belligerent on external combat power, the cases are not similar at all.

Second, the durability of an authoritarian government in an internationalized civil war is a poor guide to its resilience. The Syrian government appeared to have prevailed for four years before collapsing in eleven days. Analysts who described the conflict as frozen were measuring territorial control, which was stable, rather than the sources of the capacity sustaining it, which were not. The general implication is that assessments of regime durability should attend to the composition of combat power rather than to frontline stability.

Third, conflict termination requires a counterparty capable of concluding and implementing an agreement. Yemen's stalemate persists in substantial part because the anti-Houthi camp has repeatedly failed to constitute one. The Presidential Leadership Council was designed to solve this problem and did not: its most significant member pursued an incompatible objective and was ultimately removed by the armed intervention of the coalition's own principal sponsor.

Fourth, the termination of armed conflict is not equivalent to the establishment of peace. Syria's war has ended, but the transition has produced mass killings on the coast, communal violence in Suwayda, unresolved disputes over Kurdish autonomy, an executive-dominated constitutional order, and continuing Islamic State activity. Yemen's war continues without major frontline violence while humanitarian conditions deteriorate and access to the most affected population contracts. Neither state approximates peace, and the appropriate measure of these outcomes is neither the presence of a settlement nor the absence of fighting but the security and welfare of the populations concerned.

7. Implications and Conclusion

Three implications follow for policy and for the study of internationalized civil war.

For mediation, the Syrian case suggests that periods characterized as frozen may be less stable than they appear, and that mediators should maintain readiness for rapid change rather than treating stalemate as settled. The Yemeni case suggests the opposite priority: where fragmentation on one side prevents the formation of a negotiating counterparty, investment in consolidating that side may be a precondition to settlement rather than a distraction from it.

For humanitarian policy, the Yemeni trajectory illustrates that access constraints migrate. A response architecture built to address coalition import restrictions was poorly configured for obstruction by the authority governing the population in greatest need. Contingency planning for access denial by any party, including a de facto authority whose cooperation is indispensable, should be standard rather than exceptional.

For the analysis of proxy conflict, the comparison indicates that the category conceals substantial variation. Both wars are routinely described as Saudi–Iranian proxy conflicts. But a proxy that cannot survive its patron’s withdrawal and a proxy that can are different phenomena with different termination properties, and treating them as a single class produces predictions that fail in precisely the way predictions about Syria failed in 2024.

The Syrian and Yemeni civil wars began within three years of one another, drew in the same regional powers, produced humanitarian emergencies of comparable magnitude, and defeated the same mediators. One has ended and one has not. The explanation lies not in the character of the violence or the depth of the sectarian divide but in a structural feature that received relatively little attention while both wars were being fought: whether the principal belligerent could stand without external support. Assad could not, and did not. The Houthis can, and do. Whatever settlement Yemen eventually reaches will have to be negotiated with them rather than achieved over them—and the longer that recognition is deferred, the greater the accumulated cost to a population that has now endured more than a decade of a war it did not choose.

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