

Yemen: the Worst Humanitarian Crisis in the World, Ignored

Middle East/North Africa

Megan Jenkins

Abstract: Decades of rising tensions and several years of civil war later, Yemen and its dire humanitarian crisis have been forgotten by much of the mainstream media and the West. The effects of this humanitarian crisis have left two thirds of Yemen's population in need of humanitarian assistance and thousands of Yemeni people dead. Yemen's humanitarian crisis contains a triple threat to the people of Yemen -- conflict, famine, and cholera. Given the nature of the topic, in order to provide a balanced and well-rounded assessment of the situation, research was conducted through news articles from the United States, Turkey, the United Kingdom, and the United Nations, as well as research from the World Bank. In this paper, the causes of Yemen's humanitarian crisis are examined,

including Yemen's civil war between government forces and Houthi rebels and the intervention of foreign powers, such as Saudi Arabia and the international coalition it leads. By examining these causes in conjunction with the harsh realities of the humanitarian crisis, I argue that the global community must uphold their responsibility to protect while guarding against states' self-serving actions at the expense of the masses.

Note: The research and writing for this paper were completed in February and early March 2019. Thus, the research presented in this paper reflects the humanitarian crisis in Yemen as of early 2019. Statistics and analysis may have changed since then.

The United Nations has cited the ongoing situation in Yemen as “the worst man-made humanitarian crisis of our time” (Carey 2018). Sixteen million people in the country do not have access to safe water, sanitation, or hygiene (Conflict 2018). Furthermore, 20 million people are food insecure (Humanitarian 2019). The ongoing humanitarian crisis in Yemen has been percolating for decades for a variety of reasons and has been influenced by many domestic and global actors. As a result, millions of innocent civilians have been affected. Yemen, and the catastrophic effects of its war, illustrates the need for a deeper conversation on modern warfare and its impact on civilian life.

To understand the crisis and its complexities, it is critical to understand the profound historical roots of Yemen and its geopolitics. Throughout the Cold War, Yemen was divided into two countries, North and South (Yemen still reels 2019).

Yemen was unified as one state following the dissolution of the Soviet Union and the end of the Cold War. In 1990, Ali Abdullah Saleh, a Houthi and Shi’a political figure from Northern Yemen, came to power as the president of the newly unified state (Carey 2018). He remained in power until he was ousted as a result of the Arab Spring in 2011, which led to increased instability in Yemen even though his successor, Abd Rabbu Mansour Hadi, had been vice president since 1994. The divide between these two leaders poignantly demonstrates the divide within Yemen and within the Middle East: Saleh represented the Houthi, Shi’a-majority population in Yemen, while Hadi represented the Sunni population of Yemen. Houthi is a Shi’a branch of Islam, and their presence in Yemen threatens Saudi Arabia and its dominant Sunni interests.

As is the case with many of the contemporary concerns in the Arab world, the conflict between the Shi’a and Sunni

branches of Islam is a huge point of contention and is wrapped up in much of the geopolitics of the region. Yemen is situated just south of Saudi Arabia on the Arabian Peninsula. Saudi Arabia and the United Arab Emirates (UAE), also situated on the Arabian Peninsula, are Sunni-majority states. Just across the Persian Gulf lies the massive state of Iran, a Shi'a-dominated state that often clashes with Saudi Arabia. From afar, not knowing any of this information, it would make little sense as to why Saudi Arabia has taken such a devoted interest in Yemen's political environment. However, the fact that a Shi'a opposition group, the Houthis, are fighting to gain political power over a Sunni administration may alarm Sunni Gulf states. Saudi Arabia and the UAE are concerned that Iran is attempting to gain a foothold in the Arabian Peninsula through Yemen. In effect, this foothold would represent the extension of Shi'a influence in an otherwise Sunni-

dominated region that Saudi Arabia and the UAE have sought to keep predominantly Sunni. Consequently, the air strikes, naval blockades, and civilian casualties are representative of the coalition's fear of a 'Shi'a takeover' of the Arabian Peninsula.

Yemen was already the poorest state in the Middle East prior to the beginning of its civil war in 2015. Access to freshwater has been a persistent and often overlooked issue in Yemen for decades, and the civil war has further exacerbated this chronic shortage. A rapidly increasing population, many of whom migrated from coastal areas to urban areas, coupled with an agricultural shift away from sustenance farming towards cash crop harvesting, has further strained Yemen's water supply and made water unaffordable for many Yemenis (Suter 2017). Given the lack of freshwater and the cash crop harvesting trend, a mere five percent of the wheat consumed in Yemen is grown domestically (Carey 2018).

Furthermore, only 25% of overall food availability is produced locally (Securing Imports of 2017). Therefore, Yemen relies heavily on imports for food, and the majority of imports are brought in through two ports, Hodeidah and Salif, in Northern, Houthi-held regions (Carey 2018). When the civil war broke out in 2015, the Saudi-led coalition imposed a naval blockade on these Red Sea ports (Carey 2018). This coalition includes Sunni-dominant states in the region and the support of the United States and the United Kingdom, which backs the Yemeni government and President Hadi. Because of the blockade, the flow of imports into Yemen decreased dramatically, including food, medical supplies, and other essential items for civilians enduring the war. It is no wonder that hunger, nearing famine, has become a critical situation considering the already crippling poverty that exists in Yemen and given that imports of food commodities account for over 90% of

Yemen's annual domestic consumption needs (Securing Imports of 2017). As a result, Yemen is among the top six most food insecure countries in the world (Securing Imports of 2017).

The origins of the conflict and crisis provide the necessary context to delve into the war and subsequent humanitarian crisis. In 2015, Houthi rebel groups began seizing territory in Yemen, leading to their takeover of the capital, Sana'a (Chughtai 2019). Because Iran supported the Houthi rebel groups, Saudi Arabia immediately organized a coalition supporting Hadi and the Yemeni government, with logistical support and arms supplied by the United States. The divide between the Sunni and Shi'a sects of Islam dictates much of the behavior of states in the Middle East. Some states have predominantly Sunni populations, like Saudi Arabia and Egypt, while others have predominantly Shi'a populations, like Iran and Iraq. Foreign intervention for the

purpose of balancing the Sunni-Shi'a divide is a consistent theme in geopolitical conflict in the Middle East; the behavior of Saudi Arabia and Iran replicates this as they imposed their interests on a domestic dispute.

Given these motives and the state of affairs in Yemen, an unfortunate but predictable war ensued -- opposition versus establishment, North versus South, Shi'a versus Sunni. Since the war began in 2015, the Saudi-led coalition has conducted more than 18,000 raids against the Houthis, as well as multiple airstrikes resulting in countless civilian fatalities (Walsh 2018). Saudi Arabia has justified its naval blockade by citing Houthi missile launches: specifically, Saudi Arabia points to the first missile launch in November 2017, which was directed at Riyadh (Carey 2018). Saudi officials expressed their concern that Iran was supplying Houthi rebels with arms through Northern Yemeni ports, like

Hodeidah and Salif. However, these coalition airstrikes have consistently hit civilian areas: residential centers, marketplaces, civilian boats, and medical, educational, cultural, and religious sites. As of August 2018, these airstrikes have resulted in at least 7,000 civilian deaths (Carey 2018). The UN Human Rights Council reports that these airstrikes on civilians may be classified as war crimes (Carey 2018).

This appalling, man-made humanitarian crisis has resulted in shortages in food and critical supplies, damage to infrastructure, and civilian casualties. This has translated into tens of millions of people in need of aid today. The first cause of the crisis is fairly straightforward -- in a country that relies almost entirely on imports to feed its population, a blockade on imports is lethal. Children have been especially affected. Eleven million Yemeni children, which constitutes over 80% of the state's

youth population, require humanitarian assistance today (Conflict 2018). UNICEF warns, “the chances of survival are becoming slimmer by the day for the nearly 400,000 severe acutely malnourished children fighting for their lives in Yemen” (Conflict 2018).

Secondly, the coalition airstrikes, which intended to keep Houthi rebels at bay, have weakened water and sanitation infrastructure significantly. As a result, “17.8 million people lack access to safe water and sanitation, and 19.7 million lack access to adequate healthcare” (Humanitarian 2019). Furthermore, wastewater treatment plants that produce safe water have halted production due to a shortage in fuel imports. As a result, in April 2017, the worst cholera outbreak in history erupted in Yemen (Carey 2018). Over 1.2 million people have become sick, and 2,500 people have died from the waterborne disease (Carey 2018). With consistent access

to safe drinking water and medicine, this outbreak would disappear rapidly, but safe water continues to be scarce in Yemen. To aggravate the issue, “more than half of all health facilities in Yemen are no longer functioning because they are damaged or lack an operating budget and staff” (Conflict 2018). Thus, when Yemeni civilians become extremely ill due to malnourishment or diseases like cholera, they have very few resources to combat these issues. The results are dire: death tolls may be as high as 60,000, according to *The New York Times*, or as low as 10,000, estimated by the United Nations (Ensor 2018).

Despite all of this, there is hope. In December 2018, the United States Senate passed a symbolic resolution to withdraw support for Saudi Arabia in the war (Demirjian 2019). In effect, Saudi Arabia’s supply of arms, which have been used in coalition airstrikes, will be limited. Recently, the Yemeni government and

Houthi rebel groups have agreed to a withdrawal deal, which will force both actors to retreat from Yemeni ports and allow imports to enter the state (Yemen and Houthi 2019). The first phase of the deal was finalized in February 2019 and signals a turning point in a war that has spanned nearly half a decade (Lederer 2019). Both of these resolutions are progressive developments that speak to a larger conversation surrounding the impact of international influence on domestic issues and the devastating effects of war on civilians. The civil war in Yemen threatened and encroached upon every element of Yemeni civilians' human security: access to food, safe and drinkable water, basic health care, and safety within their own state.

What is perhaps most troubling about the war and humanitarian disaster in Yemen is the instrumental role of foreign actors on the outcome of the war and crisis. The airstrikes conducted by Saudi Arabia,

the UAE, and other Sunni-majority states, which were supported by the United States and the United Kingdom, undoubtedly contributed to the humanitarian crisis. Each of these foreign states were able to hold a significant stake in the outcome of the war without suffering any of the repercussions. When states and international institutions are weighing the advantages and disadvantages of intervening in domestic disputes like Yemen, they face a multitude of complex factors. There is a responsibility to protect humanity and to intervene in the case of egregious human rights abuses, a category into which Yemen clearly fits. At the same time, this responsibility to protect must be balanced with the need to respect a country's sovereignty, within reason. Additionally, it is nearly impossible to determine a state's true motivations in intervening in domestic disputes: is the state acting on behalf of the international

community to protect a group of people, or is it acting out of self interest?

In the case of the United States' and Saudi Arabia's involvement in the civil war in Yemen, their actions are reprehensible. The coalition has left Yemen and its people on the brink of famine. As for the United Nations' involvement in dispersing humanitarian aid, they have been partially successful -- their aid provides the Yemeni people another day, week, or month to live. However, they have also failed to address the larger issues at hand. Providing humanitarian assistance is critical, yes, but the job of international institutions like the United Nations does not end there. The United Nations had a moral obligation to cease the coalition blockade through sanctions or another method. Of course, this is easier said than done, especially considering that sanctions are first passed by the UN Security Council, in which the United States has veto power.

Regardless, the use of a blockade, and by extension the starvation of millions of people in pursuit of political aims, is grossly unacceptable. Time and time again, the global community has failed to act when a powerful state punishes the people of another state to pursue a domestic agenda. The duplicitous tactics of these states vary greatly and often conveniently slip under the rug -- installing dictators in another country to impose influence in a region, using development and aid to influence and weaken a local economy, or, as is the case with Yemen, supporting inhumane and lethal strategies on a population to maintain power in a region. While Yemen is just the latest victim of a geopolitical power struggle, it is not too late to spark a meaningful dialogue around this topic and begin work that aims to restructure how power is wielded and responsibility is exercised in the world. The global community must rethink the way war is

approached, particularly in the era of proxy wars, and critically interrogate the motives

behind the involvement of foreign powers in domestic disputes.

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