

**IDENTITY POLITICS: A CONUNDRUM TO CONFLICT  
RESOLUTION IN THE MIDDLE EAST, A CASE OF YEMEN**

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## **DEDICATIONS**

This exertion is dedicated to my wife Blessing, my children Rachel, Margret, Audrey and Don. During the course of this project, you find yourself at the end of my priority list. I came this far because of you. I love you all.

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## ABSTRACT

The study focuses on the role of identity politics in conflict resolution strategies in the Middle East region. It analyses the extent to which identity politics have become a conundrum to conflict resolution endeavors in the region. The research was guided by the hypothesis that identities and the politics thereof have become an enigma to conflict resolution strategies in the Middle East region and in Yemen in particular. The theory of Constructivism provided the framework of analysis. The study utilised the case study design wherein qualitative tools such as in depth interviews and documentary search with key informants were employed to gather data. Analysis of data was through the use of content analysis for documentary data and thematic analysis for interview data. Information obtained was then presented using emerging themes from the data. The study established that identities are a social construction phenomenon by individuals who share some common values, and act in a manner that pleases their interests. The study further notes that there exist varied identity groups in Yemeni society, divided by ethnicity, history and religious differences on Islam, each of them fighting for dominance and control of the limited resources. Conflict resolution efforts are then frustrated by these identities which resent a central government, but clamor for autonomy on tribal lines. Regional actors also complicate any conflict resolution undertakings in the country as they tend to support conflicting identities on kinship basis, and thereby creating a difficult situation in finding suitable regional mediators. The research recommends that problems to conflict resolution efforts in Yemen should be part and parcel of a regional settlement that establishes equality of independence for all people of various identities and states in order to guarantee an opening towards humane, integrationist and objective regional stability. Yemen is indeed part of a delicate regional equation, but it possesses specificities of its own, meaning that real solution for Yemen can only be conceived from within the Yemeni womb rather than outside. That must entail guarantees for a system of justice, dignity and real development in the North, one that also enables legal order and the restoration of rights.

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## **ABBREVIATIONS**

ANC	African National Congress
AQAP	Al Qaeda of the Arabian Peninsula
AU	African Union
EFF	Economic Freedom Fighters
GCC	Gulf Cooperation Council
GPC	General People's Congress
ISIL	Islamic State of Iraq and Levante
MDC	Movement for Democratic Change
ME	Middle East
NDC	National Dialogue Conference
PDRY	People's Democratic Republic of Yemen
PNPA	Peace and Partnership Agreement
UK	United Kingdom
UN	United Nations
USA	United States of America
UZ	University of Zimbabwe
YAP	Yemen Arab Republic
YSP	Yemen Socialist Party

## CHAPTER ONE: INTRODUCTION

### 1.1 Background to the Study

Generally, identity, be it individual, group, community or national, is revered by everyone in day to day life. It is natural that individuals who share certain experiences in the socio-economic and political dispensation of a society often advance common interests, comparative to the broader community of which they are part to (Scott 1995:312). The consequence of this sequel is a prolonged struggle between different religious, ethnic, racial and cultural groups, whose conflict resolution usually results in a political quagmire as with conflicts in the Middle East (ME).

Gause (2014:2) also brings into dialogue the concept of sectarianism that also creates a schism in the ME. It can be opined that sectarianism is akin to religious groupings being used to identify various people in the political activity. Doyle (2013) further asserts that sectarianism in the ME is ordinarily characterized by the centuries old Shia-Sunni divide. The Sunni-Shiite divide has been widely viewed as brewing the “Cold War of the Middle East,” wherein Iran and Saudi Arabia are in a tussle to contain each other on ethno-identity lines (Gause 2014:1). Doyle (2013) is however of the view that to label identity politics in the ME as a Shia-Sunni divide is flawed because identity politics in the ME have taken a diverse range of conflicting facets which include, among others, ethnic, ideological and tribal lines. Doyle (2013) further affirms that

There are tensions between Arab, Turk and Kurd, between Berber and Arab in North Africa. Many of the religious clashes are not Sunni-Shia but between “secular” and hardliners. In Egypt, it is often Muslim-Christian. In Israel, there is increased racist rhetoric between Jew and Arab. This atomization of identity is worse in countries such as Iraq, Syria and Lebanon where the state is weak.

What Doyle essentially brings out is that the ME is a fractured society that is deeply divided along race, tribe, religion, ideology and so on. When political activity is being organized it automatically takes the shape of various identities found in the respective body politics of the ME. Identity groupings based on tribe, caste, kin, and ethnicity contributes to the justification of inequality in socio-economic and political dispensation of most ME countries. Morris (1994:11) notes that conflicts in the ME often have a communal environment, shimmering mutually dissenting insights and lexes of variances amongst groups with varied religious and ethnic connections.



It is therefore necessary to understand the concept of conflict resolution and how it fares in such a fractured society. Thus the various identities found in the ME have to be taken into consideration in an attempt to resolve any conflict. Before venturing into how conflict resolution is impacted by identity politics, it is necessary to conceptualize what conflict resolution entails. Conflict may be defined as a struggle that arises between two or more contending parties, be it at individual or national level. Scholars such as Moore (1996) and Tillet (1991) assert that conflict occurs at varying levels of consciousness that is latent conflict, which is not acknowledged as well as conflict that is acknowledged and is normally over resources or ideals. Bercovitch et al (2009:1) define conflict resolution as the examination of the marvel of strife and explore means to manage it, highlighting their acumens and conceptions on real clashes, be they national or transnational, to enhance good relations amongst states and societies. This entails efforts that are instituted to diffuse the attrition that exists between various contending parties and is complicated by such things as identities that define the parties to the conflict. The complexities that come into play are usually as a result of lack of trust on the one mediating in the conflict or worse still perceived impartiality of the ones trying to bring the warring parties to a truce.

This brings this research to identity politics and how it is supposedly a problem in Yemen. Day (2010:1) avows that identity politics in Yemen is mainly defined by three main opposition groups that are undermining the stability of that country. The Houthi-Hadi rift is the most volatile, but it is not the only conflict. The International Crisis Group (2015:2) notes that tensions were also unsettling the marriage of convenience between the Houthi and former President Ali Abdullah Saleh, who after being deposed in 2011 tacitly allied with the Houthis against the Southern separatists, who themselves were also split. Later on the Houthis had to be part to depose Saleh from power. The creation of the Southern movement is predominantly as a result of the Unification of the country in 1990 and the Southerners believe in secession to form an independent state. The identity of this political outfit is therefore informed by regionalism. Ali Abdullah Saleh was also accused of cracking down on this group and this had an inadvertent effect of radicalizing the group. Day (2010:1) further proclaims that another borne of contention in the problems in Yemen was a strangle hold of power by Ali Abdullah Saleh and his Hashid tribe. The 2015 conflict pits the “Hadi-Houthi rift, Al-Qaeda and the Islamic State,” but to further complicate the situation, more contending groups seems to develop as the conflict continues (International Crisis Group 2015:2).

Indeed the various identities found in the ME may be viewed as obstacles to conflict resolution. As highlighted above the ME is a highly fissured society with a wide array of identities hence the supposition that conflict resolution may be problematic. This research is however a case study focused and there is need to explore whether the issue of identity politics is really problematic in resolving the conflicts in Yemen.

## **1.2 Statement of the Problem**

The issue of identity politics appears to be an enigma in conflict resolution strategies for international relations practitioners and politicians, domestically, regionally and internationally, yet it is hardly given credence. Whilst identity politics is less pronounced as a cause of conflict in most democratic countries, it has become a puzzle for conflict resolution in most third world countries wherein rifts persist amongst regimes, tribes and religious groups, indeed a marvel that is more pronounced in the ME. The mention of identity politics in the ME conjures the rift between the Sunni and the Shia, Islam versus Christianity and the quest for recognition by other small ethnic groups such as Alawites in Syria. It is in this vein that the Sunni-Shiite rift, the Al Qaeda, the Islamic State and a strong tribal divide in Yemen appear to have become the elephant in the house as far as conflict resolution in the country is concerned. The North-South divide that existed before the unification of the country in 1990 also created a difficult regional identity crisis embedded with ethnic connotations. Both the Southerners and Northerners remain skeptical about each other, with the former feeling embezzled by the latter in the socio-economic and political dispensation of the country.

The overlap of geographic and religious divisions, in particular the preponderance of Shiites in the northern highlands and Sunnis in the central, southern and western parts magnifies and muddles the conflict. Above all, both the Sunnis and Shiites are divided on tribal lines within their regions. There have been fights in Yemen since 1990 to date between the State and Houthis in the north, separatists' unrest in the south, attacks by Al Qaeda, and power struggles between tribal and military factions, a phenomenon that may indicate an ethno-identity conflict. The conflict has since been regionalized on the Sunni-Shia narratives, a situation that has further complicated conflict resolution attempts in the country. Several conflict resolutions, including the UN mandated attempts were made to bring peace in the conflict prone country, but the peace deals are usually short lived, arguably because an identity politics lacuna is not given much

weight in the conflict resolution strategies. It is in this vein that the researcher is prompted to establish the role of identity politics in conflict resolution with a bias to the ME and Yemen in particular.

### **1.3 Justification of the Study**

The complexity of conflict resolution in the ME as epitomized by the conflict in Yemen has baffled international relations practitioners, politicians and academics alike. The difficulties in conflict resolution in Yemen appear to have some penchant to the dynamics of identity politics. In as much as identity politics has become a key issue in Yemen it does not mean it does not exist in other countries. In fact the contemporary world is grappling with the difficulties in conflict resolution in various countries in the ME such as Iraq, Bahrain, and Syria. Yemen also forms a contingent of the countries where identity politics have created a conundrum for those involved in attempts to resolve the conflicts in that country. This complexity in conflict resolution created the impetus for this research to be undertaken. Although the research is driven by the complexity in resolving the conflict in Yemen, the literature to be generated will also help in future conflict resolution endeavors as well as in academic enquiry.

### **1.4 Research Objectives**

The study seeks to:

- To ascertain how identity politics generates complicated conflicts in society;
- To establish the nature of identity politics in the ME and how it impacts on attempts to resolve conflicts in the region; and
- To examine the nexus between identity politics and conflict in Yemen.

### **1.5 Research Questions**

The study seeks to answer the following questions:

Primary Question

- Using the case of Yemen, to what extent does identity politics presents itself as an obstacle to resolution of conflicts in the country?

## Secondary Questions

- What is identity politics?
- How does identity politics affect societies in conflict?
- What are the identities that dominate politics in the ME region?
- How do these identities play in regional conflicts?
- Are identity politics an issue that complicates previous and current attempts for conflict resolution in the ME?
- What are the identities in Yemen?
- What has been the role of identity politics in sparking and perpetuating conflicts in Yemen?
- What identity considerations among the prominent groups are complicating resolution efforts?

## **1.6 Methodology**

### **1.6.1 Research Design**

The study espoused a case study design in guiding the research. Payne and Payne (2003:3) argue that “a case study is a comprehensive study of a single social unit ordinarily located in one physical place, whose people are distinguished from those who are not part to that social unit.” The case study thus ensures a ‘detailed’ study of identity politics in the ME using a variety of data sources. It allowed the researcher to explore individuals and groups through interventions, relationships and communities, and then supports the deconstruction and the succeeding reconstruction of various phenomena in the area of study. The design ensured that the issue under study was explored through a variety of lens which allowed for multiple facets of the phenomenon to be revealed and understood.

### **1.6.2 Target Population**

The target population was primarily the Embassy staff from ME states missions in Zimbabwe, officials from the Ministry of Foreign Affairs, the academics from University of Zimbabwe

(UZ), citizens of the ME in Zimbabwe and selected political analysts. Three Embassy staff from Kuwait and Saudi Arabia, and two citizens of Saudi Arabia gave credible information about the nature of the conflict and conflict resolution efforts so far in the ME and Yemen in particular. Meanwhile, three Zimbabweans who were deployed on UN missions in the region also provided valuable information about the identity dynamics in the ME and how they affect conflict resolution efforts. Two academics covered up for gaps and biases that arose during data collection on the study.

### **1.6.3 Sampling Procedure**

This research utilized both purposive and snow ball techniques. Purposive sampling is where the researcher selects units to be sampled based on their knowledge and professional judgment (Neuman 1991: 208). It often relies on the choice of the researcher who uses his discretion to create a representative sample. As Kalof et al (2008:44) noted, with this technique, the sample developed gradually as insights and questions emerged from the information gathered from others. Thus this technique unraveled more credible information about the nature of identities in the ME as one respondent often referred the researcher to others who had better understanding of the study than the first respondent. Higson-Smith (1995:85) notes that Snowball sampling is used to identify potential subjects in studies where subjects are hard to locate. It relies on the researcher identifying one key respondent who in turn leads the researcher to other respondents using referrals (Barbie 2010:184). So the snowball technique was useful for contacting difficult to reach groups such as the ME Embassy staff.

### **1.6.4 Data Collection Methods**

The study made use of the qualitative methods of data collection. The main methods for qualitative data collection were in-depth interviews, key informant interviews and documentary search. Key informant interviews focused on such persons as political analysts, ME citizens and other people who specialized in the field of political science and international relations. It also focused on people in the diplomatic field like the Zimbabwe Ministry of Foreign Affairs as well as Embassy staff from the ME. The instrument which was used for this method was the key informant guide, which had a checklist of topics to be covered. Key informant interviews helped to answer questions which sought to find out the nature of identities in the ME and Yemen in

particular. It also helped to answer questions that relate to the nexus between identity politics and conflict resolution strategies in the region. The major strength of the key informant interview was that it directed the researcher to situations, events, or people which were helpful to the progress of the study (Bryman 2008: 409).

In depth interviews was in the form of face to face with Yemeni, Iranian and Saudi Arabian Embassy staff, as well as Zimbabweans once deployed on UN missions in the ME, to gather how identity politics generate complicated conflicts in society, as well as the nature of identity politics in the ME. An in depth interview guide was used as a technique to effectively cover the desired gaps of information which was sought for. The advantage of the in depth interview was that it allowed time for respondents to further develop and give reasons for his or her individual point of views without being influenced by the opinions of other respondents (Boyle 2006:3). It also allowed the gaining of controversial, sensitive or tabooed information (Ibid: 3).

Documentary search was used to attain documentary evidence on the nature of identity politics in the ME. The method created the basis of further questions for face to face interviews. The study used already published material on the topic such as books, journal articles and electronic media. The major strength of documentary search was that it provided access to information that was difficult to get in any other way, such as people who were not willing to talk in a formal interview or were difficult to track down (Bryman 2008: 409).

### **1.6.5 Data Analysis**

The study used content analysis for documentary search and thematic case for both key informant and in depth interviews. Documents and texts were analysed to identify themes, patterns and biases to the application of the concept of identity politics. Content analysis was useful in qualifying content in terms of set groups in a systematic and replicable manner (Bryman 2008: 288). Thus data with similar responses were grouped together along with respective themes, and assigned with codes to easily trace it. Content analysis was used because it uses replicable, observable and rule governed forms of analysis in a theory dependent system for the application groups (Cohen et al 2007:476). Theories and research findings by other authors were used to compare with the findings of the research.

Thematic analysis was used to ensure that the researcher moved his analysis from a broad reading of the data towards discovering patterns and themes. Braun and Clarke (2006:79) argued that thematic analysis entails finding and recording themes in the data. In addition to its ability to minimally arrange and describe the data set in detail, thematic analysis frequently goes further to interpret varied facets of the research topic.

The data thus was subjected to coding, developing descriptive themes and generating analytical themes. In the process, this helped to focus on identifying patterned meaning across a data set that provided an answer to the research question being addressed. Patterns were addressed through a laborious process of familiarization, data coding, and theme development as well as revision. The idea of analytical themes denoted a step of interpretation whereby, the researcher went beyond the primary studies and produced new constructs, clarifications or premises. Thus thematic analysis was used as it allowed the expanding of the range of the study past individual experience.

### **1.7 Limitations**

Limitations to this research related to difficulties in finding respondents who were directly involved in the identity politicking in Yemen. The researcher however atone for the shortcoming by interviewing envoys from countries in the ME who are stationed in Zimbabwe for they have been involved in attempts to resolve the conflict in Yemen in one way or the other. The envoys seemed not comfortable in disclosing information that was considered classified but the researcher alleviated the uneasiness of the envoys or any one interviewed by sticking to questions of an academic nature only.

### **1.8 Delimitation**

This research was premised on the assumption that identity politics was problematic in conflict resolution in the ME with a case study focus on Yemen. The time frame for this study was from 1990 to 2016 because the major issues of identity seemed to have begun in Yemen as a result of the Unification of the country in 1990, and since then attrition had been the order of the day in the Yemeni body politic with those in South Yemen demanding secession. Other opposing groups like the Houthi movement, Islamic State and al Qaeda were subsequently formed and to date stability has eluded the Yemeni body politic.

## **1.9 Conclusion**

This chapter focused on the background of the study, statement of the problem, justification of the study, research objectives and the questions required to fulfill these objectives. It also discussed methodologies covering research design, target population, sampling procedure, data collection methods and data analysis. The chapter wound up with limitations and delimitations for the study. Indeed, the chapter laid the foundation for the conceptualization of identity politics in society which is dealt with in chapter two.

## **1.10 Dissertation Layout**

Chapter one gave an overview of the concept of identity in society and the politics embedded in it. The chapter sets the tone on what the succeeding chapters will discuss. It defines the problem that has led to the research and justifies why the study was supposed to be conducted. Research methodologies used for the study, covering the research design, target population, sampling procedure, data collection methods and data analysis are also discussed in this chapter. Limitations and delimitations that governed the research are also covered in this chapter. Overall, chapter one formed the basis of the research and in particular opened an avenue for the conceptualization of identity politics in society.

Chapter two conceptualizes identity politics in society within the constructivist school of thought. It acknowledges that a society is a socially constructed phenomenon that is built around common values and identities. An appraisal of the concept of identity is given together with what constitutes identity politics in a society. The chapter explores the rationale behind identity politics in a society, and how this has become part of the puzzle in conflict resolution attempts. This chapter helps to unpack the nature of identity politics in the region of study, the ME, discussed in chapter three.

The nature and causes of identities in the ME region are explored in greater detail in chapter three. The role of the regional body, that is, the Arab League, as well as the UN efforts in conflict resolution efforts in the region, and the challenges faced are examined in this chapter.



The chapter paves way for a detailed exploration of identity complexities in one of the seemingly neglected countries of the ME, Yemen, which appears to have been in an identity war for years.

Chapter four then focuses on identity politics as they affect Yemen and how it has become a challenge in conflict resolution efforts in the country. The chapter unpacks the socio-economic and political dispensation in the country with the view to determine how these natural realities impact on Yemen identities. Big powers influences on identity politics of the region, mostly driven by economic interests, are also explored. These influences, as well as identity disparities in the governance of the country are analysed to confirm or refute them as contributory to challenges to conflict resolution endeavors in Yemen. Conclusions resulting from these chapters and recommendations are then captured in chapter five.

Summary of findings, conclusions and recommendations are articulated in chapter five. The chapter gives a summary of the study covering its purpose, restating of the objectives, research questions and research design. The idea is to reflect on the intended objectives and goals of the study, ascertaining that the research questions were answered in the study. The framework of analysis of the study, which in this case was constructivism, is also briefly explained in this chapter. In this chapter, the researcher also acknowledges the constraint of failing to conduct the research on the actual ground, but appreciates the contributions from ‘friends’ from the ME region. It is in this chapter that the researcher made a conclusion that the ME conflict region incarnates identity dominance by various groups over each other. In Yemen, the situation is worsened by a weak central government that has failed to unite the heterogeneous society. All the chapters acknowledge that identities are socially construed around certain values, history and beliefs, a phenomenon that qualifies the Constructivist school of thought in this study.

## **CHAPTER TWO: CONCEPTUALISING IDENTITY POLITICS IN SOCIETY**

### **2.1 Introduction**

A society is a socially constructed phenomenon, built around common values and identities. In fact, every society is bound by its history, values and beliefs, which continue to change in tandem with the contemporary developments within its setting. History and values then creates socially constructed identities with varying interests often resulting in conflicts. Such constructions are dynamic in nature and are better explained in the framework of the theory of constructivism as submitted by Onuf (1989). This chapter is thus focused on conceptualizing the concept of identity within the theoretical framework of constructivism. Effects, impacts and consequences of identity politics in society are also explored.

### **2.2 Conceptualizing Identity Politics within the Constructivist School**

The multiplicity of identities in any society is both indicative and reflective of the subjective nature of reality and the manner in which different groups in society construct and understand their statuses and existence. Constructivism helps to explain this subjective nature of reality and how societies make, “create and constitute one another through history, values, deeds and beliefs (Onuf 1989:29). Williams (2000:59) observes that “the point of argument by constructivists is that the world is socially instituted through interactions that are intersubjective, and societies are conjointly constructed, and that what is central to the dynamics and makeup of world politics are ideational factors such as norms, identity and ideas.” Kaarbo and Ray (2011:17) further explain that with constructivism, the societal domain is more important than the physical world and vital features of international politics are socially built through systems of norms, opinions and dialogue.” Contrary to realism, the argument by constructivism here is that there is no certain, permanent, factual reality, and even if there were, physical truths matter less than social constructions. Individuals are thus living in a ‘world of people’s creation’ wherein various bodies such as “shared realities” are prepared by individuals’ feat (Onuf 1989, Wendt 1991). The theory thus explains how the social world or societies are built and equally suggests that the nature and effects of identities in society are socially constructed through human interactions.

Constructivists accentuate the prominence of a range of social, cultural and historical aspects that inspire specific forms of meaning to be given to diverse actors and their goals. The invasion of

Iraq in 2003 by the USA coalition, for instance, highlights the way in which the meaning of security was constructed and arbitrated through different understandings of identity. In this context, the possibility that Saddam Hussein had been developing nuclear weapons in 2002 to 2003 was considered far more of a threat for the USA and UK than the existing nuclear arsenals of Russia, China, France, Pakistan, India and Israel, indeed sufficient to warrant military involvement and regime change. Thus from a constructivist perspective, the threat posed by Iraq was constructed through representations of Iraqi as a dangerous threat to the international community. In tandem, it is clear that societies designate other societies as friend and foe, and approach them as such on the basis of conceptions of identity.

Acknowledging the relevance of identity in constructivist approaches leads to a more fundamental shared assumption of the theory, that non material or ideational factors are central to the construction and practices in societies. Norms defined by Williams (2008:63) as “mutual prospects about suitable conduct by players with a specific identity” is applied to dominant ideas about what constitute appropriate behavior in society. The Sharia, for example is a strongly constituted concept in the Muslim community and binds everyone albeit some arising resistance from others. Indeed, norms, identity and ideas are central factors in constructivism. What a society agrees to be binding becomes an important value or norm to be respected. This normally creates cordial relations in society, but may also be the basis of conflict for an out-group that may view these values otherwise.

Societal behavior is essentially driven by norms or values derived from their identity. These values exercise great influence on societal behavior by both helping to constitute societal identities and interests, and then conditioning and constraining the actions undertaken by societies in an endeavor to further their interests. Normative and ideational structures are seen as shaping societal identities and interests through imagination, communications and constraint (Burchill et al. 1995:198). What humanity observes as the dominion of option, the actions they think should be taken and the seeming constraints thereof, as well as the stratagems that may be thought of to achieve certain goals, are affected by non-material structures. So, non-material structures condition the behavior of societies whether to be hostile or friendly in their existence. Institutionalized norms thus condition what societies consider necessary and possible in both practical and ethical terms.

Societal norms can have powerful effects on how societies act and understand societal interactions. Constructivists such as Onuf (1989) argue that what is right, wrong or appropriate, even what is in a society's interest is a product of collective social context of societies. In tandem, Kaarbo and Ray (2011:19) note that some socially constituted norms such as the banning of slave trade, use of force and non-interference in the domestic affairs of sovereign states are binding and revered by many states, and have become constraints viewed by societies as acceptable conduct. Modern societies in Africa and the ME uphold socially constructed identity values and norms such as prohibition of stealing, adherence to some form of dressing, and respect for elders to an extent of effecting punitive measures to offenders. For instance, the Muslim community of the ME is firm on the covering of women faces using veils. Thus societal values and/or norm are key to the explanation of identities within societies. Failure to adhere to these socially agreed norms may result in punishment and even conflict within societies.

For constructivists, identity is inherently unstable, contingent to a site of constant competition. In this vein, the study of identity then becomes the study of different representations that compete with others to provide realistic accounts of who a particular group is and how that group should act. It is in this context that the existence of the Houthis in Yemen arguably comes in. The Houthis are traditionally Shiites but decided to identify themselves as such after viewing fellow Shiites as violators of Islam tradition, and opted to take their name from their leader, Houthi. Meanwhile, process of migration, as was with colonialism, has also a potential to create new identities in the areas of destination. Thus 'identities' are continually socially constituted in societies, a phenomenon that qualifies constructivism as an appropriate framework for this study.

From the above, it is clear that identity is a socially and traditionally constituted concept. People learn about their identities through interactions with family, peers, organizations, media and other acquaintances they make in everyday life. Nagel (1993:2) avers that the concept of identity denotes the 'self' and 'other' societal construct, which can be reviewed, and reinvigorated through interactions in tandem with the contemporary situation. In this regard, the notions of self are the result of a variety of fluctuating and varied societal traditional groupings and identifications that are barely unwavering. It is in this respect that apart from the traditional identities in Africa and Australia, for instance, various identities emerged as a result of colonialism, and more are likely to arise as a result of migration. It is perhaps in this context that

Harris et al (2013:2) argue that “the conception of identity developed into numerous dimensions the social and behavioral sciences, to an extent that there is hardly constancy and lucidity as regards its meaning and use.”

The conceptualization of identity politics into society would first require the characterization of the phrase ‘identity politics’ as derived from the understanding of the term ‘identity.’ Zweiri (2007:6) relates identity politics to “political activities” by societal groups sharing same values, culture, religion and ethnic appendages as well as economic, social and political privileges or autonomy within a societal setting. Zweiri seems to suggest that identity politics avows to signify or pursue the interests of certain assemblages in society, where the participants seldom share and marry around mutual understandings of real or superficial social, political and economic unfairness, relative to a broader society of which they are part and exist. Rather than uniting exclusively around belief systems, programmatic manifestos, or party association, identity politics also seek to protect the political self-determination of a specific community marginalized within its larger milieu. Stemming from the ‘self’ and ‘other’, identity is then shaped by value systems, beliefs, interests and self-rule in the broader society for a particular group that feels secluded in aspects of socio-economic and political dispensation. So the idea of identity politics relates to the desire for self-determination of certain groups in society, and how these groups perceive their position in the socio-economic and political dispensation of a society. The Mthwakazi Front of Zimbabwe, an offshoot of the Ndebele, perhaps fits in this category of identity politics, as apart from their demand for secession from the country, alleges social, economic and political exclusion by the government. Thus the idea of identity politics is entrenched in a political activity and political groupings that are created based on one’s identity. What then would likely to follow is confrontation amongst different groups in society with the intent to assert each other’s authority over the other, and normally such conflicts are bloody and difficult to resolve as was with the case between Rwandan Hutus and Tutsis that resulted in the genocide of 1994.

The prime identities in most societies are those attained at birth. This translates that identity is attained from family, the clan, the tribe, and evolving into the ethnic nation. The village, district, province or city, and developing into a country as well as the religious community, which may be subdivided into cliques all constitute identities. The politics of identity would then be

manifested from families to nations, and from villages to countries, as well as religions. This translates to the issues of families labeled as that of chiefs or monarch and others as subordinate families. In the ME, each city, district or village constitutes an identity, and equally in Zimbabwe each village constitutes an identity. For instance, Puche village constitute a distinct identity in Masvingo province, which in turn constitute a provincial identity in the country of ten provinces. Identity can also be a result of an allegiance to a leader or ruler which is expressed in obedience owed by a subject to the sovereign and his multifarious representatives at various levels at which the subject lives his life (Lewis 1999:163). A good example relates to the Houthis of Yemen whose identity come into existence following their leader, Hussein Badr al Houthi, who led the group's first uprising in 2004, and killed the same year, in an effort to gain self-rule of the Saada province, a phenomenon that would preserve the interests of Zaydi dynasty Southern Sunni Islamists. In Zimbabwe, the Ndebele also want to be identified with Mzilikazi who brought them from Zululand into modern Zimbabwe, and their identity politics revolve on the supremacy of their leader who managed to conquer the natives in the country.

Personal identities are the self-designations and self-attributions that individuals aver through the progression of social interface with others and are basically the meanings the individuals attribute to the self. The concept of social identities then provides a conceptual link between the individual's depiction of self, and societal constructions and clusters in which the self is entrenched and eventually founded. To have an identity is the ability to narrate about the history of oneself and related family groups, for an identity should be an account, which one should be able to continually retell without hustles in the face of new environments (Stevenson 2000:278). The Ndebele, Shangani, Zezuru, Manyika, Nda, Karanga and others are societal identities in Zimbabwe distinguished through cultural and historical, and even geographical identities. In this instance, the Nda people in eastern Zimbabwe can easily be linked to the Nda of Mozambique, whose relatives are found on either side of the international borderline. In this vein, it is even easy for a kid from each of the tribes to narrate their origins as well as his kith and kin across borders. Whilst this relationship has often created a bond across boundaries, in some instances, it has created identity politics related to problems of geography location as well as social and political resulting in conflicts like the situation between the Democratic Republic of Congo (DRC) and Rwanda. In this example, the conflict between the two countries persists and will continue to be so because the cause of the conflict is too much entrenched in identity politics.

The conception of identity is mutually an interpersonal and circumstantial construct in that it is not possible to hold a social identity alone, and that identities are constituted inversely in diverse cultural and antique contexts. This study is also inclined to add religious identity as forming some of the classifications used in the categorization of people in identity politics. This perhaps explains the existence of identity struggles between the Christians, Judaists and the Muslims wherein the Muslims are viewed to be resorting to fundamentalism to ensure that their religious 'identity' is acknowledged across the globe. The Boko Haram of Nigeria also presents a good example of a religious related problem stemming from identity politics. Within the religious identities also are sub-identities as with the Muslim Sunni Saudi Arabians who feel more close to Prophet Mohammad than others because they are custodians of holiest places of Islam, Mecca and Medina, and conversely the Qureshi tribe argue that the prophet hails from their tribe, which Saudi Arabia does not have a pedigree.

Societal identities are constructed through individuals or group interactions sharing some form of history, interests, behavior, values or norms. Arguing from a constructivist perspective, Wendt (1991:383) equates the conception of identities and interests of states to pick pockets and murderers whom he argues, are not free from, but are constituted by the societal setting. In this respect, it is worth noting that shared values shape the existence of a certain social group, and such groups sharing the same values as thieves will always support each other. For instance, the Masai of Kenya and Tanzania are brought together by their nomadic and historical identities, and thus their identity politics is shared in that context. These societies normally decide to cooperate on the basis of their history, values and culture, but may also decide not to cooperate for other reasons such as geographical location and nationhood. Similarly, the social context of the Muslim community facilitates a grain of mutually recognized identities and interests hence the harboring of Al Qaeda, the ISIS and the ISIL in most ME countries.

Significant aspects of identity such as gender, social class, sexual orientation, age, ethnicity and race play important roles in determining how societies comprehend and experience the world, as well as modeling the kinds of prospects and challenges they face. Lewis (1999:163) observed that the above identity facets, play a great role in determining whether a society has social, political and economic power, how that society get power, and how to use it. On gender differences, it is a fact that it has immense social and cultural effects on the development of

attitudes and identities in any society. Identity politics revolving around gender have forced nations to adopt the 'Beijing Declaration' on women, and has also seen the male dominated ME beginning to accept women in decision making. The issue of social class, ethnicity, and even sexual orientation present complex identity politics in societies which in some cases causes unrest and conflicts. Conventional constructivists like Wendt (1991) adds the issue of "interests" as augmenting identity facets mentioned above, a paraphernalia synonymous with the realist argument on the pursuit of power. Indeed, societal and ethnic identities are indissolubly connected to issues of power, interests, value systems and ideology. The conflict in Yemen between the Houthis, Sunnis, Al Qaeda and the Islamic State, for instance, is linked to differing value systems of Islam, power struggles and conflicting belief systems about Muslim.

Identities can profoundly shape societal life experience, opportunities and expose the inequalities a society faces. Considering the role identities play in the way people experience and accumulate power, it is crucial to note that there are potential problems, discernment and repression that some groups in a society experience. Terms such as racism, sexism, and classism echo views that postulate supremacy of one identity over another, men over women, whites over non-whites and wealthy over other classes, indeed very discriminatory and full of bias (Lewis 1999:163). Furthermore, they defy ideologies that propagate hierarchical constructions and limit a subordinate group's chances and freedoms. For instance, this was the case in then apartheid South Africa where identities based on race resulted in the socio-economic and political exclusions of black people, a phenomenon that was behind the black uprising against the white minority. Meanwhile, identity based on sexual orientation, from a certain race or ethnic group or socio-economic class, may involve recurrent or institutional prejudice that can manifest in the form of unequal opportunities, rights or wages, as well as being stereotyped, sidelined or persecuted. In most cases these have resulted in marches, boycotts and sit ins by the affected identity groups. The resultant confrontation with government institutions sometimes breeds full scale conflicts amongst varied identities which are very difficult to resolve.

In the context of identity, there is often a puzzle as regards the authenticity of some indigenous identities in societies. This has seen the concept of identities not only growing from the construct dimension and drift of connections among persons and others, but, also those relations often degenerating into areas of conflict (Harris et al 2013:17). People placing claim to certain



identities may find that others contest those claims. This is perhaps well exemplified by the Israeli- Palestine conflict that dates back to the Biblical times when the Israelis were given the promised land of Canaan, yet the Palestinians claim that the land belongs to them by birth. In this manner, the concession and renegotiation of identities involves demanding and resisting identities from inside a set of predominant discourses about the genuineness of certain identity types. As a result, these tales about who should amount to native people in the society becomes complex. Relatedly, the South Sudan conflict is deeply entrenched in ‘identity politics’ between the Nuer and the Dinka reflecting tribal divisions. In Rwanda and Burundi, the puzzle of indigenous authenticity between Tutsi and Hutu, coupled by the problems of socio-economic and political exclusions by the respective governments has continually caused identity conflicts punctuated by mass killings between the tribes. The 1994 Rwanda Genocide and the 1992 and 1993 mass killings in Burundi are sad examples.

As societal identities are people created, it equally entails that they are dynamic in nature as people behavior change with time and circumstances. Identities are fluid and develop over the course of human lives as they are socially constructed through interactions. Hall (1996:3) argued that identity ought to be regarded as “a steady core of the self-evolving from commencement to the end through all the vagaries of history without change.” The contemporary Jewish Zionism was initially profane and peripheral within the Jewish community, but became motivated by its own identity politics upon the formation of the state of Israeli in 1948. One may also refer to the Palestinian-Israeli divide, the Shia-Sunni divide in the ME and the north-south divide in Yemen and the diverse range of conflicts as a result of historical and ever-changing socially constructed differences. For instance, the Shia-Sunni divide is inspired by socially constructed differences in perceptions of Islam as a religion. The North-South divide in Yemen is also inspired by socially constructed beliefs that the Southerners feel disenfranchised by the unification of the country hence the demand for secession. So it would appear that the causes of societal conflict, whether social, economic or political, are almost linked to the question of identity.

What is apparent is that identities are insentiently shaped and depend as much upon the recognition of others as they do on the self-designations and self-attributions they affirm during the process of social interaction with others. Rather than instituting an integrated, static and unchangeable paradigm, identities are always in mutability, they are an answer to fluctuating and

varied social and cultural classes and identities that are hardly steady. In this sense, identities are nascent, a process of becoming rather than being. Societies are also imaginative agents who attempt to construct their own sense of social identity and may challenge the prevailing social constraints and social structures. In Zimbabwe, for example, the opposition Movement for Democratic Change (MDC) came into existence in 1999 claiming to be identified as a ‘workers’ party and challenged the social constraints and structures of the ZANU PF government, albeit with little success, and this has become a trend with most opposition parties in the country coming within varied identity frameworks that include tribalism.

The idea of identity brings in different social structures that can either be cooperative or conflictual in societies. Griffiths et al (2008:52) assert that “what makes much sense for the constructivist is that under anarchy, different social structures and arrangements, cooperative and conflictual, can be formed and defined on the basis of actors’ social identities, and accordingly, the way they construct their national interests and devise relevant means to secure them.” It is true that some societal structures may be cooperative as with the Shonas of Zimbabwe, but in some instances, the relations are sour. In Somalia, for instance, clan and Islam are central pillars of the society, with clan dynamics and inter-clan rivalries magnified by decades of state collapse. The major groups, Hawiye, Isaaq and Al Shabaab are engaged in an endless identity conflict with each clan vying for influence and resources. Each clan has constructed its structures and interests in Somalia, and vow to fight the other clans even through suicidal means. Geographical clan divisions often correspond to battle lines, as clans contest for power and resources. Conflict resolution strategies by the IGAD, AU and even UN in Somalia have always hit a snag simply because the social actors seek to be uncooperative and remain conflictual on clan basis, each striving for power and influence.

The notion of identities, be they personal or collective, is inherently political. “All politics is identity politics, and political activity is, and, at its best, is animated by efforts to define and defend who I am, or we are, or you are, or hope to be seen to be” (Parker 1994:10). The politics of identity can involve the construction, reconstruction or disruption of notions about what it means to claim particular identities, or the creation, or recreation of meanings attached to them, especially if these efforts are attempts to shift power relations within or between groups. The social constructions that express identity discourses are themselves entrenched in uneven cliques

of social, economic and political relations. Consequently, the chronicles of “who gets what, how and when” have differing political insinuations for different groups of indigenous people (Lasswell 1963). The Kenyan environment arguably presents a good example, wherein ethnic diversity of over seventy ethnic groups has led to disputes, and, inter-ethnic rivalries and resentment over Kikuyu dominance in politics and commerce have hindered national integration. Meanwhile, the Syrian conflict also seems to be as a result of oppressing other ‘identities’ such as the Sunnis by President Assad’s Alawite ethnic group. So the social players that elucidate identities discourses are themselves implanted in unequal sets of social, economic and political relationships, meaning that at the centre of any conflict is the issue of identity relevance in society.

It can indeed be argued that colonial legacy and practices deeply distorted, and in some instances detached, the interactions that native people have to place and to relate in a diversity of ways. Many social identities in Africa were distorted by colonialism. In Mozambique, for instance, the concept of ‘assimilado’ seems to have erased the true Mozambique identity as natives feel more comfortable to be identified with Portugal than Africa. It is a truism that most native Mozambicans cannot speak their mother languages, which should be the measure of their identity, and above all, can hardly trace their origins. The issue was made worse by the intercourse between the natives and colonizers that produced the mixed race, called the ‘coloureds’ in Zimbabwe, and ‘bastards’ in Namibia. Such people are not very sure about their true identities, a phenomenon that creates some form of identity problems to the people concerned. In some cases, colonialism has reorganized indigenous societies to an extent that people only become conscious of their indigeneity later in their lives (Harris et al 2013:22). Moreover, the geographical boundaries drawn by the colonisers affected different identities especially in Africa for the boundaries knew no relationships, tribes and families. As a result, many have tried to re-establish those social and cultural acquaintances, and in the process engage in violent conflict with other groups. This arguably is the reason why there are several border conflicts amongst many countries. It is vital to understand that many indigenous people finding themselves wedged in a binary not of their own making, continue to forcefully resist endorsed identity groupings viewing the obsession with concepts of indigenous authenticity as racism and primitivism in disguise.

Indeed the concept of identity and the ‘politics’ in it is evidently a social construct by individuals. This is a consequence of shared values, beliefs and history that societies value most, and it is within the framework of these values that groups interact and coexist. Suffice for this study to bring in the theory of constructivism propounded by Onuf (1989), then Wendt (1990s) and others, a theory that argues that the world is a socially constructed phenomenon.

### **2.3 Effects, Impacts, Consequences: Identity Politics and Conflicts in Society**

The concept of identity presents multifaceted effects in societies. This has seen societies either living in harmony or at conflict with each other depending on varied values and beliefs, or how they have generally socially constructed their relationships. Groups’ identities are then viewed through their culture, values and norms creating some form of coexistence amongst different societies.

Various identity groups tend to value and respect each other when they consider the other groups as strongly socially bound by their identities. Zinyama (2016) believes that the reciprocal relationship between group identification and group culture makes intergroup coordination, trust and cooperation possible. This translates to the fact that if people in a society are agreed to certain values and share the same culture, there is always some respect and societal pride amongst them. This presents a positive effect for being in identity in societies for people will be living in harmony. Seconding Zinyama’s sentiments, another scholar, Mutamangira (2016) of the Peace and Security Training Academy, argues that when people are categorized into identity groups, actual differences between members of the same identity tend to be perpetually minimized and often ignored in making decisions or forming impressions. So, in essence, people living under group identity resents conflict in their being, but only if the values and cultures of the group identity in question are in the interests of all. For instance, the Shiites and Sunnis of Yemen lived in harmony for years till their unification in 1990, only to confront each other following differing values and interests that related to economic and political exclusions of the Southerners, a situation that started a conflict in existence to date. Thus the same processes of categorizing identities, can also give rise to intergroup differences and distrust that may seed and sustain conflict.

Having an identity allows people to stand out as individuals, develop a sense of well-being and importance, and fit in with certain groups and cultures. There is always a sense of oneness in identities as people tend to have a sense of belonging like the 'We Americans' mantra. This breeds security and development as is the case with USA for people tend to work towards their national identity. The unfortunate thing comes when within the society, emerges race, culture and value differences, a phenomenon that then creates yet other identities, with their own identity politics. The identity of the USA nation is globally hailed, but the seemingly 'silent' other identities that include blacks has created racial identity politics that has seen blacks being shot during day light. So in light of this, values of identity in a society, to include those of the minority, must be respected otherwise the consequence will be uprisings, killings and turmoil.

It should be noted that the identity of the alienated people provides a space for a political base for these people to marry and start to affirm themselves in the community. This is a result of the creation of representations of other individuals and groups in actual or ascribed variances, and the formation of conditions by which they characterise themselves. Taking the example of Rwanda, Tutsi identity was cemented as a result of some form of oppression by the Hutus that eventually killed thousands of the Tutsis in 1994. To date the Tutsi are identified as such and resent any attempt to cede power back to the majority Hutus. A sad sequel of identity problem also presented itself during Burundian mass massacres of 1972 and 1993 wherein the issue of identities led to fatalities in a society.

With identity come some forms of privileges and discrimination. It is a fact that one's skin colour, for instance, determines what one gets or not get in other societies. For instance, the situation in South Africa before 1994, and perhaps at the present, is such that race determines who gets what and when amongst the race identities in the country. The result of this situation is confrontation amongst whites, blacks and other identities in an attempt to reverse the denial of some privileges by the 'supreme' race. This is why there is a call for land redistribution by both the African National Congress (ANC) and the Economic Freedom Fighters (EFF). Burton (1997:19) noted that people who are deprived of their aspirations and desires by the authorities are likely to find ways of ensuring that their grievances are heard, even though violent or suicidal means. In Syria for example, the alleged exclusion of other identities in the political dispensation by the Alawites arguably fermented the conflict as other ethnic groups demanded recognition.

Serious identity problems also sparked a civil war in Sierra Leone in 1992 as there emerged some form of ‘greedy and grievance’ within the country, with Charles Taylor’s regime and the elite plundering resources at the expense of the majority. In this instance, the people socially constituted themselves against Taylor’s regime and a civil war erupted. In this vein, Gurr (1970) seemed correct when he argued that the felt gap between value expectations and value capabilities causes conflict. The greater the relative deprivation experienced by the certain identities concerned, the greater the likelihood of potential violence.

Identity politics amongst in-groups are often unhealthy as there is a tendency to fight for power, influence and resources. Galtung (1969:171) noted that;

In situations of structural violence, the violence is built into the structure and shows up as unequal power and consequently as unequal life chances. Resources are unevenly distributed, as when income distributions are heavily skewed, literacy education unevenly distributed, medical services exist in some districts and for some groups only and so on, and above all the power to decide over the distribution of resources is unevenly distributed.

The ‘relative deprivation’ in relation to identity politics in Yemen politics for example, relates to people forming groups identified by their perceived or lack of access to resources. For instance the Southern movement identifies itself by the portrayal of its deprivation of political power by the government of Saleh. It is this deprivation that creates identities and people begin competing for those deprived resources hence the existence of identity politics which creates problems for conflict resolution.

## **2.4 Conclusion**

The idea of identity in society is a socially constructed perception. Constructivism helped to explain how the world is socially constituted by individuals through their deeds, values, beliefs and history. The major premise was that identities are constituted socially through inter-subjective interaction, that agents and structures are mutually constituted, and that ideational factors such as norms, values and ideas generally are central to the constitution and dynamics of identity politics. Individuals learn about their identities through interactions with family, peers, organizations, media and other acquaintances they make in everyday life. Identity politics seek to protect the political self-determination of a specific community marginalized within its larger setting. Identity politics may at times come with peace for as long values are shared equally

within a society, but conflict ensues when these values differ in the same society. It is worth noting that every society is socially constructed around these values resulting in varied identities. As is discussed in chapter three, the ME region has a socially constructed complex and diversified identities whose societal values are mostly at odds with each other hence endless confrontation.

## **CHAPTER THREE: IDENTITY POLITICS IN THE MIDDLE EAST**

### **3.1 Introduction**

The complication and diversity of varied identities which individuals and groups hold in the ME are a result of the continual change and emerging of other identities, the ways in which the peoples of the region identify themselves, the groups to which they belong and the difference between self and other. Lewis (1999:163) traces identity problems in the ME to the Biblical times by arguing that, “The old contest between the nomadic herdsmen and peasants cultivators is a recurring melody in the ME history, and in many parts of the region the clash of interests between the two remains important at the present day, all dating back to Biblical history of Abel and Cain wherein Cain (tiller of ground) in anger and envy, rose up against his brother Abel (a shepherd) and slew him.” Indeed the region seems to be representing a clash of ‘relatives’ most probably pursuing differing goals and values as with the Israeli- Palestinian conflict over occupational identity, as well as between Shia Islam and Sunni Islam each vying for identity dominance. Lewis (Ibid) further argues that as cities grew in the ME region, complicated clashes of identities and allegiances rose, amidst the core and the periphery, and among sects of the city, seldom coalescing tribal, societal and occupational identities. This is the nature of identity politics in the ME, which tends to evolve progressively from ancient times in line with contemporary global developments, and in the process further complicating the already existing fragile situation.

The complexity of identities is further compounded by immigration of newcomers who create new minorities, and are widely dispersed in the region, differ ethnically, linguistically, culturally, religiously and often racially. Such migration naturally brings with its own conceptions and acuties of identity. This has resulted in the nature of identities in the ME becoming more complex and diverse, breeding conflicts that are difficult to resolve as they are embedded with identity politics.

### **3.2 Nature of Identities in the Middle East**

The society of the ME can be distinguished on the basis of their ethnicity, religion and national identity. For the purpose of this study, ME countries are Egypt, Saudi Arabia, Qatar, Yemen, Iran, Iraq, Bahrain, Kuwait, Turkey, United Arab Emirates, Syria, Jordan, Lebanon, Oman and



Israel, as well as Palestinian held territories. Ethnically, the Arabs constitute the majority of the ethnic groups in the region except in Iran where there are Persians, Turkic dominated Turkey and the Jewish dominated Israel. Another visible ethnic group is the Kurds who exist as minority groups in Syria, Turkey, Iran and Iraq. These ethnicities make clear identities in the ME and are often sources of both harmony and conflict in societal existence. For instance, the issue of being 'Arabs' often bind most of these Arab states hence they teamed up against the Jewish dominated Israel in in the so called 'Arab-Israeli wars' of 1948, 1956, 1967, 1973 and 1982, and they continue to have the same voice against Israel's stance on Palestinians. Meanwhile, the existence of some ethnic groups in the region such as the Kurds has created conflict amidst calls for sectarianism on the basis of identity as exemplified by the Kurdish struggle against the Turkish government.

Apart from ethnicity, the people of the ME are segregated by their religion. Islam is the main religion in the region except in Israel and Palestinian areas. Generally, the ME is evenly inhabited by Muslims, but this homogeneousness of religion disguises a number of significant peculiarities. Indeed, quite a number of identities are found within Islam. Most people in the region belong to Sunni divide of Islam. The Shia Islam is the majority religion in Iraq, Iran and Bahrain, and minority Shiites are also found in Lebanon, Kuwait and Yemen. Other smaller identities within Islam include the Alawites, the Druze, Ibadis, Ismailis, Houthi, Shafir and various Sufi orders (Gause 2014:5). Eighty two percent of the population in Israel practice Judaism whilst a small proportion in the same country practice Christianity (Hamdan and Pearson 2014:66), and Christianity is also practiced in Lebanon and Egypt. In this regard, it is apparent that there are various religious identities in the ME, a phenomenon that defines the region on 'kinship' systems aligned to religion. Kaarbo and Ray (2011:220) avow that fissures that exist between Sunnis and Shiites have its roots in the traditional contestation over the succession to Prophet Muhammad for the spiritual leadership. Despite some form of sectarianism, it is common that a Sunni of Saudi Arabia would view another Sunni elsewhere as a 'relative' in the same manner the Shia would view another Shia, hence the ME conflict normally attracts regional allies on religion basis. This is arguably true in Yemen where the Shiites gets support from fellow Shiites in Iran and on the other had the Sunnis are getting support from Saudi Arabian Sunnis.

The ME society is also discerned by their national identity such as being a Syrian, Egyptian and Iranian. Whilst ethnic and religious identities are central in the region, the people often have a strong sense of nationalism that is linked to their national identity. The people often place more emphasis on their country of origin than their ethnic or religious background. National pride is thus upheld to an extent that any challenge or form of disrespect would attract hostilities. But it is through this respect of national identity that the ME societies have managed to respect the territorial integrity and boundaries of each other, hence living in relative harmony. Conversely, Kumaraswamy (2006:63) argued that;

More than democratic deficit, most countries of the Middle East suffer from fundamental problem over their national identity. More than three-quarters of a century after the disintegration of the Ottoman Empire from which most of them emerged, these states have been unable to define, protect, and maintain national identity that is both inclusive and representative. None of the countries of the Middle East is homogeneous; they consist of numerous ethnic, religious, cultural, and linguistic minorities. Yet they have not succeeded in evolving a national identity that reflects their heterogeneity. Countries of the Middle East are internally diverse and, hence, a narrow exclusive national identity could not be imposed from above.

The ME is thus viewed as a region suffering from the incapability to identify, integrate and replicate its ethno-cultural diversity. Efforts to enforce an identity from above, be it ideological, religious, dynastical or power-centric have consistently been botched and often resulted in divisions and sectarian tensions. In fact, the mounting mania with identity, which is emblematic of domains where endorsed patriotism is failing to embody all social sectors, contributes to the advent of sectarian groups as new socio-cultural paradigms that signify a conceivable society.

Though not yet a big well pronounced in the masculine dominated ME, identity politics relating to gender is likely to come into the fray in the immediate future. Gender variances have often colossal societal and cultural inspiration on the development of behaviours and identities in any societal setting, and in the mannish subjugated ME they are only starting to have a political influence. Women remain marginalized in almost all aspects of the society in the ME with most of them denied formal employment, education and participation in politics. In fact, as Huntington (1991) argued, the ME region remains the world's authoritarian stronghold and has yet to experience a wave of democratization, and because of this, the basis of the economy has not produced social and economic development with modernism and democracy as favourable by-products. The lack of democratic practices in the ME has seen women relegated to households and to bear and take care of children. This situation is also likely to lead to conflict based on

gender identity in the region, a phenomenon likely to be influenced by developments in other regions as a result of globalisation and the call for gender equality.

### **3.3 Role of Identity Politics in Middle East Conflicts**

Identity politics in the ME has brought discern and conflicting values in the region. This has seen the region becoming continually unstable supporting Zweiri (2007:7) who avows that;

The Persian Gulf is a region where identity politics has come to dominate regional politics, with it being brought to attention through the political developments starting with the 1979 Iranian Revolution. The revolution would unleash identity politics across the Persian Gulf and set foundations for future assertion of identity politics in the region.

The Iranian Revolution of 1979 is viewed as an earthquake that provoked the Shiite identity and Saudi Arabia responded by awakening Sunnis. There arguably was reasonable harmony amongst the Arabs before the Iranian Revolution, and pronounced confrontation occurred later suggesting its influence on the awakening of identity politics in the region. Thus why the International Crisis Group (2003) also argued that the awakening of the Shiite society to assert their identity in the region was a result of the Najaf and Karbala taught clerics' politicization of the once dormant Shiite communities in the region, a segment of the social order which was disenfranchised in the socio-economic and political arena of the Persian Gulf. These sequels bred a perilous condition in the region for the Shiite avowal of religious identity would lead to an upsurge of political violence across the ME. However, it should also be noted that great powers' interests in the region, especially oil interests, have a great role in the ME instability. This means that the apportioning of identity politics as the sole cause of the region's instability would be an inaccurate gesticulation.

It is a truism that identity politics in the ME resulted in a clear confrontation between the Shiites and Sunnis, superintended by two countries, Iran and Saudi Arabia respectively. Gause (2014:1) argues that the best way to comprehend the politics of the ME is as a "Cold War amongst a number of regional players, both state and non-state actors," wherein Saudi Arabia and Iran are major players. The two countries are viewed as contesting for influence in the internal politics of the region. Sunni dominated regime of Saudi Arabia in which Salafism is the main defining feature of state identity, came into the fray by reconstructing a regional Sunni identity which views Shiism as its main enemy, meant to contain Iran's regional influence. Conversely, Iran succeeded to shape an influential support links with Shia movements in most countries in the

region especially in Yemen, Lebanon and Iraq. This Iranian steered multinational Shiism is in contest with the Saudi led transnational Sunnism, generating proxy wars in Iraq, Syria, Bahrain and Yemen. Gwite (2016), a former UN observer in Syria in 2012 noted that Assad's Alawites has roots to Shiites Iranians hence the support from Iran. The 2011 Bahrain 'Arab Spring' was a result of a call for reform and equality for the majority Shia population, with the majority demanding the downfall of the ruling family, a situation reflecting identity politics at play. Thus the ME 'Cold War' has a significant sectional element, but it cannot be precisely understood merely as a Shia-Sunni contest. It can be comprehended by appreciating the relations between domestic conflicts, transnational kinships, regional state drives, and even the international world that vies for oil reserves in the region.

Identity politics arguably has been and continue to be an issue and problem for Arab states in the ME. Litchtenheld (2015) asserts that that the labeling of people into distinct identities for the purposes of policy making has been the hallmark of political activity in the ME. It is in this vein that he asserts that the Turkish government has systematically been uprooting entire Kurdish villages in the country as a war tactic aimed at weakening the Kurdistan Workers Party (PKK). This view shared by Litchtenheld indicates that the underlying factor that determines the actions of the Turkish government is the classification of the Kurds as enemies of the state who need to be curtailed. Identities are seen to be playing a key role in this politicking taking place in Turkey. The Turkish –Kurdish crisis has all the seals of the Iranian -Kurdish, Iraqi- Kurdish and to some extent, the Syrian –Kurdish colleagues (Zweiri 2007:7). Morris (1994:11) also noted that;

Disparities in population growth along ethnic and religious lines have fundamentally altered political balances and the prospects for stability in the ME. Prominent examples include the steady erosion of the Maronite position in Lebanon in the face of growing Muslim population, the expanding and increasingly assertive Shiite population in smaller Gulf States, the relatively rapid growth of Kurdish community in Turkey, Iran and Iraq, and the high birth rates among Palestinian and Israeli Arabs. Demographic changes along these lines will continue to be a source of friction in the ME society as old political arrangements and ethnic compacts lose their relevance.

Zweiri (2007:7) further noted that identity politics was instrumental behind the 1975 Lebanese civil war with different ethnic and religious groupings demanding greater political rights and recognition in the overall political framework leading to inevitable collapse of the fragile political system in Lebanon. This creates situations whereby to resolve conflicts in the region would be a challenge. This however is a mere supposition based on the identities in the political

activity obtaining in the region but as alluded in the preceding paragraphs, there are also some aspects such as external influence that are behind the region's instability.

The issue of identities in the ME has bred some form of sectarian tension in the region. This is arguably as a result of the minority's exclusion in the socio-economic and political dispensation of most ME countries, as well as the imposition of state hegemony. In Syria, however, the majority Sunnis are allegedly secluded in the socio-economic and political arena of the country by the Alawite minority government hence tension ensued on ethnic lines. Jeong (2010:4) also argues that the imposition of state hegemony has provoked protracted struggles between governments and ethnic minorities in many parts ME. Sectarian calls by the Southerners and even the Houthi of Yemen is arguably a result of state hegemony by the then Saleh Government especially over the South, who later on felt disenfranchised since 1990. This saw tension becoming a protuberant feature in consolidating sectarian identities, exploiting feelings of abhorrence and victimhood, consolidating common borders and legitimizing Salafists extremists as activists of a group's identity and survivability. Exemplifying the existence of sectarian in the ME, Reese (2013:7) noted that

The first half of 2013 has demonstrated clearly that sectarian conflict is spreading in the Middle East. This conflict is a product of developments over the course of 2012, including Iraqi Prime Minister Nouri al-Maliki's consolidation of power and the development of an armed opposition movement in Syria. A turning point, however, came this year with the Syrian opposition's loss of the strategic town of al-Qusayr in early June to regime forces backed by Lebanese Hezbollah. The intervention of this prominent Shi'a militant group has heightened the "sectarianization" of the conflict. Sectarian narratives provide an emotional rallying point for popular mobilization, and are easily leveraged by actors involved in the conflict to achieve their goals. The rise in sectarian violence sponsored by external actors poses an existential threat to these already-fragile states.

The above extract aptly gives a clear indication of the existence of sectarian conflict as a result of various identities that exist in the ME. The media and social networks have capitalized on identity differences and are viewed as furthering sectarian solidarity especially on both Shia and Sunni sides. The role of external actors is also viewed to be complicating the situation in the ME. The conundrum that therefore exists is on how to resolve such conflict with issues of identity so much imbedded.

The issue of identity has also divided the region on the role of Islam. The Saudis, Muslim Brotherhood and its regional allies, Al Qaeda and its affiliates, the emergent Islamic State, and other Sunni groups are locked in a conflict over what the proper political role of Islam should be

in the Sunni world. Meanwhile, the Salafists resent any modern political systems imported from the West. Thus unsettled political prospects and the unremitting authority of Islam and chauvinism on the regional scene suggest a far less foreseeable and less affable atmosphere from the viewpoint of security collaboration.

### **3.4 Implications on Attempts at Conflict Resolution**

The in-group-out-group phenomena, based on identity, affect negotiation behavior in the ME, especially in terms of goal setting. Because of the cultural variability of individualistic and collective societies, there are always differences in goals. Brett (1998:8) contends that;

Individualists, because of their strong self-interests, set high personal goals in negotiation.... These goals motivate individualists to reject acceptable, but sub-optimal, agreements and continue to search among alternatives possible, agreements for one that best meet the individualists' self-interests. Because of their identification of in-groups, collectivists' goals should be aligned with their in-group goals. If the other negotiator is an in-group member, gradual alignment should generate cooperative behavior in negotiation, whereby parties search together for a mutually satisfying agreement. However, if the other negotiator is an out-group member, as is likely in any inter-cultural negotiation, goals are likely to be aligned and competitive behavior may ensue.

The ME region is faced with the problems of individualism and collectivism, both embedded in identity as Brett observed. The apparent issue is that if a conflict involves Sunnis, it is better mediated by the Sunni as opposed to the Shia, and vice versa. Clash of interests normally ensues when the mediator is an out-group. It should be noted that conflict typically arises because of incompatible personalities, beliefs or goal orientation and/or incompatible face work or relational management. This was perhaps demonstrated by the failure of both Kofi Anan and Lakhdar Brahimi in mediating the Syrian conflict in 2012. During the mediation process, the incompatibility of goals and the degree to which face issues were honoured or threatened dramatically impacted on conflict escalation and de-escalation between contending parties. Hamdan and Pearson (2014:78) summarise the problem by acknowledging that “the key to conflict resolution in the ME concerns a ‘clash of definitions and not clash of civilisations’ where each culture defines its enemies and co-existence with the preservation of differences and what Huntington conceived as a prescription of war.”

The identity umbrella of being ‘Muslim’ has led to the Arab countries to resent international efforts to resolve the region’s conflicts. It would appear that the internalisation process in the ME is a function of the psychological and physical proximity in which people grow. The

environment there provides and rewards intense inter-personal relationships and emphasizes mutual dependence on one's immediate and extended family, tribe or clan (Yousef 1982:231). Arabs seem to prefer regional settlement efforts to international mediation. For instance, the Arab League was involved in 48% Arab disputes, and only a third of Arab-Arab cases saw UN involvement (Ibid:90), a phenomenon that shows a propensity for pursuing regional resolutions to conflicts. Moreover, it would seem that the preference is for 'inside partial' mediation that remains in the 'family' in case of inter-Arab conflict. Lederch and Wehr (1996:48) observed that the conception of an 'insider partial' as contrasted to 'outsider neutral' that typify the 'emics' versus 'etics' approaches is essential in circumstances like those in the ME region. The UN adopted Resolutions 2042 and 2043 of 2012 on Syria failed to yield any meaningful results because the region does not respect international observers. This argument is valid in that the Syrian government was quick to accept regional observers at the expense of those from UN, but as former UN observer in Syria, Gwite (2016) noted the acceptance of Arab observers had some restrictions such that certain observers were not allowed access to certain areas, something that depicted acceptance by some form of 'identity politics' at play. This is perhaps why the mediation custom for Arab-Arab negotiations appear to have been small representatives and leaders mainly drawn from the region, paraphernalia that has not helped much in resolving conflicts in the region as these negotiators may lack the expertise or even become biased on identity lines.

The idea of 'us' and 'them' resulting from identities complicate any conflict resolution attempt in the ME. Conflict in the ME has often resulted in contesting parties looking for regional allies who share, in some way, their own political and ideological positions, with whom they feel some kinship on ideology and identity grounds. For instance, the Houthis of Yemen would prefer Iranian mediators whilst the Sunnis would prefer Saudi Arabian mediators, a phenomenon showing identity politics at play. This is perhaps why Hamdan and Pearson (2014:87) argued that a distinct pattern of inter-Arab disputes is that they reflect primarily matters of principle, ethnicity and identity politics and ideology as opposed to concrete interests involving territory or economic issues though ethnicity can intermix with these, but the primary pattern appears to show more emotive concerns in the Arab world. Considering that the ME countries prefer regional solutions to their problems, surely biases may not be discounted if anyone is appointed

mediator to any conflict with identity intricacies. Mr Brahimi, for example, failed to mediate the Syrian conflict in 2012 because of perceived bias attributed to some form of identity.

The issue of identity has hindered progress in resolving the ME region in general. But Gwite (2016) argues that the major hindrance to conflict resolution in the ME is to do with external influence, with the USA seeking to protect Israel from Arab menace and oil interests, and Russia seeking to further her influence in the region. The hand of external forces like the British and the Americans are indeed equally behind the complications to resolve the conflict, but it should be noted that that position of the Muslims towards Israel, and within their identity crisis, further complicate any resolution efforts. An example is the call for the extinction of the Israeli state by Iran which has forced Israel to embark on fortress democracy aimed at defeating the Muslim intentions. So, apart from fighting for national identity between Israel and Palestine, the issue of religious identity has implications in efforts to resolve the conflict.

### **3.5 Conclusion**

The ME region is awash with various identities and its politics embedded in it. The above discourse revealed that the peoples of the ME are distinguished by ethnicity, religion and national identity. Worth noting is that Islam is the major binding religion in the ME countries except in the Jewish dominated Israel and Palestinian occupied areas. Nonetheless, conflicting values embedded in identities has often resulted in many conflicts with countries allied on ethnic bases. Complicating any conflict resolution efforts in the ME is the Arabs belief that they are capable of resolving their own problems hence the failure of most UN sponsored conflict resolution efforts in the region. But within themselves emerge various conflicting identities with diverse interests and values that they can hardly agree on common issues. The roles of external actors, especially the great powers interests, are viewed to be further complicating any conflict resolution efforts. It is however viewed that the self-centeredness of the region and the fact that they value their various identities make any conflict resolution effort unbinding. In tandem, the big powers appear to be just capitalizing on these conflicting identities to further their interests, and indeed, faced with these, conflict resolution efforts in the region will remain a fiasco. As shall be discussed later, the situation in Yemen confirms the problem of identity politics well exploited by external actors in resolving conflicts in the ME region. Various identities, each with



its own external backing, are at conflict with each other baying for dominance over each other in the country that is viewed as one of the poorest countries of the ME.

## **CHAPTER FOUR: IDENTITY POLITICS AND CONFLICT RESOLUTION IN YEMEN**

### **4.1 Introduction**

Yemen's socio-political situation has been clouded by a myriad of problems since the unification of the North and the South in 1990. Despite the fact that the Yemenis are proud of, and respect their national identity, there are always quarrels and fighting within the country's society. Several conflict resolution attempts to end conflicts in the country achieved minimal results. To date, the country is still in a conflict situation causing several deaths and suffering, a situation that the UN has declared 'a humanitarian crisis.' The continued failure of the ME and its Arab League, as well as the international community to completely resolve the 'conflict situation' in Yemen requires some vetting. This chapter traces the socio-political situation of Yemen before and after the unification of the North and South in 1990. The chapter further endeavors to unearth the factors behind the unification and the identity politics that ensued later. Moreover, it unpacks the intricate relations that exist in Yemen society and their economy. Such any exploration effort helps to unearth the underlying facets that negate any conflict resolution exertions to end the crisis in the ME's poorest country.

### **4.2 The Socio-Political Situation in Yemen**

The country called Yemen today used to exist as two separate countries, which were Yemen Arab Republic (YAR) in the north, and the People's Democratic Republic of Yemen (PDRY) in the south, ruled by the Shiites and Sunnis respectively. Thus the two Republics used to exist on ethnic lines till their unification in 1990, a situation obviously shows different thinking, beliefs and values. The YAP and PDRY were also foreign controlled by the Ottoman Empire and Britain respectively hence the fate of modern Yemen appears to have its roots from such colonial legacy. In fact, the brawl for power in Yemen during the Ottoman Empire and British era seems to have left its mark in the country. The two countries divided Yemeni society into the Northerners and Southerners, Sunni and Shia, and even divided the tribes to become adversaries. The contemporary environment in the country seems to be drawn by the fragmentation produced in that historic period, Aden and the South, the North and the Imamate, the central region with Sanaa and its Shafiite neighbours, all appearing to be defined in terms of identity politics. Further complicating Yemen politics is that South Yemen had embraced Marxist Socialist system in their society before the unification. Thus Yemen's fate is a destiny decided by history

and one that continues to shape the reality of Yemen to this very day. For years Yemen has been embroiled in endless wars which exacerbate further divisions in the country, and any mediation efforts are mired by the politics of the North and South identities bred from the colonial times. The failure by conflict resolution strategists to end Yemen conflict appears to be a result of the inability to capitalise on the Yemeni society acceptance of their national identity and try to rub off 'other' forms of identity and the colonial legacy.

It should also be realized that the establishment of Yemen Arab Republic in 1962 marked the genesis of the state's embodiment of tribes, but tribal influence enhanced political instability of the system. In the South, small entities were ruled by Sultans, Sheiks and Princes resembling the North's rule on tribal lines. This then meant that the country was divided along tribal identities. Brigadier Syed Nazarat Bashir of Pakistan (2016) noted that although the central government tried to penetrate society and break the resistance of the tribes, it was the tribes and their leaders who effectively penetrated the state and were overwhelmingly represented in the bureaucracy, its army, legislature and executive bodies, and the political system as a whole. Influential tribes resist any attempt to create a strong state, and play significant roles in conflict resolution in the country as opposed to the central government (Ibid). Despite the fact that Yemenis have barely any qualm about their national identity, they resent a sovereign state. This is engrained in the failure by both the YAR and PDRY to integrate tribes in the political systems in a way that generates their acceptance of a sovereign state. As noted by Gwite (2016), in present-day Yemen, the tribe-state relationships are branded by a tribal acuity that splits national identity from the conception of sovereign state, and an estrangement of tribesmen from their tribal leaders who exercise political power in the centre. This socio-political situation has bred several conflicts in the country wherein tribes often demand punishment by death for anyone who wrong another person from another tribe. This has resulted in the emergence of tribal identity pooled with a self-preservation tendency in Yemen conflicts years after the unification. The non-inclusive government forced heterogeneous tribes to pursue their interests and power complicating conflict resolution efforts. The fragile situation has seen the social construction of many ethnic groups engaging in conflict in what Hobbes termed 'war against all' situation. The failure to acknowledge all tribal aspirations in resolving the country's conflict appears to have had a negative mark on all conflict resolution strategies.

As already alluded to above, YAR and PDRY then merged in 1990 to create the Republic of Yemen. The discovery of oil deposits between the borders of the two countries goaded interest in developing pacts to exploit resources for the better of both countries' economies. Thus in 1988, the two countries concluded an agreement to demilitarize and exploit the common oil deposits that were discovered in 1984. The collapse of the Soviet Union, the key sponsor of Socialist South Yemen, as well as the termination of Saudi aid to North Yemen were determining factors in a drive towards unification. However, the unification was under some fragile agreement punctuated by some seemingly identity politics within Islam. Dresch (2000:1) observed that;

Much of Yemen's history through the 20<sup>th</sup> century connects with efforts to form that state, which was finally established in 1990. Before that there were two states, the North and the South, with their capitals at Sanaa and at Eden respectively, each with its view of the country's past and future, and in the years around 1900 there were myriad little centers of power, hence myriad different historic, were there space to give them, and a few great claimants, two of which were foreign empires.

The apparent socio-political dispensations presented by Dresch are rooted in regional locations in Yemen, the North and the South, whose societies had differing values and beliefs about the future of their respective countries. In spite of them being bound by religion and national identity, the country faced a myriad of serious political, social and economic challenges entrenched in 'regional identities' few years after the unification. This resulted in a bloody civil war of 1994 between the Shia dominated government and the Sunni Southerners whose 'identity' felt disenfranchised, and attempted unsuccessfully to reverse the unification. From the outset of the unification, Southerners complained about being disenfranchised on key posts and protested against the islamisation imposed from the North. The embracing of the Sharia as the only source of legislation, the authorization of polygamy and resurgence of tribalism gave rise to social upheavals in the South, which had been under Marxist system for a long time. The conflict was then ignited by the discovery of oil in the South, wherein, the former Southern leaders, influenced by Saudi Arabia, decided to undermine the unity and called for secession.

The response to the 1994 conflict was the Pledge and Accord signed in Amman, Jordan, in 1994, which was a conciliation agreement to resolve the impasse between Yemen's Socialist Party (YSP) and then President Saleh's General People's Congress (GPC). Day (2012:127) observed that the Pledge and Accord was the first and final attempt at a constructive solution to Yemen's unity problems. The document was meant to resolve the problem of central-local government

relations, and members of a burgeoning civil society came close with the document (Ibid: 127). Thus the document was mainly aimed at averting the collapse of the national unity. However, the agreement would not last as less than two months after it's signing, Yemen plunged into a civil war between the Northerners and Southerners, revealing some form of regional identity conflict. The Pledge and Accord agreement appeared to have negated the consideration of the historical specificities of the social constructions and unifications that make up the societal structure of present Yemen, hence its failure.

#### **4.2.1 Identities and Interests in Yemen**

Yemen societal identities and the politics within them are defined in terms of the various groups that pursue divergent interests, values and beliefs. The self-identifying groups in Yemen are Zaydi Shiite and their offshoot Houthis, mainstream Sunni, Ismaili, and Salafi black. The Hirak Movement, also known as the Southern Separatist Movement, the Muslim Brotherhood and Islah are also part of identities that exist in Yemen. Also part of the fray are Al Qaeda, and Islamic State movement, which announced its presence in November 2014 and claimed responsibility for the 20 March 2014 attacks that killed 140 worshippers at Zaydi mosques in Sanaa. Bassam (2016) of Saudi Arabia claimed that the Houthis were an offshoot of Shiites, often called Ansar Allah or Partisans of God, who has allegiance to Zaydism. Bassam (Ibid) further confirmed that the Shiites are the minority who ruled North Yemen under a system known as the Imamate till 1962, and have been opposed by the majority Sunnis from the South. These identities pursue different ideologies, values and interests in the country resulting in conflicts. The resultant conflicts are socio-economic and political related with different identities clamoring for dominance over others, and/or complaining about exclusion in these fields of life. It should however be noted that the struggle in the socio-political and economic arena is a result of the self-identifying groups in Yemeni society, which vie for dominance over each other. The failure of the central government to build a nation that accommodates interests of all identities is complicating conflict resolution strategies in the country, and the struggles continue to date.

The overlap of geographic and religious divisions, especially in the predominance of Zaydis (Shiites) in the Northern highlands and Shafais (Sunnis) in the Central, Southern and Western parts, amplifies and complicates the conflict. Whilst the Zaydis-Shafais differences were less marked in Yemen than those between the Shiites and Sunnis elsewhere in the region, their long

history of coexistence started to break down in the mid-1990s. Further complicating identities in Yemen is the existence of ‘other smaller identities’ within the bigger identity groups. These include the Houthis, often referred to as ‘Twelvers,’ meaning the predominant Shiite branch, and Houthis often refer to their enemies broadly as ‘Takfiris’ meaning Muslims who accuse other Muslims of being unbelievers, conflating Islah, which include the Yemen branch of Muslim Brotherhood, with Al Qaeda and the Islamic State (International Crisis Group 2015:5). Houthis are then criticised of intending to reinstate, by force, a theocracy reminiscent to the Zaydi Imamate of Yemen’s past, and there are also claims that the group has turned away from their Zaydi roots towards Twelver Shiism, to which Iran’s Shiites adhere and thus are serving Iranian programme (Ibid:5). This shows some mounting obsession with identity in Yemen, which is characteristic of domains where official nationalism has failed to embody all social segments, a scenario that contributes to the emergence of sectarian groups as new socio-cultural constructs that represent an imaginable community. Such obsession appears to be hindering any conflict resolution effort as different identities either abscond or refuse to abide by agreements sighting certain irregularities alleged to be affecting them. The Aljazeera (2016) reported that the UN organised April 2016 talks in Kuwait to end Yemen conflict were unprogressive as the Houthis alleged several irregularities, and failure to recognize some of their demands. Meanwhile, other identities such as the Al Qaeda, some Southern Separatists elements and the Islamic State, were not represented and fighting continued throughout the period of talks. Such failure of the international body to consider the reality of Yemen situation, that include the rise of sectarianism and regionalism retards prospects for peace in the country.

Yemen identity groups appear to be historically based and relates to the existence of strong tribes. The citizens are varied, with loyalty to the centuries-old community well-known as the Al-Zaydi existing alongside that of the Shafiite Sunnah. Cascading from community loyalty, tribal structure strongly dominates society and appears whenever power calls. Manea (1996:205) noted that as with any ME country, the tribe is the key social unit in Yemen. The Himiar and the Madhhij tribes are the most dominant tribes of the fertile South whilst the Hashid and Bakil tribes dominate the less fertile North of Yemen (Dresch 1994:37). So within Yemen society, whether Sunni or Shiite, tribalism defines individual identities most. The belief in tribalism and their supremacy is complicating efforts to have an effective central government. Colonel Bassam (2016) claimed that the belief that a modern state would develop in Yemen remained a myth as

the country, along with its armed force relapsed to tribal power. A tribal conflict then seems to be the order of the day, redolent of the old Yemen, well confirmed by Dresch (2000:2) who noted that ethnic violence has been common in Yemen since the founding of the modern state nearly hundred years ago. Philips (2009:72) also noted that in the tribal areas, particularly the Marib, Al-Yawf and Shabwah governorates, revenge killings on identity basis have led to cycles of inter-violence. Meanwhile, Saleh's rule saw political power coalesced around his family, who held key appointments in key areas of government. What then becomes clear from this is that conflicts in Yemen belong to a complex history, with familial and political dimensions. This may translate that conflict resolution efforts for Yemen should incorporate history and familial interests for them to succeed. The sectarian magnitude of the conflict suggests that religious leaders should be at the forefront of promoting tolerance and forgiveness. This is so since the fight in Yemen, albeit it involving many actors, is basically Sunni-Shiite conflict and thus polarized between good and sinful, and faith based narratives appears to continue convincing the society.

Yemen's societal structure is characterised by the desire by different identities to be self-governing. The desire for political autonomy from a central power is a key component of Yemen's tribal systems and the conceptions of honour integral to it (Caton 1990:32). The Al Qaeda and the Yemeni government both have ambitions that clash with those of Yemen tribes. The Al Qaeda of the Arabian Peninsula (AQAP) demonstrated a political sophistication focusing on government's injustices and tribes' need for autonomy and attaching local Yemeni grievances and cultural sensitivities to its mandate. Nonetheless, AQAP political culture of intending to create an Islamic caliphate and its outsider status are at odds with the tribes' desire to maintain a level of local autonomy. The Somalia conflict presents an example where the conflict between Al Qaeda's internationalized ideology and local tribes' demand for independence undermined jihads in the early 1990s. The Southerners resent what they perceive as continued Northern domination of the political scene, and in addition, North-South cleavages based on religious sectarian differences, political rivalries, and disputes over sharing of oil revenue, continue to cripple peace efforts in the country. What is presented here suggests that Yemen society embraces varied identity groups of people pursuing different interests, and it is the clash of these interests that complicates unity and peace. This complex situation may require a political settlement that includes traditional leaders in the balance of power sharing, otherwise the country

will continue facing multifarious regional and international conflict resolution strategies that do not work.

Conflicts in Yemen are further complicated by the existence of some global terror groups that have taken advantage of the fragile situation and base in the country. Prados and Sharp (2007) noted that Yemen is considered one of the global bases of Al Qaeda whose Al Qaeda joined with those of Saudi Arabia to form AQAP. Whilst the Houthi-Hadi rift is of cause the most explosive, but as already noted, there are other groups which are not only dedicated to destroy the Houthis whom they view as Shiite infidels, but also attacking the state and seizing territory. The Zimbabwe Herald Newspaper dated 14 March 2016, confirmed that Islamists militants from Al Qaeda and Islamic State were exploiting the conflict to expand their control, especially in areas where the Saudi backed President Abd-Rabbu Mansour Hadi's supporters had managed to expel the Iran backed Houthis. The Zimbabwean newspaper revealed the existence of a combination of Al Qaeda elements and the Islamic militants taking advantage of the confused situation in the country to expand their control at the expense of government efforts to defeat the Houthis. These terror actors would thrive to exacerbate conflict in the country for them to have a safe haven from which they operate like 'fish in water' within their kin identities. The terror groups obviously complicate any conflict resolution efforts in Yemen as they vie to perpetuate conflict and normally would not be part to any peace negotiations. The failure by the international community, Arab League and Yemen government to have one voice to condemn terror groups in Yemen, like the Al Qaeda and the Islamic State would mean their prolonged existence in the country, especially that they are well accommodated by their fellow identities.

The period 1990 to 2015 saw the position of the armed forces becoming problematic in Yemen conflict. Sajid (2016) of Saudi Arabian navy noted that even Yemen security forces had riven allegiances with some supporting deposed President Hadi, and the others the Houthis and Mr Hadi's predecessor Ali Abdullah Saleh, who remained politically influential, signifying deep rooted identity politics within every sector of the country. Sajid (2016) also noted that in Yemen, just as was in Saddam Hussein's Iraq, and most Arab governments, the problem of identities starts with the apparatus of the central government, including the armed force, a situation that encourages corruption and exclusionism. The armed forces then appeared to present yet another problematic identity in the country with its elements divided on ethnic or tribal lines. The



scenario has placed the country in a difficult conflict situation whose conflict resolution efforts have remained in limbo. The government's failure to professionalise Yemen armed force has ripple effects for the country's conflict resolution strategies as different armed groups are likely to continue fighting in the face of peace talks. Any future peace truce should ensure complete disarmament of the militia and the professionalising of the armed force through training.

### **4.3 Socio-Economic Dilemma in Yemen**

The socio-economic dispensation of Yemen tends to divide the community into distinct identities which can broadly be viewed as the Northerners and Southerners. The Shia dominated North is generally infertile whilst the Sunni dominated South is very fertile for agricultural purposes. The resultant regional identity politics of being the Northerner and Southerner was behind the attempt to reverse the 1990 unification of North and South Yemen in 1994. The unification project failed to materialize its goals against the backdrop of underdevelopment, poverty, unemployment, the absence of justice and tribal influence, all of them persisting as the state's biggest dilemmas and reasons behind its ongoing tensions. As already alluded, the Southerners claimed that they were disadvantaged in every aspect of their lives by the Northerners and attempted to reverse the unification resulting in a bloody conflict of 1994. Meanwhile, the waning role of the state deprived these territories from the economic base, and given that because of the relative infertility of the land in the North, agriculture was not an available preference. As a result, war was the new tool to extract resources for residents of these areas, and in doing so they resorted to their tribal origins for protection. This appears to suggest that conflict in Yemen is rooted in economic problems, which indeed is true, but such economic woes are linked to the desire by each identity to benefit at the expense of others. The prospects for developing the infertile northern part of Yemen should help in future conflict resolution strategies.

Southerners resent what they view as Northern political, economic and cultural domination of the country. The Southern governorates unrest intensified in 2007 with demonstrations against the central government over political and economic marginalization of the South by the Shia dominated government. The Southerners demanded equality, decentralization and greater share of state welfare. Allegations of the central government selling southern fertile land to the Shia northerners with links to the regime, as well as the disproportionate benefit of southern oil revenue took centre stage. There were also claims that commerce in the once viable and liberal

port city of Aden had been neglected as most business was now conducted in the capital Sanaa (Sharp 2015:10). Such complains would eventually lead to unrest in the country. In this respect, it was clear that the country was ruled on identity lines and there was a clear negation of the demands of other identities. Such a failure to manage all identities results in the persisting conflict in Yemen. Gurr (2000:278) advocated for a

...regime of managed ethnic heterogeneity” which includes a recognition of the rights of minority peoples and right of ethnic groups to have some degree of autonomy within states, democratization that institutionalizes these rights, and an increasingly accepted “principle that disputes between communal groups and states are best settled by negotiation and mutual accommodation.

But for Yemen, the weak regime could not manage the various identities hence conflict persists. As a result, the heterogeneous society broke into several identities each with varied values and beliefs.

The economic base of Yemen is generally feeble and depends largely on foreign aid and income from oil which is nippily running out. The period 1990-2015 saw Yemen faced with limited natural resources, a crippling illiteracy rate, and high population growth, and hence an assortment of scary developmental challenges. Her paucity was further aggravated by the multiplying of its population over the last years. Following the advent of oil in the Gulf, Yemen become became an oil producer in mid 1980s, but royalties from oil production were used by the government to buy tribal royalties, expand Yemen’s bureaucracy with patronage jobs, and depress energy prices (Salisbury 2011). Revenue from hydrogen production accounted for nearly all Yemen’s export and up to 50% of government revenue (Ibid). However, the Shia dominated government, which was also based on then President Saleh’s family, could hardly distribute these resources to the heterogeneous Yemeni society equitably. Consequently, Yemen’s main oil export pipeline, called the Marib, and the natural gas pipeline were frequently attacked by independent tribesmen and tribes who felt alienated from the resource by the central government. As a result, a tribesmen conflict, reminiscent of the Somali ‘warlord’ system, which has seen the country ruled on warlord or tribal basis, crippled into Yemen, and conflict resolution efforts remain a nightmare. Prospects for peace under such an environment remain blurred unless the central government defies corruption and attempt to address resources distribution to benefit the whole identity divide.

Yemen agricultural development was ruined by water shortages, political strife, and lack of investment, making the country dependent on food imports for almost all staples. Critical safe water shortages often attracted demonstrations against the government which was alleged to be favouring the capital Sanaa at the expense of the rest of population. Apparently, Yemen ground water reserves were being exhausted due to the cultivation of 'gat,' a stimulant plant chewed throughout the country and the Horn of Africa (Sharp 2015:23). These shortages gave room for people to identify with their tribes and form groups that would fight for their survival and autonomy. The conundrum then would revolve on the feasibility of consenting these various identities to a one system of governance, hence persisting problems in resolving Yemen conflict. The continued water problem remains the source of conflict in the country as different groups continue to fight for the scarce resource, a situation that is likely to be capitalized by regional identities to perpetuate conflict in the country. Peace prospects should aim at creating a political environment that would attract investors, international aid and create an all-inclusive government that accommodates all groups' interests.

Yemen's development is hindered by insecurity, large scale transposition, a weak government, corruption, resource depletion and poor infrastructure. The country's poor economic base forces its citizens to look for employment in neighbouring Gulf States especially in the rich oil industry of Saudi Arabia. This has helped to ease employment problems in Yemen, as well as bringing in some revenue in the country, through a concept that can be referred to as the 'migratory bird.' However, Sharp (2015 :21) noted that Yemen's support of Iraq during Operation Desert Storm in 1991 crippled the country economically as Saudi Arabia and other Gulf States expelled an estimated 850 000 expatriate Yemeni workers, and the USA also cut off ties with the country. This situation created problems in the country and also bred tense relations with regional countries. This would manifest into a regional Sunni-Shia divide with most Sunni ruled countries such as Saudi Arabia supporting Yemeni Sunnis against the Iran backed Shias suggesting the regionalization of identity conflict. The puzzle in this matrix would then revolve around the identification of a suitable mediator to end Yemeni conflict considering that the region is divided into 'identities,' hence unending conflicts in the country. The broad solution would probably to encourage foreign and local investment to promote economic recovery and employment creation. Moreover, the creation of employment would go a long way to stymie militia recruitments.

#### **4.4 Role of External Actors**

Attempts to resolve conflicts in Yemen are often muddled by external actors. External actors act either on kinship basis or for national interests. The USA oil interests in the region, as well as her desire to protect Israel from Islamic menace, especially from Iran, has forced her to be involved in support of the Saudi Arabia backed Sunni regime in Yemen. Acting under the guise of trying to prevent the spread of Al Qaeda, The USA has trained and equipped the anti-Houthi coalition in addition to air and drone attacks in the country. This has resulted in the Saudi backed Sunni to be identified with the USA and the Houthi to Iran and possibly Russia. This perhaps explains why the 2011 USA backed Gulf Cooperation Council (GCC) peace truce in the country failed as parties to the conflict felt that there could be some bias. The international community thus should ensure a combination of the East and West in efforts to resolve Yemen conflict, as the participation of one big power would be seen as favoring one group.

The Yemeni war now appears to be some ‘proxy’ pitting Saudi Arabia and Iran supporting the Yemeni government and Houthis respectively, all embedded in kinship. The Saudi Arabian government is Sunni dominated whilst the Iranian government is Shia dominated hence the respective support of different groups in Yemen. Saudi Arabia Sunni support in Yemen was amplified when the Saudi Arabia led coalition launched ‘Operation Decisive Storm’ that brought widespread bombardment, a ground, sea and air blockade of Yemen, and the arming of groups opposed to the Iran backed Houthis. The Saudi Arabian coalition includes almost all the countries in the GCC, except Oman. Sudan also came as part of the Saudi Arabian coalition on kinship basis as most of its population is Sunni. On the other hand, Iran backs the Shia Houthis and other anti-Sunni movements in the region such as the Hezbollah and President Assad’s Syrian Alawites. These relationships have dented attempts in resolving Yemen conflict. Maeresera (2016) avowed that it was pertinent for the international community to have a full understanding of these dynamics and actors involved in Yemen conflict, otherwise the country risks to remain in a state of conflict and a tenacious humanitarian catastrophe.

Penurious but strategically important, the wrangle for power in Yemen has solemn implications for the ME region. Bassam (2016) observed that the strategic position of Yemen’s Bab al-Mandab Strait that links Red Sea with the Gulf of Eden draws in other external actors that would otherwise be not involved in the conflict. Egypt and the USA, which are key allies to Saudi

Arabia, are afraid that Houthi control of Yemen would threaten unrestricted channel through the strait (Ibid). Hence Egypt, which is Sunni related, comes in on the side of Saudi Arabia in Yemen conflict. Muslim fundamentalists such as the Al Qaeda, Islamic State and Muslim Brotherhood also take advantage of the fragile situation to complicate the conflict in Yemen. In this case, both interests and the notion of identity come into play. The presence of various external actors with kith and kin, as well as economic interests in Yemen derails efforts to end the conflict. These become ‘spoilers’ to Yemen’s conflict resolution efforts to ensure that their interests are attained. So within Yemen exists Steadman’s (1997:6) concept of ‘spoilers’ whom he describes as “those actors who actively seek to hinder, delay, or undermine conflict settlement” for a range of reasons through a variety of methods affect conflict resolution efforts in Yemen. But indeed many of these spoilers are embedded with the politics of identity to the tribes of Yemen.

#### **4.5 Challenges to Conflict Resolution**

The non-existence of a central judicial system present a major challenge for Yemen to effect any conflict resolution strategy as no legal mechanisms are in place. Gaston and al-Dawsari (2014) asserts that “traditional or customary dispute resolution particularly tribal dispute resolution has long been prevalent in Yemen. Official statistics are scarce, but an estimated 80 plus percent of Yemenis resolve disputes from an individual murder to a tribal blood feud to a dispute over land or property to a car accident outside the formal justice system”. It is important to note that the assertions given by the above author indicate that traditionally Yemen has never had a sound centralized conflict resolution mechanism and local leadership has always played a key role. If one is to focus on the massive national conflict that engulfed the nation when violent protesters were protesting against the then incumbent President Ali Abdullah Saleh in 2011, no central judiciary was in place to deal with perpetrators so that the conflict would be resolved. This may have been the reason why the government decided to crack down on the protesters especially the Southern Movement. It can thus be concluded there was a direct relationship between traditional conflict resolution mechanisms and the complexity in resolving the impasse between the then incumbent President Saleh and the Southern Movement as well as the al-Houthi rebels. The government was supposed to have a comprehensive transitional justice plan by forming a specialized legal body that considers all previous conflicts fairly.

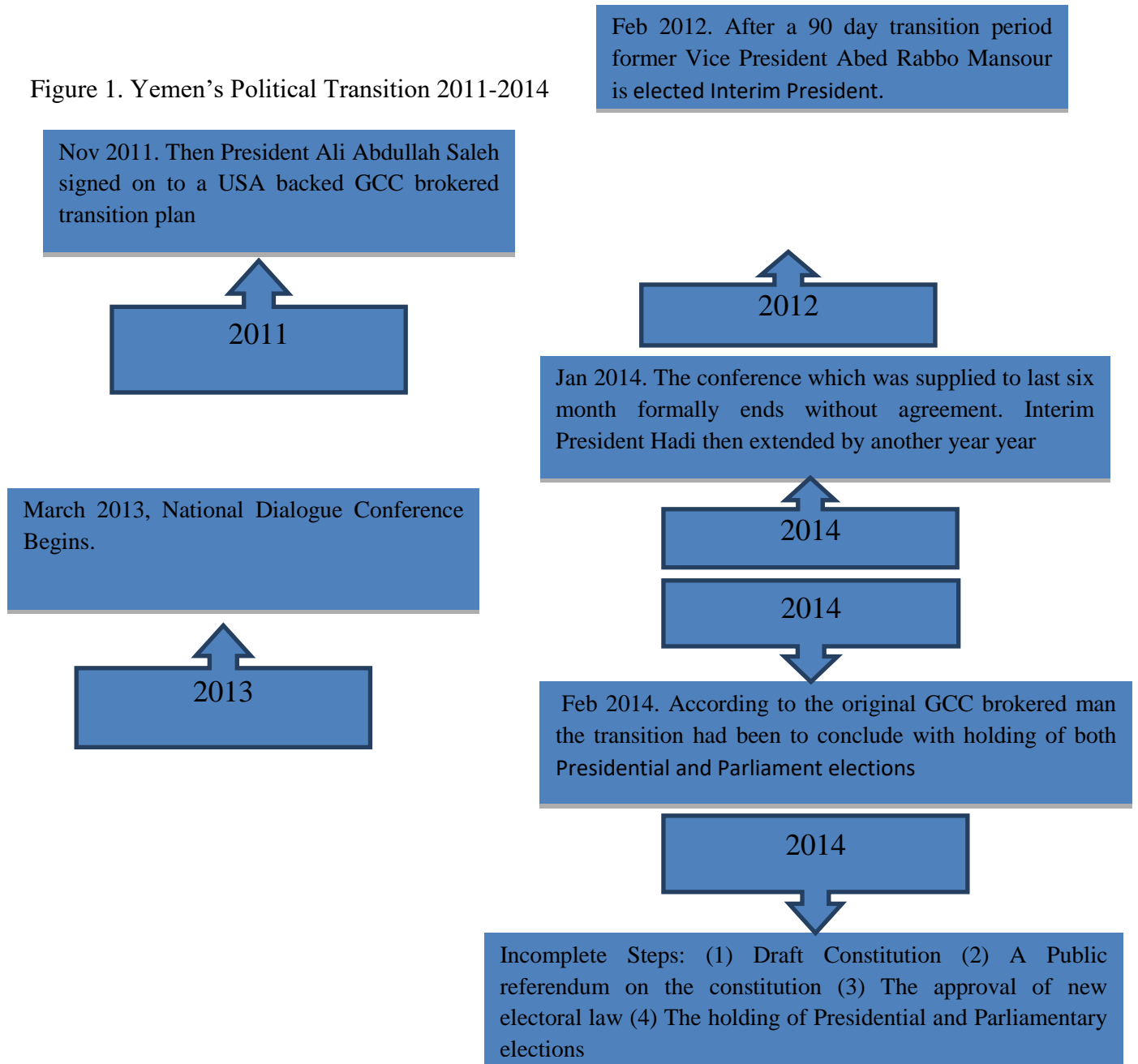
What appears to be holding in Yemen is that dispute resolution is the continuation of politics by other means. Conflict resolution is tightly connected to the political authority of a sheik, local community leader or leader of an armed group. After the unification, armed actors becoming more dominant, including in dispute resolution. The ability to mediate conflicts or resolve disputes stems from and reinforces existing political or military control. Citizens turn to prominent local armed groups, sheiks, armed factions of political parties, locally supported groups, and other power brokers, for dispute resolution because they are able to enforce decisions. Local religious leaders frequently act as mediators rather than arbitrators, bringing conflict parties together and persuading them to go through a dispute resolution process. Gaston and Al Dawsari (2014:11) also noted that “the security vacuum in many areas also gave an even more breathing space to criminal, terrorist, and other armed groups who often challenge or intimidate local leaders...the political uncertainty and security vulnerability make traditional patterns of authority more open to challenge and more likely to fluctuate.” The aspect of having traditional leaders presiding over disputes shows a strong belief in traditional ways of legal justice, yet the country should move forward with developments in the global community. This scenario encourages tribal revenges and favoritism in resolving conflict on identity basis. A centralized legal system that incorporates every identity would help resolve such a cumbersome and confusing way of resolving disputes.

A state sponsored patronage system distorted Yemen’s traditional mechanisms of dispute resolution and resource distribution since the advent of oil in the 1980s. Dresch (1995:2) noted that tribal sheiks are the pillars in both the traditional and patronage systems, although in the latter the regime detaches them from their communities by offering wealth and status in exchange for political acquiescence. This has resulted in the rapid centralization of the political systems, which was built on the state’s capacity to distribute oil wealth to those it deems politically relevant (Caton 2005:331). The patronage system has eroded many Yemen’s tribal codes and norms, helping to create a vacuum where there is no clear alternative to the current patterns of leadership and in which entrepreneurial radicals such as the AQAP have greater room to maneuver (Philips 2008:97). Resultantly the patronage system has affected even traditional dispute resolving, which may act as building block for a national conflict resolution stratum.

Since 2004, President Saleh's regime had subjected the Houthis to six brutal wars until the Arab Spring inspired uprising of 2011, which forced him to depart leaving the government weakened. The GCC initiative of 2011, part of the Arab Spring developments, sought to address the problems in Yemen and ensure peaceful transfer of power within the country. This led to the presidential elections of 2012 and the installment of Abd Rabbuh Mansour Hadi as interim president. However, confidence for progress and stability arising from Yemen's 2011-2012 political transition were eroded during the period 2014-15 with the Houthis reverting to war. Prior to that Yemen was viewed as a model of Arab Spring success managing to bring all political factions together to reach a political solution. In 2014 the UN backed National Dialogue Conference (NDC) meant at arriving at a new political order was concluded without any agreement between the northern and southern politicians on the governance of the new federal nation. The UN envoy Jamal Benomar, tried to reconcile those who had never agreed to the division of roles within the state as much as they had agreed on the display of power to one another and to their external allies, but this was all to no avail, until his resignation in 2014. As a result, tensions reminiscent of those that existed before the 1990 unification appeared as a result of a number of political and identity based differences. As Maeresera (2016) noted, it was crucial that those behind efforts to resolve the conflict should have understood the dynamics of identity politics in the conflict to reach a settlement.

The September 2014 taking over of the Capital Sanaa by the Houthis then forced a UN brokered peace deal, the Peace and Partnership Agreement (PNPA), meant to create a new cabinet and the appointment of a new Prime Minister. But all was to no avail since tension soon ensued between the Houthis and government leading to the house arrest of the prime minister and government officials, amidst abduction of some including the Chief of Staff and General Secretary of National Dialogue Conference Dr Ahmed Awadh Bin Mubarak. The subsequent control of Aden then forced President Hadi to flee house arrest and established a government in exile in Saudi Arabia, where his fellow Sunnis were in governance. What pertained in Yemen is redolent to the development of an armed force in Syria aimed at removing President Assad from power as similarly, the Popular Resistance and the Houthis in Yemen which successfully removed Ali Abdullah Saleh from power, the Houthis managing to force President Abdabbuh Mansour Hadi to go in exile, had all of this has the imprints of identity politics. A summary of efforts to resolve Yemen conflict since 2011 to 2014 is shown at figure 1 below.

Figure 1. Yemen's Political Transition 2011-2014



Adopted from Sharp (2015: 25)

Figure 1 above shows efforts to resolve Yemen conflict by the USA and the UN during period 2011-2014. The resolution strategies could not achieve the intended results of a lasting peace because of the perceived bias of the USA towards the Houthis. The UN was well placed to ensure peace prevails but it would appear that the international body failed to embrace the



interests of all parties involved especially the Houthi identity that sought autonomy and resources access into the South. The Houthis had a soft sport to President Saleh because he was Shia, despite that they were involved in his deposing during the Arab Spring of 2011, and Sunnis back their fellow Sunni deposed President Hadi, signifying identity politics. The Houthis could hardly accept the leadership of the Sunni and vice versa hence the peace process failed because of the politics of identity that are strongly embedded in the politics of Yemen.

From the above, it would appear that conflict in Yemen is a result of the inability to capitalize on the Yemeni national identity, and failing to realise that the ‘whole is greater than the sum of its parts.’ In view of these, Yemen challenges to conflict resolution attempts ought to be part and parcel of a regional settlement that creates equality of independence for all people of various identities and states in order to assure an opening towards gentle, integrationist and objective regional stability. At the same time, though Yemen is indeed part of a delicate regional equation, it also possesses specificities of its own, meaning that real solution for Yemen can only be conceived from within the Yemeni womb rather than outside.

#### **4.6 Conclusion**

The country called Yemen is characterized by civil war and economic failure. Yemen has various groups that constitute it all with divergent interests, values and beliefs which is where the conflict begins. Various identity groups contest for recognition, power and autonomy resulting in endless conflicts. A central government cannot represent the interests of these groups equally. Efforts to end conflicts are normally hindered by these identity groups which resent the authority of other groups within the same society. Complicating conflict resolution efforts also are various tribes that happen to be more powerful than the central government. In fact, all identities in Yemen are opposed to the concept of central government. The fight for resources and alleged inequality in the socio-political field is also on identity lines. The situation is further made complex by the role of external actors in the conflict which support various groups on kinship basis respectively. This places regional conflict resolution strategies in Yemen in a quagmire as finding a neutral mediator proved difficult. As a result efforts by both the ME region and the UN to resolve the conflict in Yemen were to no avail, because the identities of being Northerners and Southerners, Sunni and Shia complicated these efforts, and conflict continues to date.

## **CHAPTER FIVE: SUMMARY OF FINDINGS, CONCLUSIONS AND RECOMMENDATIONS**

### **5.1 Introduction**

The contributions of identity politics to the failure of conflict resolution strategies in the ME and Yemen in particular is incontrovertible. This chapter summaries the findings and conclusions obtained during the study of the role of identity politics in conflict resolution strategies. Recommendations are then proffered for possible improvements in efforts to resolve conflicts wherein identity politics are entrenched.

### **5.2 Summary of the Study**

#### **5.2.1 Purpose of the Study**

The issue of identity politics appears to be a conundrum in conflict resolution attempts in most less developed countries, the ME region inclusive. In these countries, rifts persist amongst regimes, tribes and religious groups, indeed a phenomenon that retards conflict resolution efforts. The general mention of identity politics in the ME region invokes the Shia- Sunni rift but surely these could not be the only one. It would indeed appear that, in addition, other identities are in the puzzle in the ME and in Yemen in particular. The Al Qaeda, Islamic State and a strong tribal divide appear to be behind conflict resolution difficulties in Yemen. The South –North rift that existed before the 1990 unification created regional identities that remain skeptical about each other. There is a Shia-Sunni fight, fight between the state and Houthis, separatists unrest in the South, attacks by Al Qaeda and power struggles between tribal and military factions, a situation that may indicate an ethno-identity conflict. Several conflict resolutions to achieve peace in the country were always short-lived arguably because of an identity politics gap which is negated in the conflict resolution strategies. Thus the purpose of this study was to establish the role of identity politics in conflict resolution with the bias towards the ME and Yemen in particular.

#### **5.2.2 Restatement of the Objectives**

This study explored the puzzle exhibited by identity politics in the ME and Yemen in particular by;

- Ascertaining how identity politics generates complicated conflicts in society;

- Establishing the nature of identity politics in the ME and how it impacts on attempts to resolve conflicts in the region; and
- Examining the nexus between identity politics and conflict in Yemen.
- Recommending the measures to resolve conflict in Yemen so embedded in identity politics.

### **5.2.3 Restatement of the Research Questions**

The primary question for this study was; using the case of Yemen, to what extent does identity politics presents itself as an obstacle to resolution of conflicts in the country?

The secondary questions were;

- What is identity politics?
- How does identity politics affect societies in conflict?
- What are the identities that dominate politics in the ME region?
- How do these identities play in regional conflicts?
- Are identity politics an issue that complicates previous and current attempts for conflict resolution in the ME?
- What are the identities in Yemen?
- What has been the role of identity politics in sparking and perpetuating conflicts in Yemen?
- What identity considerations among the prominent groups are complicating resolution efforts?

### **5.2.4 Restatement of the Research Design**

The study used a case study design in guiding the research. The tools used for gathering data were in depth interviews with key informants and documentary search. Both the snowball and purposive sampling techniques were used for choosing respondents. Books were used for identifying the nature of identities in the ME region, electronic journals and media reports were used to gather contemporary conflict resolution strategies in Yemen as well as to gain knowledge of the nature of conflict. The study used both content and thematic analysis for both key

informants and in depth interviews. The information was then presented using evolving themes from the data collected.

### **5.3 Framework for Analysis**

The framework used in analyzing the role of identity politics in conflict resolution strategies was constructivism. Constructivism theory as advocated by Onuf (1989) asserts that identities are socially constructed phenomena. Such social constructions are a result of individuals within a society sharing some history and common values who the group together for a common cause. In an apparent divergence from realism, constructivism argues that is no certain, permanent, factual reality, and even if there were, physical truths matter less than social constructions. Individuals are thus living in a socially constructed world wherein various bodies such as shared realities are prepared by individuals' feat (Onuf 1989, Wendt 1991). The theory thus elucidates how the social world or societies are built and equally suggests that the nature and effects of identities in society are socially constructed through human interactions.

### **5.4 Limitations**

Given the geographical location of the country, the researcher had a constraint of conducting the research on the actual ground. Moreover, some of the intended key informants were not readily available especially those from ME embassies based in Zimbabwe. However, the researcher had to extensively use 'friends' from the ME region who gave valuable information pertaining the ME and Yemen in particular. Academics, books, media and individuals who in one way or the other interfaced with the goings in the ME region also helped to cover gaps of information sought. To this end, the research managed to objectively analyse the role of identity politics in conflict resolution strategies in Yemen.

### **5.5 Summary of Findings and Analysis**

The presence of identities based on ethnicity, religion and national identity are a cause of conflicts in the ME region. This research confirms that these divergent identity groups are problematic to conflict resolution strategies in the region and Yemen in particular. These identity groups' divergent interests on identity basis wreck efforts for lasting peace.

### **5.5.1 Identity Politics in the Middle East**

The results of the study revealed that the societies of the ME region are distinguished by ethnicity, religion and national identity. There is heterogeneity in terms of ethnicity with the Arabs as the majority, and the Turkic, Persians, Jews and Kurds as other groups. This ethnic divide is often a source of conflict in the region especially between the Arabs and the Jews who are mostly in Israel. This has given rise to the ongoing conflict between Israel and Palestine which is backed by many Arab states on kinship bases. Whilst Islam is the major binding religion in the ME countries except in the Jewish dominated Israel and Palestinian occupied areas, conflicting values embedded in identities has often resulted in conflicts with countries allied on kinship bases. Complicating any conflict resolution efforts in the ME is the Arabs belief that they are capable of resolving their own problems hence the failure of most UN sponsored conflict resolution efforts in the region. But within themselves emerge various conflicting identities with diverse interests and values that they can hardly agree on common issues. It appears that the self-centeredness of the region, and the fact that the region values its various identities make any conflict resolution effort unbinding. In tandem, the big powers appear to be just capitalizing on these conflicting identities to further their interests, and indeed, faced with these, conflict resolution efforts in the region will remain a fiasco. Thus the central observation in this study was that the ME region is awash with various identities and its politics embedded in it, a situation that has seen the rise of sectarian conflicts, and conflict resolution strategies appear to be in unbinding.

### **5.5.2 Identity Politics and Conflict Resolution Efforts in Yemen**

Identity conflicts in Yemen started to be more pronounced after the unification of YAR and PDRY to form the present day Yemen in 1990. The conflicts started as an attempt to reverse the unification by the Sunni Southerners who felt excluded in the politics of the country by the Shia dominated government, a situation that marked the genesis of an identity conflict in the country. Apparently, both Britain and Ottoman Empire appeared to have had divided Yemeni society already into two separate identities during their control of the North and South territories for the two countries have different governance systems. This translated into a North-South divide, or Sunni-Shia divide, which exists to date, and the conflict in the country remains now with small emerging identities such as the Houthis. This means that conflict in Yemen is a result of the

major identity rift between the Shia dominated north and Sunni dominated south, and their offshoots, which translate into and identity conflict. Such a complex identity politics have remained a puzzle in both UN and regional conflict resolution strategies to end conflict in Yemen. An all-inclusive conflict resolution strategy that would help to end the conflict is hampered by the absence of a strong central government in the country.

Further complicating the relations between the Southerners and Northerners is the fact that the latter is infertile for agricultural purposes, hence Southerners see their Northern colleagues as trying to rob them of their resources. The situation is worsened by the fact that the Northerners are mostly Shiites whilst the Southerners are largely Sunnis who are always at odds with each other. Regional actors have also helped to shape the society into identities by supporting groups in the conflict on kinship basis. Houthis are supported by the Iranians while the Saudi Arabians support the Sunni dominated resistance movements in the south. This situation has affected regional conflict resolution strategies in Yemen for different groups in the conflict remain skeptical about the regional mediators.

Yemen society consists of various conflicting identity groups that resent a central government, but have a strong connection to their tribal authorities instead. The conflicting groups, Northerners, Southerners, Shiites, Sunnis, Houthis, Southern Separatists, Islamic State and the Al Qaeda, pursue divergent interests in the socio-economic, political and religious dispensation of the country resulting in endless conflicts. Conflict resolution strategies have become a tall order in dealing with these different groups well entrenched in 'identity politics.' The weak Yemen government, which is also identity politics prone, failed to address the interests of these groups. The various societal groups, clouded with the politics of identity, either opt not to be part to a peace agreement or refuse any peace outcomes as long they feel that their identity interests were not addressed.

There is a general craving for political autonomy from a central government by Yemenis. What became clear during the study is that Yemenis have a strong belief in tribal systems and resent any central government. Tribe-state relations are patented by a tribal perspicacity that splits national identity from the idea of a state sovereignty. The society has loyalty split between Zaydi and the Shafiite Sunna. Yemenis believe in conflict resolution by traditional leaders hence no central legal system existed in the country. This has placed the country in ancient days of conflict

resolution, which indeed are at divergent with modern developments. Anyway the involvement of traditional leaders in conflict resolution efforts may help to end identity conflicts in the country.

## **5.6 Implications**

The complexities of the socially constructed identities in Yemen have created a fragile security situation to the extent that all peace initiatives both at regional and international levels have proved to be futile. The security vacuum in the country has attracted terror groups, criminals and armed groups which challenge traditional leaders who should be influential in conflict resolution strategies in the country. Today, Yemen is labeled as one of the countries that harbor terror groups such as the Islamic State and Al Qaeda. Worse off, the conflict in Yemen is somehow regionalized on Shia-Sunni identity lines, further complicating conflict resolution efforts, and even making the ME region insecure. Identity politics in the country has rendered the central government ineffective, develop into a situation of anarchy, and indeed, identities have become a puzzle to conflict resolution efforts in Yemen politics.

But perhaps, Yemen challenges to conflict resolution efforts should be part and parcel of a regional settlement that establishes equality of independence for all people of various identities and states in order to guarantee an opening towards humane, integrationist and objective regional stability. At the same time, though Yemen is indeed part of a delicate regional equation, it also possesses specificities of its own, meaning that real solution for Yemen can only be conceived from within the Yemeni womb rather than outside. That must entail guarantees for a system of justice, dignity and real development in the North, one that also enables legal order and the restoration of rights. The review of all past efforts such as the Pledge and Accord signed in Amman in 1994 should culminate in holding a permanent regional meeting that aims to rehabilitate the forces of society, invest in capacity building, and allocate funds in order to drain pits of terrorism and fill the vacuum of despair.

## **5.7 Conclusions of the Study**

The conflict in the ME region incarnates an identity dominance by various groups over each other with ethnicity and religion as the mobilization force for the contesting groups. The various groups contest with each other in the socio-economic, political and cultural spheres of their

societies. The situation in Yemen is exacerbated by a weak central government that has failed to unite the heterogeneous society. The result of this failure is the continued tribal contestation amongst these various groups over the scarce resources in the country. The socially constructed identity groups in Yemen thus vie for power, autonomy and control of resources, a phenomenon that has seen heightened tensions in the country. Generally, the fight is between the Shiites and the Sunnis, but other smaller identity groups like the Houthis, Islamic State and the other Southern Separatists groups emerged from these major groups, pursuing divergent interests. What then is clear from the above is that the ME region, and Yemen in particular is clouded with the politics of identity. Such politics have complicated various conflict resolution strategies by the region and the international community. However, it should be acknowledged that big powers interests are also complicating conflict resolution efforts in the ME and Yemen in particular. In Yemen, the role of regional countries like Saudi Arabia and Iran in the conflict is at odds with conflict resolution strategies, as these countries tend to further divide Yemen society into contesting identities. The region and Yemeni government thus should strive to work together and try to dispel the idea of identities in the country otherwise an identity conflict will continue. Thus the study concludes by acknowledging that indeed, identity politics have become a conundrum to conflict resolution strategies in the ME and in particular in Yemen.

## **5.8 Recommendations**

The researcher proposes the following:

- Challenges to conflict resolution efforts in the ME should be part and parcel of a regional settlement that establishes equality of independence for all people of various identities and states in order to guarantee an opening towards humane, integrationist and objective regional stability.
- Yemen is indeed part of a delicate regional equation, but it possesses specificities of its own, meaning that real solution for Yemen can only be conceived from within the Yemeni womb rather than outside. That must entail guarantees for a system of justice, dignity and real development in the North, one that also enables legal order and the restoration of rights.
- The review of all past efforts such as the Pledge and Accord signed in Amman in 1994 should culminate in holding a permanent regional meeting that aims to rehabilitate the



forces of society, invest in capacity building, and allocate funds in order to drain pits of terrorism and fill the vacuum of despair.

- There is need for the international community to have a full understanding of the dynamics and actors involved in Yemen conflict before embarking on any conflict resolution efforts.
- The Yemeni government should demilitarize all militias and professionalize the armed force. Meanwhile, the sectarian magnitude of the conflict suggests that religious leaders should be at the forefront of promoting tolerance and forgiveness.

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