

# What Is at Stake in Yemen

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## Is Yemen Truly Forgotten?

Some casual observers of the conflict in Yemen have been referring to it as the “forgotten war” for quite some time.<sup>1</sup> The implication is that the international community has neglected the violence and the humanitarian crisis that has ensued over the past four years and has not taken adequate measures to bring the conflict to an end. However, a cursory survey of headlines in media outlets in the West in general, and in the United States in particular, over the past several months, in addition to multiple reports by international organizations and various nongovernmental organizations (NGOs), suggests that the conflict has actually garnered a fair amount of attention. The *New York Times*, the *Washington Post*, the *Wall Street Journal*, and the *Guardian*, among many other Western newspapers, have published dozens of articles about the conflict—covering its political, economic, and social dimensions—since it began. At the same time, television news networks like NBC, CBS, ABC, CNN, and BBC have also aired many segments about the conflict, showing images of the damage to the civilian infrastructure as well as graphic footage of malnourished children. In the same vein, the United Nations and its various affiliated agencies have also commissioned detailed reports written by “panels of experts” to analyze various aspects of the conflict, including its impact on children.

Despite that, the prevailing perception is that the international community has not made ending the war in Yemen a priority. Oddly enough, this is not the first time. On August 14, 1964, *Time* magazine published an article about civil war in northern Yemen. It was entitled, “Yemen: The Forgotten War.”

## Calls Increase to End US Military Support to Saudi Arabia

In recent months, there have been steadily growing calls for the international community in general and the United States more specifically to take some sort of action to stop the conflict and end the humanitarian crisis. Many of these calls have not focused on solving the myriad and—arguably—endemic political, economic, and social challenges that brought Yemen to the brink of yet another civil war. Instead, a growing number of members of Congress, opinion writers, and human rights advocates have been advocating for the United States to simply stop supplying Saudi Arabia with military equipment and weapons. They have also advocated that the United States end its intelligence and logistical support to the Saudi-led coalition currently supporting the internationally recognized government of Yemen in its



military campaign against the Houthi rebels. In November 2018, the United States announced that it was stopping aerial refueling of Saudi jets conducting military missions in Yemen but said the decision was based on a Saudi request due to the fact that the kingdom had developed its own capability to do so.<sup>2</sup> Later in the month, the US Senate passed a procedural measure that seeks to invoke the War Powers Resolution to halt US military support to the coalition's effort.<sup>3</sup> These developments suggest that it is not the war itself that has been forgotten—rather, it is some of the critics who seem to have forgotten what is at stake in Yemen.

### **Stopping Support to the Saudi Led Coalition Will Not End the Conflict**

Contrary to the critics' assumptions, stopping support to the Saudi-led coalition in Yemen will not end the violence, nor will it alleviate the humanitarian crisis. It is a call to leave the internationally recognized government of Yemen and Yemen's 28 million people at the mercy of several ruthless, militant nonstate actors. That includes the Iranian-supported Houthi militia that began this conflict and whose intransigence is preventing it from being resolved. In addition, there are two other even more brutal terrorist groups—al-Qaeda in the Arabian Peninsula (AQAP) and the so-called Islamic State—that would relish the opportunity to operate in a security and political vacuum. It is also a call to abandon Saudi Arabia, a reliable partner that has fought side by side with the United States against communist expansionism, Saddam Hussein's invading forces in Kuwait in 1990, and, more recently, ISIS in Syria. Just as important, it would be tantamount to *carte blanche* for Iran, which appears intent on creating yet another proxy force that would do its bidding, much as it has done with the militant group Hezbollah in Lebanon.<sup>4</sup> As the conflict continues, evidence has been uncovered by the Yemeni government, the Saudi-led coalition, and the US government that strongly suggests that Iran's military and technological support to the Houthis has increased considerably over the course of the conflict.<sup>5</sup> That has enabled the Houthis to continue fighting and to continue to threaten the security of Saudi Arabia by employing ever more sophisticated military tactics, including the use of increasingly longer-range ballistic missiles as well as unmanned drones and speedboats.<sup>6</sup>

Calls to cut and run from Yemen are a recipe for increased instability and violence, not the opposite. The fact that these advocates rarely provide concrete recommendations as to how to bring the conflict to an end, alleviate the humanitarian situation, and assist Yemen on the road to recovery is also telling.

### **A Simplistic and Largely Inaccurate Dominant Narrative**

It has been tempting for some observers to portray the conflict in Yemen as a Saudi/Emirati war against their less developed and poorer neighbor to the south. In reality, it is a conflict that started long before the Saudi-led coalition formed and began providing

military support to the Yemeni government in March 2015. At its core, the conflict is an armed insurrection that also has the characteristics commonly associated with civil wars. It began when an armed militia that calls itself Ansarullah, but is more commonly known as the Houthis, took up arms against the internationally recognized central government led by President Abdrabu Mansur Hadi in mid-2014. By late 2014, the Houthis had advanced south from their northern base of Saada, along the border with Saudi Arabia, down to the city of Amran, then on to the capital, Sanaa, and eventually to the southern-most port of Aden. In the process, the country's fractious politics, weak economy, underdeveloped infrastructure, badly overstretched health care system, and fragile food supply all came under intense strain. Unquestionably, the Houthis' military advance also resulted in hundreds of casualties and thousands of people being displaced. Unfortunately, none of the above was new to Yemen.

### **Violent Militia and Endemic Problems Overlooked**

Critics of the manner in which the Saudi-led coalition has conducted its military campaign seldom mention the fact that it was the Houthi rebels who began this war. It is also rarely mentioned that the Houthis have a long legacy of resorting to violence as a means to redress their perceived grievances or that they have a well-documented reputation for attacking civilian centers, using human shields, and recruiting child soldiers. Just as important, numerous detractors rarely acknowledge that many of the issues underlying the humanitarian crisis that have been aggravated by the conflict—including food scarcity, famine-like conditions, and the spread of diseases like cholera—had long been challenges in Yemen.

In fact, a report published by the US Agency for International Development (USAID) in July 2014—a full six months before the Saudi-led coalition entered the conflict, but a few months after the Houthis took up arms—described the situation this way: “The Republic of Yemen is one of the driest, poorest and least developed countries in the world. It ranks 154 of 182 countries on the UNDP Human Development Index. An estimated 50 percent of the people are poor, and one in three is malnourished. Poverty is endemic, particularly in more remote and less accessible areas.” The report added, “Extreme poverty, chronic food insecurity, limited resources, poor education and low skills, growing economic uncertainty, and ongoing security threats (along with the lack of support systems and coping strategies) combine to make a large portion of the population life-threateningly vulnerable to acute crises. Threats include displacement due to insecurity and conflict, unmanageable food prices, and malnutrition.”<sup>7</sup>

It is also important to note that there is ample evidence suggesting that—contrary to the prevailing perception among Western critics of Saudi Arabia—the Houthis have employed tactics and policies that could account for the majority of the most acute cases of food shortages, famine, and the spread of diseases.<sup>8</sup>



## A Closer Look at Civilian Casualties

And while the violence has taken a heavy toll on the civilian population in Yemen, one could make a compelling argument that it is the military tactics of the Houthi rebels that are largely to blame for the collateral damage. Not only have the Houthis attacked civilian centers repeatedly during the course of the war—including southern cities and regions in Saudi Arabia—but their policy of using civilian centers and institutions (including schools, mosques, and hospitals) to hide military equipment and personnel has vastly increased the chances of civilians being harmed by the coalition's airstrikes.<sup>9</sup>

Nevertheless, the Saudi-led coalition's spokespeople have acknowledged that mistakes have been made and that the coalition will hold those responsible for errant airstrikes.<sup>10</sup> The coalition's Joint Incidents Assessment Team (JIAT) has investigated airstrikes in which civilians might have been harmed, according to human rights organizations. And while critics have questioned the objectivity of the JIAT process, there appears to be no Houthi equivalent to investigate civilian casualties due to their attacks and no indication of a Houthi official issuing any apology. That suggests that Houthi attacks are not mistakes, but rather a deliberate policy.

## US and UK Assistance Sought and Received

In addition, the Saudi-led coalition has also sought and received the assistance of both the United States and the United Kingdom to improve the accuracy of its targeting.<sup>11</sup> I have personally listened to a lengthy presentation by a representative of the coalition detailing the multilayered safeguards put in place to minimize civilian casualties. Despite the coalition's best efforts, civilian casualties in modern warfare, especially when a party to the conflict considers cities and urban centers to be part of the battlefield, appear to be virtually impossible to avoid completely. It is also worth noting that even the most advanced military in the world, that of the United States, has not been able to avoid civilian casualties in its air campaign in Syria. However, there is a patent difference between mistakes and the intentional targeting of civilians. Unfortunately, we have a contemporary example that highlights the scale of the devastation when civilians are targeted as a matter of policy. That is in fact what the regime of Bashar al-Assad and its Iranian and Hezbollah allies have been doing in Syria. The devastation has been catastrophic.<sup>12</sup>

The conflict in Yemen, like all conflicts around the world, is a complex one. While many of the political, economic, and social conditions—disputed political representation, lack of institutional capacity, and a weak economy—which have spurred the war are challenges that the Yemeni state and the international community have long struggled to resolve, a consensus long ago emerged as to the way forward from this current conflict. It is a consensus that includes the internationally recognized government of

Yemen, the Saudi-led coalition, the United Nations and its special envoy for Yemen, and the Friends of Yemen group. It considers a political resolution to be the most viable means to ending this war. It is widely believed by many in the international community that it is the Houthis' intransigence that is the primary obstacle standing in the way of political resolution.<sup>13</sup> The Houthi rebels must lay down their arms, stop behaving as if they have a right to impose their will on the rest of the country, and return to the negotiating table. The fact that the Houthis refused to attend the most recent attempt at a political resolution—talks in Geneva, Switzerland—suggests that this prevailing perception is understandable.<sup>14</sup>

### **A History of Political Violence**

One could make a compelling argument that the political, economic, and social factors that led to this conflict have been a fixture of Yemeni political life for many years. Yemen, unfortunately, has rarely experienced extended periods of peace and prosperity in its modern history. On the contrary, it has been beset by serious political strife, including at least two civil wars and structural economic problems that have resulted in nearly uninterrupted political violence and economic hardship. Yemen has not enjoyed political stability in decades, certainly not since the early 1960s, when civil war broke out in what was then north Yemen. That war, which lasted for several years, proved in some ways to be a harbinger of things to come. It was also a conflict that had broader regional dimensions as Saudi Arabia supported the ousted Zaydi imamate (which had lasted for nearly a thousand years) against the military-led republican rebels who established the Arab Yemen Republic with the support of Egypt's Gamal Abdel Nasser in 1962. At some point in the conflict, Nasser had upwards of seventy thousand troops and personnel in Yemen.<sup>15</sup> After years of fighting and possibly as many as two hundred thousand casualties, a tenuous peace was established.

The end of that civil war in the north in 1970 did not usher in peace for Yemen. For much of the next four decades, tensions and violence flared not only between different factions within north Yemen but also between the north and what would become the Marxist government in south Yemen, the first and so far only Marxist government in the Arab world. Military skirmishes, political assassinations, and shifting political alliances became fixtures of Yemeni politics for decades. In fact, a civil war that had broken out in south Yemen in 1986 saw approximately four thousand people killed in Aden in the span of only ten days.<sup>16</sup>

In 1990, after nearly twenty years of negotiations, the Yemen Arab Republic in the north merged with the People's Democratic Republic of Yemen in the south. Yet a sense that the north had become the predominant force in the newly unified country quickly led to yet another civil war a mere four years later as the south attempted to secede once again. The secessionists lost that war, but elements in the south continue



to work toward seceding to this day. The question of the future of the south is one that Yemen will have to address. But a consensus is yet to emerge as to whether it should be addressed during any political negotiations that resolve the current conflict or after a peace agreement has been reached.<sup>17</sup> It is worth mentioning that the Houthis also perceive that the transition from former President Ali Abdullah Saleh to the current one under the leadership of President Hadi did not represent their interests adequately—although they took part in the National Dialogue Conference that set the stage for a more inclusive Yemeni state.

### Understanding the Houthi Rebels

The current conflict started when the Iranian-backed Houthi militia took up arms against the internationally recognized government of Yemen in the summer of 2014, seeking to impose its will on the rest of the country. The Houthis are considered by some to be a “pro-Iranian, sectarian Shiite movement with millenarian aspirations to re-establish the Zaydi Shiite imamate . . . ,” a militant group that sees violence as a means and an end in itself.<sup>18</sup> Even a cursory look at the strategies and tactics they have employed during this current conflict, as well as some of their previous wars against the government of Ali Abdullah Saleh, suggests that they show little regard for the well-being of the Yemeni people or the laws of warfare. In fact, several Yemeni officials, scholars, and activists have told me that they see little difference between the Houthis and AQAP or the Islamic State. Their slogan alone, “Death to America. Death to Israel. Curse the Jews. Victory to Islam,” is quite revealing and suggests that they are cut from the same cloth as other militant religious groups.

While there is little indication that the Houthis have routinely targeted either the United States or Israel with violent operations, there is convincing evidence that they have sought to indoctrinate Yemeni children and youths who live in the territories they control with this hateful ideology.<sup>19</sup> That does not bode well for the future of Yemen. It is also worth noting that the Houthis did target the US Navy’s destroyer, the USS *Mason*, in October 2016, which prompted a retaliatory attack by the United States against radar sites controlled by the Houthis along Yemen’s western coast.<sup>20</sup>

The litany of the Houthis’ transgressions is long, from targeting civilian centers to using food and medicine as weapons of war. There is compelling evidence suggesting that they are intentionally using tactics to starve populations that resist their encroachment, as was the case with Taiz.<sup>21</sup> It was in Taiz that the Houthis’ disregard for the rules of the international community came into sharp relief. In addition, Houthi snipers have also killed journalists.<sup>22</sup> Just as important, the siege of Taiz starting in April 2015 included flagrant violations of humanitarian law. According to multiple credible accounts, in an effort to defeat local resistance forces, the Houthis “retaliated by cutting off roads, preventing food and medical aid from getting in.”

At a checkpoint outside the city, the Houthi militants have reportedly confiscated “cooking gas, vaccination doses, dialysis treatment packets, and oxygen cylinders.”<sup>23</sup>

Contrary to popular perception, the Saudi-led coalition is not “blockading” food and medicine from being delivered to those who need it most.<sup>24</sup> An appreciable amount of food is in fact entering. It is high prices, rudimentary transportation networks, and obstruction and extortion by the Houthi rebels that are largely responsible for the current humanitarian crisis. The World Food Program’s Yemen Market Watch Report for the period of June/July 2018, for example, maintains that “as a result of the overall good supply of food commodities, most of the essential food items [are] abundantly available in all governorates except for Hodeida.” The Houthis also have a long history of recruiting child soldiers, using land mines extensively, and using human shields.<sup>25</sup> While the Saudi-led coalition has clearly made mistakes, it has taken many measures to minimize collateral damage.

### **Impact on Saudi Civilians and Infrastructure**

Also lost in the conversation about the conflict in Yemen is the fact that the Houthis have fired thousands of mortars and 189 ballistic missiles into Saudi Arabia, leading to the death or injury of hundreds of civilians.<sup>26</sup> I was in Riyadh when the Saudi air defense forces intercepted a ballistic missile over its skies in April.<sup>27</sup> The threat that Saudi Arabia faces from the Houthis is real. So is the threat to international maritime security and commerce, given the proximity of the vital Bab el Mandeb Strait to Yemen. Intelligence officials from Saudi Arabia, the United States, and other nations are increasingly confident that Iran is supplying the Houthis with new technological capabilities that have enabled the rebels to not only launch missiles deeper into Saudi Arabia’s territory but also endanger maritime commerce in the Red Sea.<sup>28</sup> Human rights organizations, including Human Rights Watch, have repeatedly condemned the Houthi rebels for violating “the laws of war by launching ballistic missiles indiscriminately at populated areas in Saudi Arabia.”<sup>29</sup>

### **Potential Terror Hub**

Partly due to the frequency of political turmoil and the government’s inability to exert effective control over the entirety of Yemen’s territory, the country has been vulnerable to becoming a safe haven for militant and terrorist groups.<sup>30</sup> Al-Qaeda in the Arabian Peninsula has operated in the south of Yemen for a number of years. The USS *Cole* was attacked by AQAP in Aden back in October 2000. The so-called Islamic State also tried to establish a presence in Yemen even before the current crisis.<sup>31</sup> And while the prevailing narrative among many in Congress is that the Saudi-led coalition has allowed these terror groups to expand their presence in Yemen, there is scant evidence to support that proposition. On the other hand, it is well documented that tribal forces allied with the United Arab Emirates, which plays an important role as a member of the Saudi-led



coalition, have been able to expel AQAP from some of their previous strongholds in the south of Yemen, such as Mukalla.<sup>32</sup>

### **Saudi Campaign Supported by the International Community**

It is also worth remembering that the international community supported Saudi Arabia's right to defend itself and the goals of the coalition and condemned the Houthis' usurpation of power by passing Security Council Resolution 2216 in April 2015 almost unanimously.<sup>33</sup>

The coalition has also begun to assist in what is likely to be a lengthy and difficult reconstruction of Yemen. Saudi Arabia and its partners are also committed to finding a political resolution to the conflict. By all accounts, it is the Houthis who have scuttled multiple diplomatic attempts by the United Nations and other actors to end the conflict.

### **The Iranian Component**

There are two primary sides to the conflict in Yemen: the internationally recognized government of Yemen and the Saudi-led coalition on one side and the Houthis and their Iranian patrons on the other. The former have made a concerted effort to adhere to the norms and conventions of international relations and international human rights laws.<sup>34</sup> The latter, on the other hand, have consistently exhibited disregard for the well-being of the Yemeni people and the principles of the international community. The Houthis have been emboldened by the support of the Iranian government, which has a long history of encouraging militant nonstate actors who flout international laws and norms.<sup>35</sup> Iran has long been labeled the premier state sponsor of terrorism in the world.<sup>36</sup> It has also adopted a particularly destructive policy of choosing the most radical nonstate actors in the Middle East and the broader Islamic world and turning them into proxy forces that do Iran's bidding in their respective countries to the detriment of the stability of those countries and the broader region. Saudi officials have said that the notion that Iran would be allowed to create another militant group in the mold of the militant Lebanese group Hezbollah in Yemen was a nonstarter.<sup>37</sup>

### **Saudi Initiatives to Alleviate the Humanitarian Crisis**

Contrary to the erroneous allegation that Saudi Arabia is blockading Yemen and that it is intentionally starving the people of Yemen, as some members of Congress and opinion-makers have repeatedly maintained in recent months, the kingdom appears keenly aware of the gravity of the humanitarian crisis. It has taken several initiatives to help address the direst needs in terms of shortages in food and medicine and maintains that it has in fact been the biggest provider of aid to Yemen in the past three years.<sup>38</sup>



In early 2018, the Saudi-led coalition launched the Yemen Comprehensive Humanitarian Operations (YCHO), whose stated objective is “to improve the Yemeni humanitarian situation by addressing immediate aid shortfalls while simultaneously building capacity for long-term improvement of humanitarian aid and commercial goods imports to Yemen.” The plan is meant to complement and work in conjunction with the 2018 United Nations Yemen Humanitarian Response Plan. Some of the more specific goals include “increasing imports to 1.4 million metric tons per month up from 1.1 million metric tons per month while enhancing capabilities in Yemen to import 500,000 metric tons of fuel derivatives per month up from 250,000 metric tons per month at its peak in 2017.”

The plans’ highlights include the following: contributing \$1.5 billion in new donations to international organizations and depositing \$2 billion in Yemen’s central bank (in addition to a \$1 billion deposit that Saudi Arabia contributed in 2014); expanding additional Yemeni ports; establishing “air bridges” from coalition countries to Marib; and creating up to seventeen safe passage corridors “originating from six points to ensure safe overland transportation of aid to NGOs operating in the interior of Yemen.”

In addition, the Saudi-based King Salman Humanitarian Aid and Relief Center maintains that from May 2015 to the end of August 2018 it has implemented 277 projects with eighty partners in Yemen at a total cost of more than \$1.64 billion. The projects span a wide array of sectors including providing food and medicine, treating the injured, creating medical facilities, providing clean water, and clearing mines. The effort includes a \$66 million donation to the World Health Organization (WHO) in June 2017 to combat the spread of cholera.<sup>39</sup> By the end of 2017, there were clear indications that the cases of cholera and deaths resulting from the disease had dropped so significantly that the health organization Médecins Sans Frontières (Doctors Without Borders) announced that it would close the majority of its cholera treatment centers or reduce their capacity. Although there was an increase in cases by August 2018, it is difficult to attribute that increase directly to the conflict. Due to its underdeveloped health care sector and inadequate water sanitation, Yemen has experienced widespread water- and food-borne illnesses, including cholera outbreaks, in the past.<sup>40</sup>

In June 2018, the King Salman Humanitarian Aid and Relief Center launched a mine-clearing initiative called the Saudi initiative for Land Mine Clearance (MASAM).<sup>41</sup> According to Saudi government sources, “There have been more than 600,000 mines planted in the liberated areas by militias; 130 thousand internationally banned sea mines, 40,000 mines in Marib and 16,000 mines in the island of Mayon.”<sup>42</sup>



The routine use of land mines by the Houthi rebels, which disproportionately impacts children, is consistent with other policies that are indicative of a nonstate actor that has little regard for the laws of the international community. According to Yemeni government records, more than 615 people have been killed by mines, including 101 children and twenty-six women. The renewed focus on the use of land mines is a “response to the Houthis’ mass production and deployment of their own land mines.”<sup>43</sup> The Houthis may not be the first warring party to use land mines in Yemen, but observers have noted that they are using them at an “astonishingly high rate.” Analysts have maintained that the Houthis have routinely employed a policy of planting mines in areas from which they withdraw. That has been the case in Lahij, al-Bayda, and Marib governorates.

## UNVIM

Under an arms embargo imposed by UN Security Council Resolution 2216, monitors from the UN Verification and Inspection Mechanism (UNVIM) have been stationed in ports in Djibouti, Dubai, Jeddah, and Salalah to “observe screening of cargo headed for Yemen.” More specifically, they monitor vessels en route to the two main Houthi controlled ports of Hodeida and Salif. According to its official website, UNVIM is tasked with facilitating “the unimpeded free-flow of commercial items through verification and inspection, as well as clearance request reviews, of commercial vessels sailing to Yemen ports.”

Since it became operational on May 5, 2016, until the end of September 2018, UNVIM had received a total of 1,051 requests: 859 were cleared and 190 were denied, canceled, or revoked. UNVIM’s records suggest that the average preclearance processing time for vessels has declined steadily since 2016 and was sixteen hours in October 2018.<sup>44</sup> The same figures also confirmed that 230,604 metric tons of food and 230,069 metric tons of fuel cargo were cleared in the same month.

It is important to note a distinction between what is known as the holding area (in which vessels inspected by UNVIM are held) and the anchorage area, which is the area in which vessels wait prior to proceeding to dock at the actual ports, which are controlled by the Houthis. While the average wait time for vessels in the holding areas for October, for instance, was sixteen hours, recent figures suggest that it was twenty-six to thirty days for the anchorage area. This latter delay is explained by bureaucratic and administrative regulations and red tape at the actual port, which is operated by Houthi-affiliated officials. Following a Houthi attack against a Saudi ship in April 2018, the director of UNVIM met with Saudi officials and agreed that UNVIM would increase its inspectors from four to ten and its monitors from six to sixteen and that it would also improve its technology to inspect ships.<sup>45</sup> It is worth noting that UNVIM only checks commercial ships going to northern ports under Houthi control,

including Hodeida, Salif, and Ras Isa, but not Aden, which is under the Yemeni government's control.

When the Houthis fired missiles at Riyadh last November, the Saudi-led coalition temporarily shut down Yemen's airports and ports. However, most of the restrictions were lifted shortly thereafter.

As already mentioned, aid groups have long complained about the obstructionist policies of the Houthis. The "authorities' permit system for the movement of vehicles, goods and personnel has resulted in restrictions on the freedom of movement of humanitarian organizations and their staff in the country," one aid group concluded. The same report concluded that these policies have resulted in "excessive delays." In one case, apparently, an aid organization required two months to move an aid shipment out of Sanaa, which is under Houthi control.<sup>46</sup>

In addition, aid workers on the ground in Yemen have complained that the "Houthi de facto authorities work in a fragmented manner and are using their influence to control the delivery of aid." In early October, the United Nations children's agency, UNICEF, suspended a program that provides overseas cash transfers to nine million people when it was prevented from establishing a call center that would have allowed it to receive feedback from beneficiaries. Media reports cited sources familiar with the program as saying that the primary reason was that the Houthi rebels "hindered the launch of the call center because they feared it might reveal their manipulation of the cash transfers." In the same vein, the rebels banned the director of another aid agency, the Adventist Development and Relief Agency, from returning to Yemen because the organization resisted the rebels' attempt to force it to use its "beneficiary lists in aid distribution and to use Houthi-linked staffers in ADRA-run health facilities."<sup>47</sup>

Aid workers and organizations have expressed frustration that the Houthis make the delivery of badly needed humanitarian relief contingent on "extorting bribes at checkpoints."

### **Civilian Casualties: A Broader Perspective**

On May 11, 2018, the Office of the United Nations High Commissioner for Human Rights (OHCHR) reported that 6,385 civilians had been killed and 10,047 had been injured since the start of the conflict. And while OHCHR and other human rights organizations have attributed the majority of civilian casualties to airstrikes, as is the case in other war zones, the numbers and who bears responsibility for them seem to be in dispute.



A UN Human Rights Council resolution adopted on September 29, 2017, mandated a group of eminent international and regional experts to carry out a comprehensive examination of the human rights situation in the country.

Although the panel maintained that it has reasonable grounds to believe that individuals in the Yemeni government and the coalition may have conducted attacks in violation of the principles of “distinction, proportionality and precaution,” it also found that the Houthi-Saleh forces were using weapons that had indiscriminate impact, especially in Taiz.

The panel’s conclusion appears to have been contradicted by US Secretary of State Mike Pompeo, who mere weeks later certified that the “governments of Saudi Arabia and the United Arab Emirates are undertaking demonstrable actions to reduce the risk of harm to civilians and civilian infrastructure resulting from military operations of these governments.”<sup>48</sup>

This certification was legally required after Congress inserted a clause in a defense bill last year requiring the administration to issue it if the United States was to continue refueling Saudi warplanes conducting military missions in Yemen. As already mentioned, a mutual understanding was reached, and Saudi Arabia is now performing its own refueling.

For its part, the Saudi-led coalition has strongly objected to the findings of this report on human rights, casting doubt on the methodology the panelists used as well as maintaining that the report contained many inaccuracies. The coalition also argued that, contrary to the allegations of the report, it cooperated fully with the panel. It is also worth noting that the Yemeni government also took issue with the findings and the language of the report. Yemen’s Human Rights Minister, Mohammed Askar, objected to the report’s description of rebel leader Abdulmalik Al Houthi as the leader of the “revolution” when “he is the biggest criminal in Yemen,” Askar said in an interview. He also added that the characterization was indicative of the report’s “bias.”<sup>49</sup>

### **A Stark Difference between Mistakes and Intentional Targeting of Civilians**

As already mentioned in this report, the toll on the civilian population of Yemen has been steep. However, modern warfare by definition is devastating, and the risk to civilians increases significantly when combatants use civilian centers to store ammunition and weapons or to hide troops. The Houthis have a legacy of doing all of the above, not only during the current conflict, but also during its six wars with the government of the late president Ali Abdullah Saleh between 2004 and 2010. In fact, Saleh had long ago accused the Houthis of using civilian centers including schools,

hospitals, and mosques for military purposes.<sup>50</sup> Saudi and Yemeni government officials have made similar arguments, adding that it is the Houthis' irresponsible policies that have put civilians in harm's way.<sup>51</sup> In a television interview in 2017, Saudi Defense Minister and Crown Prince Mohammed bin Salman suggested that the Saudi military has exercised restraint to minimize collateral damage and civilian casualties.<sup>52</sup> But it is abundantly clear that despite the best precautions and the best military practices, civilian casualties are practically impossible to avoid in modern wars.<sup>53</sup>

For example, the US-led coalition against the Islamic State has also been accused of killing civilians in its campaign to eliminate the last remaining territories controlled by the terrorist group that once occupied large swaths of territory along the Syrian-Iraqi border.<sup>54</sup> In fact, representatives for the US coalition in Syria have made nearly identical arguments to those of the Saudi-led coalition in Yemen. As an example, the Syrian Observatory for Human Rights, a group that documents casualties of the war in Syria, reported that airstrikes killed forty-one people, including ten children, in al-Sousa village and its environs in eastern Syria during military airstrikes over a two-day period in late October. The US coalition acknowledged that it struck a mosque that was being used by the terror group as a base. However, a spokesman added, "Such Daesh misuse of the mosque is another example of their violation of the law of war and made the mosque a valid military target." (Daesh is the Arabic acronym for the Islamic State.)<sup>55</sup> Interestingly enough, as is the case in Yemen, the United States disputes the actual number of civilian casualties during its four-year campaign in Syria. While the coalition puts the number of civilian casualties at just over 1,000, the aforementioned Syrian Observatory maintains that the campaign had actually killed 3,331 civilians by the end of September 2018.<sup>56</sup>

However, Syria demonstrates the point in dramatic fashion. President al-Assad's violent reaction to a peaceful protest in 2011 morphed into a seven-year military campaign of the Syrian government against an armed rebellion that included secular-leaning fighters and Islamist groups of varying militancy. Syria shines a spotlight on the extent of the devastation that occurs when a party to a conflict targets civilians as a matter of policy.

According to the Syrian Center for Policy Research, a group that was based in Damascus until 2017, the war in Syria had killed 470,000 people by 2016. The British-based Syrian Observatory for Human Rights maintains that 511,000 people had died by March 2018.<sup>57</sup> Whether one takes the higher or lower estimate, the totals and average numbers of civilian deaths by year, month, week, and day far outstrip the numbers for deaths and casualties in Yemen.



## The Way Forward

The conflict in Yemen began when the Houthis took up arms against the government of Yemen in September 2014. It will end when the Houthis accept UNSC 2216, put down their weapons, and realize that they have scant support inside the country and virtually none outside it. The only responsible course of action is to return to the negotiating table. In mid-December, UN-brokered peace talks in Sweden between representatives of the Yemeni government and the Houthis resulted in a preliminary cease-fire agreement on the important port of Hodeida. However, the test will be in its implementation. According to Yemeni observers, the Houthis have already reneged on seventy-four prior agreements. And just as Pompeo cautioned in an opinion piece in November and as US Secretary of Defense James Mattis noted during comments to the press around the same time, calls for the international community and the United States to abandon Yemen and Saudi Arabia will aggravate the very real security threats that both face, leading to further instability and violence inside Yemen and possibly beyond.<sup>58</sup>

## NOTES

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The Herbert and Jane Dwight Working Group on Islamism and the International Order seeks to engage in the task of reversing Islamic radicalism through reforming and strengthening the legitimate role of the state across the entire Muslim world. Efforts draw on the intellectual resources of an array of scholars and practitioners from within the United States and abroad, to foster the pursuit of modernity, human flourishing, and the rule of law and reason in Islamic lands—developments that are critical to the very order of the international system. The working group is chaired by Hoover fellows Russell Berman and Charles Hill.

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