

Understanding Yemen's crisis: a perspective from the Interdependence and Neoliberal Institutionalism Theories

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Abstract. This study focuses on understanding Yemen's crisis under two well-known liberal theories in the International Relations field: Interdependence and Neoliberal Institutionalism. The research aims to explain and analyze the country's delicate situation relying on the work of Joseph Nye and Robert Keohane, formulated during the 1970s when the International System needed an alternative to Realism. Both points of view will be demonstrated and discussed, in this case, the ideas that best relate to each event will be explained before, using the author's opinion and the critical knowledge developed during the academic background and when this paper was being written. This matter was chosen due to its importance, considering that this is the worst humanitarian crisis in the world, according to The United Nations. Besides, the many actors involved in the conflict (which are not only States), make this a challenging study since it's more related to neoliberal theories, collaborating to the aim of the research.

Keywords. Yemen Crisis, Yemen Humanitarian Conflict, Middle East, International Relations Theory, Interdependence, Neoliberal Institutionalism.

1. Introduction

It is extremely important for an International Relations (IR) student to become familiar with the idea of seeking the ability to analyze a global event from some theoretical perspective. More than being capable, it is necessary to achieve the ability to also convince other people of your research. Therefore, the intention of this work is based on the objective of understanding and explaining the current crisis in Yemen from the view of two neoliberal theories: Interdependence and Neoliberal Institutionalism. But before that, some information must be stated in order to understand and contextualize the "problem". Facts and details are shown to give importance to the concern, since it's required for the analysis and to prove the point of the investigation.

The situation that Yemen finds itself in today is of extreme magnitude, the "forgotten war" has already extended for eight long years, without the historic-regional antecedents, which strongly collaborated for the initiation of a conflict that ended the life of more than 230,000 civilians, according to data from the United Nations (UN). Ignored by the mainstream Western media, the humanitarian crisis in the

country is considered by the UN to be the worst in the world, as in addition to being intensified by the devastating effects of the Covid-19 pandemic, it also currently encompasses the problem of hunger, disasters climate change and cholera outbreaks, mainly caused by lack of access to water, basic hygiene conditions and basic sanitation.

In all, the organization states that today, more than 23.4 million people (around 75% of the population) are in need of humanitarian support and protection, including almost 13 million children; the number is 13% higher compared to 2021. The United Nations Children's Fund (UNICEF) reports that more than 11,000 children have been killed or injured since the beginning of conflicts in Yemen. Food insecurity also affects children, almost 2.2 million children suffer from acute malnutrition and 540,000 are struggling to survive the disease. Furthermore, this portion of the population is also experiencing a crisis in education. 2 million students are out of school and 6 million are prevented from going since one in four schools has been damaged or destroyed across the country.

Yemen's historical background

Since the second half of the 21st century, Yemen has had an internal political-religious struggle between the so-called "Houthi", a pro-Iranian Shiite rebel group formed in 1990 after the unification of the country; and government forces, internationally recognized and supported by Saudi Arabia, with a Sunni majority. The first armed revolt of the militia took place in 2004, but it was only in 2011 that the movement gained strength with the end of the Arab Spring.

Former President Ali Abdullah Saleh, who had ruled former North Yemen for 12 years (1978-1990) and the current Yemeni Republic for 22 years (1990-2012) was forced to resign due to the protests of that revolutionary period. His deputy, Abd-Rabbu Mansour Hadi, took power in 2012 but resigned in 2015 after Houthi attacks in the previous year. They took the capital Sanaa and occupied the presidential palace, in defense of the former Shiite president. Hadi, however, condemned the coup and fled to the southern city of Aden, having to go into exile in Saudi Arabia later, which supported his government.

In this context, a regional alliance was born, led by Saudi Arabia, with logistical and intelligence support from the United States, France, and the United Kingdom. Subsequently, countries like Egypt, Sudan, Kuwait, United Arab Emirates, Morocco, Bahrain, and Jordan gradually took part, concentrating support for the fight. This military intervention waged war against the Houthis in March 2015, initiating a series of air strikes mainly in the capital Sanaa, with the aim of restoring Hadi's rule and eliminating the Shiite presence in the region. This coalition intensified the conflict, creating a humanitarian crisis in the country that intensified the dispute between the main powers of the Middle East, Iran (with a Shiite majority) and Saudi Arabia (with a Sunni majority).

This Arab coalition has been receiving strong international condemnation, including by the Human Rights Council of the United Nations, in short for the indiscriminate bombings against civilians and the war crimes committed. The complaints point to systematic violations of human rights and international humanitarian law. The so-called "Operation Decisive Storm", has carried out, according to the "Yemen Data Project", more than 24,000 airstrikes since its inception and it's responsible for most of the deaths in Yemen.

The catastrophic situation of the invasive actions of the alliance revolves around Saudi Arabia, because the country has a huge arsenal and an advanced war structure, precisely because it is the largest importer of weapons in the world. No wonder the logistical support comes from the United States. Data from the Stockholm International Peace Studies Institute (SIPRI), state that the US power was the main exporter of guns to Saudi Arabia, supplying it with 79% of its weapons, followed by the United Kingdom (9.3%), and France (4%), between 2016-2020.

The conflict today

Blockades and economic embargoes were intensified at every border in the country in 2017, besides, all ports and international airports were blocked to prevent advanced weapons from reaching the Houthis. As a consequence, the incoming of medicine, food, and basic supplies necessary for the survival of the population was impaired, resulting in generalized hunger and the risk of death from starvation in the Yemeni population increased.

The establishment of chaos and the focus of the war, especially in the North, West, and South regions, provoked what is known as a "power vacuum", attracting terrorist actions from other radical groups such as Al-Qaeda and the Islamic State, which operate mainly in the east of the country and seek to increase their area of control and influence, taking advantage of political-military fragility. The expansion of these attacks has grown towards the southern region, the port city of Aden is the main target and suffers from violent occupations, especially by Al-Qaeda.

It is noted that there is even an internal dispute between the Houthi rebels, evidenced by the assassination of the former president Saleh, committed by themselves. The group's support, which had existed since the early 2000s, fell apart after Saleh held talks with Saudi Arabia (a supporter of the Yemeni government). The action was considered an act of betrayal of the movement, motivating the rebels to act in that way.

2. Research Methods

This current study is a liberal analysis of a substantial conflict that has ravaged this South Middle East country for almost a decade. The investigation started as a class project in 2022, with the aim to assay a global contemporaneous matter from a neoliberal theory perspective studied in the field of "Theory of International Relations (IR) II", a college subject. A revised and deepened research was made in order to write this article and present an explanation for the events, motivations, and developments regarding the main actors of Yemen's situation, under the view of the Interdependence (Keohane and Nye, 1977) and Neoliberal Institutionalism (Keohane, 1984) Theories.

All data was carefully collected online through research carried out in books, academic articles, blogs, websites, and electronic news. The examined sites were mostly Brazilian due to the first conducted study made for the college subject. Plus, background knowledge learned during classes was used to set up discussions.

The focus was primarily headed on previous work made by Robert O. Keohane and Joseph S. Nye Jr., neoliberal authors and political scientists who produced the majority of studies involving the theories used in this paper. *"After Hegemony:*

Cooperation and Discord in the World Political Economy" (1984) [1] introduces Keohane's Neoliberal Institutionalism; whereas *"Transnational Relations and World Politics"* (1972) [2] and *"Power and Interdependence: World Politics in Transition"* (1977) [3] covers the Interdependence concept. These last two books mentioned were co-authored by them.

The delicate condition in Yemen is ignored by the occidental TV networks (The Russian-Ukrain war made it even worst) and doesn't get the necessary attention it deserves. The political-historical context has been properly analyzed, comprising the country's origins up to the beginning of the regional conflicts in the 1990s, which evolved (after the Arab Spring, in 2011) into more violent wars, the involvement of nearby nations and The United Nations (UN) intervention; resulting in the worst humanitarian crises of the world (UN, 2021).

90% of Yemen's crisis data and information were taken from the UN's official website since it's the biggest - and most important - international organization that has been doing an important work since the beginning of the mediation. On the other hand, there was some trouble with different data (regarding the same subject) available online. Although it's understandable because it might be difficult to prove the veracity of information collected since it's a war and numbers can vary. Another issue was the complexity of focusing on one IR theory knowing the existence of another (Realism). A personal view had to be put aside and didn't affect the result of the research.

3. Results

3.1 The Interdependence point of view

In the 1970s, during the elaboration of their ideas, Nye and Keohane - more precisely in *"Power and Interdependence: World Politics in Transition"* (1977) - identified new political processes and analyzed in depth the existence of the role of the multiplicity of other agents in the International System. The Theory of Complex Interdependence is a branch that recognizes the importance of other international actors, seeking to reduce the relevance of the States in the system. That said, there's a multiple communication agenda that connects societies (multiple channels), therefore, there is no clear and defined hierarchy (related to power and war).

It's been found that the dispute and the role of the Houthi rebels vs. the Arab coalition in Yemen take the lead as the main actors in the process, triggering the civil crisis. The internationally recognized government of Yemen exists and has its value, but in this case, it "loses" its degree of importance as a sovereign state, with territorially limited decision-making capacity. Requiring external forces that somehow "share" the same interests.

At first, it appears that Saudi Arabia has chosen to cooperate, leading the anti-Houthi push into Yemen and benefiting from it. However, this classic liberal idea does not apply to this situation, since the Theory of Interdependence often "forces" agents to cooperate because of its effects - such as different types of costs, for example. In addition, self-interest still exists and can stand out - keeping in mind that between 1977 and 1984 Kohane stopped showing his idea of Complex Interdependence as a rival of Realism, after the publication of *"After Hegemony"*. Subsequently, the results emerge as Neoliberal Institutionalism.

Furthermore, the logistical support of the coalition provided by the United States, France, and the United Kingdom also points to the existence of a personal interest, as they all profit by selling war weapons. As Rafael Murgi (2014, p. 131) points out, citing Nye and Keohane: "As the State is not considered a unitary actor, but an arena where multiple interests operate, the objectives of State actions may vary according to the various areas of government action". This also shows how much the states involved in the conflict are interdependent, either among themselves or even with other actors such as international organizations (United Nations) and regional coalitions (The Arab Alliance).

Also, the use of force through military power is considered, by the Theory of Interdependence, as an ineffective policy instrument against other States. In other words, it does not tend to "succeed" in the interdependence influence area, and as a consequence, it still imposes costs and security threats. This has been clearly observed since the beginning of the Yemeni conflicts, which seem to have no end, requiring external intermediaries from the UN, which seeks to promote truces in order to alleviate the humanitarian crisis in the region. One of the objectives of the organization is to mediate, helping Yemen to rebuild itself and encouraging the Houthis and the coalition to opt for disarmament and a ceasefire. UN's mediation is a good example of cooperation and coordination, from a liberal perspective it seeks world peace as shown in Figure 1.

	<i>Realism</i>	<i>Liberalism</i>	<i>Constructivism</i>
Main Actors	States	States, multinational corporations, and international organizations	States, transnational knowledge communities, and moral entrepreneurs
Primary Goals of States	Pursuit of national interest; power maximization (offensive Realism); survival and security (defensive Realism)	Cooperation and coordination to achieve collective goals; world peace	Community building through interactions and shared normative frameworks
Preferred International Order	A balance of power system underpinned by self-help and alliances to maintain international order	A collective security system underpinned by free trade, liberal democracy, and institutions	Global and regional security communities forged through shared norms and collective identity
Primary Mode of Interaction between Units	Strategic interaction backed by causal ideas and military and economic power	Two-level (domestic and international) bargaining backed by causal ideas; trade and other forms of functional institutionalization	Socialization through principled ideas and institutions
A Major Variation	Neo-Realism: distribution of power decides outcome	Neo-Liberal institutionalism: international system anarchic, but institutions created by states in their self-interest do constrain anarchy	Critical Constructivism: challenges the state-centric Constructivism of Wendt

Fig. 1 - Comparison of Realism, Liberalism, and Constructivism. The figure shows the main differences involving some topics, such as the main actors; primary goals of states; preferred international order; the primary mode of interaction between units, and the major variation among them. The picture can be found in the book "International Relations of Asia" by David Shambaugh and Michael Ayuda, 2008 p. 59.

3.2 The Neoliberal Institutionalism point of view

Institutions play a crucial role in Interdependence Theory and Neoliberal Institutionalism. It is believed that they have important functions such as helping States and reducing the costs of interdependence (sensitivity and vulnerability), avoiding conflicts. They facilitate the flow of information, reduce mutual distrust in cooperation and help shape the behavior of actors. The presence of all these characteristics can be seen in the United Nations, the main institution active in the ongoing humanitarian conflict in the war in Yemen. Its role has been important since the beginning of the conflict, mainly in the collection of data and information, also sending resources and donations to the countless victims.

UN News data from March 2022 states that Yemen needed US\$4.27 billion to contain the "catastrophic situation" to help more than 17 million people with food, health, education, sanitation, and other basic services. To date, nearly US\$1.3 billion has been raised from 36 different donors. The United Nations Children's Fund (UNICEF), an organ of the organization, also makes donations to the children's cause in Yemen. The aid is aimed destined to the serious issue of hunger, malnutrition, lack of basic sanitation, education, and medicine.

The United Nations also facilitated cooperation and was able to somehow shape the behavior of actors through calls for a truce, which was debated and stipulated last year between the internationally

recognized government forces and Houthi rebels. Unfortunately, the "moment of peace" lasted from April to October last year, and brought many benefits such as a 60% reduction in civilian casualties, the return of fuel supplies by sea, and the reopening of Hodeidah International Airport.

4. Discussion and Conclusions

This study is in line with the idea that international politics and events around the globe interfere with the behavior of actors in the system. This interference consequently results in the central idea of the theory, that States are interconnected, either by the advancement of technology and global communication or by the complexity of contemporary economic relations. Interdependence brings impacts especially in the domestic environment as it influences the decisions taken by other States, bringing effects on their economy and society. Thus, the initial vision of the authors presented an alternative to Realism, which was valid, considering its limitations and partial incapability of collaborating, so that it can exist an understanding of the new "rules" of the international relations game.

Keohane and Nye make it clear that interdependence is not directly linked to situations that bring mutual benefits to the agents involved as Realist authors suggest. It is present through different forms of power – such as political, economic, and cultural power – in addition to conflict, which generates different types of costs and brings reciprocal effects. In the case of the crisis in Yemen, it's noted that the presence of interdependence caused by military power affects both the Houthis and the Sunni coalition. That said, the country does not behave alone as a single actor in the international system, because in addition to not having its government recognized worldwide, it is "commanded" by a rebel group, while its current Head of State governs in exile. This type of power moves and brings more conflict, as it generates an interdependence between Yemen and other nearby States, forcing them to act in some way, even from non-state actors.

To reinforce that these results are convincing, there was a decision to deepen this liberal analysis. In this case, and among the many effects of Complex Interdependence, two main ones can be cited: sensitivity and vulnerability. The first can be understood as the impact of the actions of the States, that is, the way in which a country would politically "respond" to the actions of the other. It can be an action that has the power to affect the domestic policy of a country. It also involves a State's ability to deal with changes and mitigate negative impacts. An example is this very event of the civil war in Yemen, which resulted in the biggest humanitarian crisis in the world. The first sensitive effects of the Houthi attacks led to the action of the Arab coalition in the

region, which consequently led to the response of other States and the involvement of the UN through its organs. The issue of war refugees is also part of this effect, in this case, United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees (UNHCR) acts by providing innumerable types of assistance, using its donations.

Vulnerability, on the other hand, involves the costs of alternatives and the ability of an actor to face changes in the international context. It's not the ability to respond, but the possibility that such a State has to influence the outcome of the actions of another. A great example was the ceasefire and the truce agreed upon last year that lasted 7 months. This represented a major step forward and showed that both the Houthis and the government of Yemen were capable of collaborating and entering into a period of sustainable peace. It is also worth mentioning the UN mediation, which already requested this action, and which somehow influenced the process since it had the help of several States of the international community.

5. References

- [1] Keohane R. *After Hegemony: Cooperation and Discord in the World Political Economy* (1984)
- [2] Keohane R., Nye J. *Transnational Relations and World Politics* (1972)
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