The War in Yemen

Overview:

War rages on in one of the world’s poorest nation. In Yemen, the population is caught between a brutal conflict over the legitimate rulers of the Yemen government. The country has never been wealthy or stable, and has suffered through civil wars in the past, however, the current conflict has reached devastating proportions. The war has resulted in a true humanitarian catastrophe, with millions at risk for starvation and death from malnutrition, lack of basic medical supplies, and constant warfare. To make matters worse, interventions from foreign countries has further complicated the war, and made it even more complicated to produce legislation aimed at relieving the situation. Without drastic action from the international community, millions more will die and the war will continue without end.

Historical Background:

The history of Yemen dates back over 1,000 years, and follows a similar trajectory as many of its neighbors. Yemen has been shaped by Islam, and the various sects that have interpreted the Qur’an differently. Up until recently however, the various sects within Yemen have remained relatively peaceful, living in conjunction with one another. Zaidi Shi’ism is mostly predominated in the northern highland region, while Sunnis are the majority in the rest of the country. Yemen, as it exists today was unified in 1990, uniting the Yemen Arab Republic and the People’s Democratic Republic of Yemen, two distinct areas that were divided under British and Ottoman rule. With all divisions, cultural and political differences arose between the two areas, differences that were not instantly healed upon their unification. The differences were so profound that when Britain withdrew from Yemen in 1967, following their global decolonization effort, the People’s Democratic Republic of Yemen adopted communist ideology, becoming the

only Marxist state in the Arab world. The rise of global political Islam has led to unrest in the area, creating violent divisions in the country that did not exist before. In particular, groups like The Muslim Brotherhood, Salafism, and Zaidi Houthis, have increased sectarianism in an area where it never previously existed. The Houthi rebels in particular have fought off and on with the Yemen government since 2004. However, the war has escalated since the events of the 2011 Arab Spring. With waves of democracy making their rounds throughout the Middle East, Yemen also encountered some of the new ideas that clashed with the old. In 2011, pro-democratic protests took to the streets to advocate for President Ali Abdullah Saleh to step down after his 33 years in office. President Saleh responded with some economic concessions, but refused to step down. By March of 2011 the military was activated to put down the protest, and they responded with deadly force. An internationally brokered deal resulted in a transfer of power to the vice-president, Abd Rabbu Mansour Hadi, which allowed for elections to occur in February of 2012. In 2013, Yemen held a National Dialogue Conference to reconsider the wave of democratization making their way throughout the region. In this conference, a new constitution and new federal political system was supposed to be created. However, the Houthis withdrew because it would have resulted in changes to the political and federal system, but the basic government structure remained the same, something that was unacceptable to Houthi leaders. Thousands of Yemeni citizens expressed their discontent with the transition of power by joining the Houthi rebels and taking over the capital city of Sanaa in late 2014 and early 2015. Following their successes in the capital, the rebels then attempted to take control of the entire country, forcing President Hadi to flee the country in March of 2015. Following the total loss of control of the legitimate ruling authority in Yemen, Saudi Arabia intervened into the war, creating a new dynamic that has further complicated this intricate war.

Rise of the Coalition

As with all incidents in the Middle East, the struggle between Sunni and Shia Islam plays a central role. With Saudi Arabia designating themselves as the protectorates of Sunni Islam, and Iran as the regional Shia power, the war in Yemen is seen as many as a proxy war. A proxy war is one in which states fight a war in another area, and do not fight with one another directly. They use third parties to do the fighting for them, in locations often far from home. Saudi Arabia, along with United Arab Emirates, Bahrain, Kuwait, Qatar, Morocco, Sudan, Egypt,

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2 “Mapping the Yemen Conflict”, https://www.ecfr.eu/mena/yemen#.
5 “What is a proxy war?”, The Vietnam War, Last Updated: May 5th, 2016, https://thevietnamwar.info/proxy-war/.
Jordan, and Senegal have formed a coalition to combat the Houthi rebels on the ground and in the air. In addition, The United States, The United Kingdom, and Jordan have provided logistical and intelligence support to the coalition. This adds a complex layer to the war, as outside forces have different interests and motivations for participating in the conflict. In an already unstable area like Yemen, the presence of foreign fighters will only further complicate the war. Coalitions are used to strengthen legitimacy of a conflict. When multiple states participate in a war, it lends credibility and legitimacy to that war, as the world has negatively responded to unilateral actions. This was seen in the war in Iraq, when the United States went against the wishes of the United Nations Security Council and led the invasion. However, in a situation like the Yemen conflict, the presence of foreign states has only prolonged the fighting. In addition, non-state actors have infiltrated the country, moving into an area where the government has failed to protect its borders. Many of these non-state actors have returned to Yemen after years of fighting in Afghanistan and Iraq. The group al-Qaeda in the Arabian Peninsula (AQAP), is considered one of the most effective branches of al-Qaeda, and have grown in power recently with the influx of new fighters to swell their ranks. Although they have not seized large areas of territory, the presence of a large and well-organized terrorist group in the area threatens to continue to destabilize the region.

Problems with the Coalition

As previously mentioned, although the coalition has managed to effectively subdue much of the Houthi fighters, there are many issues that have arisen from an unchecked coalition running throughout the country. Data from ACLED reports that approximately one in ten events of the Saudi-led Coalition has resulted in the targeting of civilians and around 75% of the total civilian fatalities were attributed to the coalition. Much of this violence stems from the technological advantage that the coalition boasts over the rebels. From precision artillery to airstrikes and better trained ground forces, the Saudi Arabia-led coalition has created many more problems in the area. The participation of these countries in the war is not without cost. Hundreds of Saudi soldiers have been killed, and the war has costed the country dozens of billions of dollars. This material cost can be borne by oil-rich Saudi Arabia, but ensures that they will continue to fight in a conflict that they have spent so much money and blood in. In addition to the military campaign being waged in the area, Saudi Arabia is also maintaining a blockage around Yemen which is creating a full-scale humanitarian crisis that will be discussed later in this topic guide.

Present-day Fighting

The conflict has raged off and on since 2015, with various breaks in the fighting for attempted peace deals. Since the fight over the capital, an estimated 91,600 people have been killed, with more than 2 million displaced. The fighting has moved beyond just rebel controlled areas in Yemen. In 2018, the coalition launched a major offensive to retake the coastal region of Hodeida, this resulted in the Houthis launching missile attacks on Saudi Arabian infrastructure and territory, including oil tankers, facilities, and international airports. The United States has continued to conduct counter-terrorism operations in Yemen, separate from the coalitions. They have relied mainly of airstrikes to target AQAP and other militants associated with the Islamic State and the splinter groups that have formed in the wake of ISIS’s defeat. The United States also has deployed Green Beret special forces units in the area, and in 2017 a US Special Operations Forces raid in central Yemen killed one US Service member, several AQAP fighters, and an undetermined number of Yemeni civilians. With so many different countries present in one area, and many different interests at play, crafting a peace-deal is a slow and challenging process. However, there may be one on the horizon. In 2018, a special envoy from the United Nations was assigned to broker peace between the Houthis and the ruling government in Sanaa. Envoy Martin Griffiths has reported that all fighting sides and the broader international community support a peace deal that was negotiated in Sweden in December of 2018. This deal is known as the Stockholm agreement. All sides have agreed to begin withdrawing troops from Hodeidah, a port city that was the site of a major battle last year. This peace deal is not all inclusive however. Administrative questions of what group will administer the management of the port, handle its revenue, and govern the local security forces remain. This peace deal is fragile and could easily fall apart if any side fails to uphold their end of the agreement. Breaking the agreement would likely result in further conflict and bloodshed, and set the process to restoring a working government in Yemen, and ending the humanitarian crisis back by years. Further attacks on Saudi-infrastructure, a renewed coalition push against the Houthis, or increased violence and instability in the region could all lead to the collapse of the treaty. As the governing process transitions back to Yemen, the coalition will remain in place. This includes

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military assets from states like Saudi Arabia and the United Arab Emirates. These military forces will serve in an advisory role to local Yemeni forces, protect vital waterways to ensure freedom of navigation in an important oil passageway, and support humanitarian assistance programs\(^\text{12}\). With so many assets remaining in the area there are at least two distinct possible outcomes. The first being that the Stockholm agreement is respected, and Yemen returns to a state of normalcy, legitimate governance, and that the humanitarian crisis is addressed and the quality of life improves. The other possibility is that either the Houthi rebels feel slighted and cheated from the peace process and use the presence of foreign troops as a rallying cry and continue to fight against the Yemeni government. In the same vein, members of the coalition and Yemen government decide to stamp out the rebels once and for all, and prolong the conflict. Either way, even with a peace treaty, Yemen remains perched on a precipice and can easily fall back into conflict.

**Humanitarian Concerns**

Wars have much further reaching effects than the soldiers on the battlefield who fight them. Civilians are always caught in the middle between warring parties, unable to defend themselves. In Yemen, the Middle East’s poorest country, and one of the poorest in the world overall, this is no exception. A cursory internet search will reveal that the war in Yemen has created the worst humanitarian crisis in modern times. This is an alarming headline, but it must be broken down to properly understand what a humanitarian crisis, how Yemen got there, and what can be done to relieve the suffering of millions. The traditional definition of a humanitarian crisis differs from instance to instance. It is a term that invokes a certain response in those who hear it, as it conjures up the worst images of starvation, misery, and death. Often times the label is used prematurely to advance a perspective or opinion. Regrettably, in the case of Yemen, there truly is a crisis occurring. Yemen is currently experiencing a full-blown famine. It is believed that 75% of Yemeni citizens, or 22 million people require humanitarian assistance due to a shortage of food or lack of adequate housing or security protection\(^\text{13}\). Of this, 18 million people, including a high proportion of Yemen’s children are food insecure, meaning that they do not know where their next meal will come from and rely almost exclusively on emergency aid. The international community has responded to this humanitarian crisis, and dozens of countries and non-state

\(^{12}\) Anwar Gargash, “We’re proud of the UAE’s military role in Yemen. But it’s time to seek a political solution”, *The Washington Post*, July 22\(^\text{nd}\), 2019, [https://www.washingtonpost.com/opinions/2019/07/22/were-proud-uaes-military-role-yemen-its-time-seek-political-solution/?noredirect=on&utm_term=.f96c065e4568](https://www.washingtonpost.com/opinions/2019/07/22/were-proud-uaes-military-role-yemen-its-time-seek-political-solution/?noredirect=on&utm_term=.f96c065e4568).

actors have provided funds and support. However, there are repercussions to this aid. The currency of Yemen, the Rial, is heavily depressed due to the influx of foreign aid which increased the price of food indirectly. Also, fuel prices are skyrocketing in Yemen, as transportation costs to move food and medical supplies continue to increase. This is all due to the blockade that was organized by Saudi Arabia that was designed to put pressure on the Houthis. Although Saudi Arabia succeeded in stemming supplies to the rebel forces, civilians were disproportionately harmed by the reduction of goods and the steep increase in prices\(^\text{14}\). There is little incentive in Yemen to govern effectively, as the central government cannot afford to pay the salaries of public workers, meaning professions like doctors, nurses, sanitation workers, engineers, electricians and other tradesmen, and domestic aid workers are not performing their duties because they are not being paid to. This compound the problems in Yemen because the right personnel are not in place to tackle the complex humanitarian crisis present throughout the war-torn country. Human rights groups alone cannot meet the demands of the needy in Yemen, and must rely on the broader international community to provide the aid and human assistance to end the crisis. The most significant obstacle to ending the crisis is the current blockade that Saudi Arabia is maintaining around Yemen. The Saudis control the main airport in Sanaa as well as the key port city of Hodeida. They are preventing much needed food and medical supplies from entering the country and are directly contributing to the starvation of millions\(^\text{15}\). For those who have managed to escape the conflict zones, over 3.3 million Yemenis remain displaced, unsure if they will ever return to their homes\(^\text{16}\). This is contributing to the overall global migration crisis which stresses developed and underdeveloped countries alike. The international community, coalition forces, and Yemen itself must come to an agreement that moves beyond just the Stockholm agreement and focuses on assisting the millions of people who desperately need help.

**Involved Actors**

Yemen- The site of the current civil war. Yemen has historically existed as a fragile and fractious state, divided along religious and physical lines from outside sources. In recent years however, the country has experienced civil war and conflict. Following the Arab Spring, Yemen ousted


their president of 33 years and the vice-president took over. The Houthi rebels could not abide by this transition of power and launched into open rebellion against the Yemeni government in 2004. The war was further escalated in 2015 with the Saudi-led invasion. Currently there are millions of citizens that require aid and assistance throughout the area, and things are not looking to improve.

Saudi Arabia- The powerhouse and Western-allied Kingdom of Saudi Arabia has created a coalition of the willing of over seven middle-eastern nations. They are contributing an estimated 6 billion dollars a month to the war effort, and leading the charge against the Houthi rebels. Although they have largely outspent and outgunned the rebels, pockets of resistance still remain. Saudi Arabia’s current strategy is to organize a blockade against the port city of Hodeida, preventing much needed food and medical supplies from entering the country. Saudi Arabia is supported by western countries through the use of logistics and intelligence reports. They have received much criticism for their escalation of the war and blatant attacks on civilians.

United Arab Emirates- Another member of the Saudi-Arabia coalition, the UAE has been very adamant in their desire to flush out the Houthis. The UAE is actively committed to scaling down the influence that Iran exerts in the region, and will participate in both regular missions and covert ones to ensure that Sunni Islam remains dominant in the region. The UAE is known to fund various militia groups and other paramilitary organizations that go outside what a state is traditionally allowed to do.

Houthi Rebels or Ansar Allah- A group that originated from Northern Yemen in the mid 1990’s, they are of the Zaidi sect of Islam traditionally, however intelligence reports suggests that a growing number of Sunnis are also joining. They seek political and economic change in Yemen, by advocating for combatting economic underdevelopment and political marginalization in Yemen while seeking greater power for themselves. In 2015 they took over the capital city of Sanaa which resulted in the Saudi Arabian-led coalition. The official slogan of the Houthi’s is “God is Great, Death to America, Death to Israel, Curse on the Jews, Victory to Islam”. The group is overwhelmingly more than likely supported by Iran, but both sides vehemently deny this connection. They still maintain control over many areas in Yemen, but have lost numerous battles against the coalition.

United States- The United States has provided logistical and intelligence to the Saudi Arabian coalition. Many state and non-state actors have accused the United States of being complicit in the humanitarian crisis unfolding in Yemen by providing the Saudis with both logistical support and continuing the regular shipment of arms and equipment.
Al Qaeda in the Arabian Peninsula- An offshoot of Al Qaeda, this group is recognized by the United States as the networks most extreme and violent branch. AQAP is not aligned with any group but itself, and has attacked both Yemeni forces, Houthi forces, and members of the Coalition. They are actively at war with the United States, and are the target of many airstrikes.

**UN Resolutions and Activities**

**S/RES/2014(10/21/2011)**- One of the first resolutions to address the growing secretariat violence in Yemen, this document called upon the Yemeni government to restrict their use of violence, particularly against civilians. This document also advocated for an inclusive and Yemeni-led political process of transition for the government. The security council at this time wanted the Gulf Cooperation Council to facilitate this dialogue, but clearly this would not occur.

**S/RES/2051(6/12/2012)**- This resolution continues the process of attempting to establish a peace treaty with the various factions present in Yemen. It also called for Yemen to restructure the national security and armed forces under a unified force. It also supported the efforts of President Hadi and his move to push the transition process forward. This predates when President Hadi was forced to flee Yemen and obviously is no longer valid.

**S/RES/2140(2/26/2014)**- This resolution attempted to continue the process implemented by the transitional government led by President Hadi following President Saleh being removed from power. It called for the drafting of a new constitution, creating a new electoral law aligned with the new constitution, holding referendums on the new constitution, reforming Yemen into a federal state, and establishing regular and timely general elections.

**S/RES/2201(2/15/2015)**- This was the first resolution in which the actions of the Houthis are mentioned. It deplored the unilateral actions of the Houthi government to dissolve parliament and seize control of the various branches of Yemen’s government. The resolution also expressed grave concerns over reported usage of child soldiers by the Houthis. It demands that the Houthis begin negotiations with the United Nations, withdraw all their forces from government institutions and the capital Sanaa, release President Hadi and other captured government leaders, and that they refrain from further hostile actions.

**S/RES/2216(4/14/2015)**- This resolution reaffirmed its support for the legitimacy of the President Hadi as the legitimate ruler of Yemen. It also made special mention to the deteriorating humanitarian situation in the area, and made mention that an absence of a stable political situation would result in further catastrophe. This resolution noted with concern the actions of former President Saleh and his support of the Houthi rebels which has a destabilizing effect on the region.
S/RES/2342(2/23/17)- This resolution extended out many of the previous resolutions, indicating that the UN realized that their target goals would not be met in containing the escalating violence. It advocated for the continued implementation of an arms embargo against Yemen and further sanctions against the Houthis.

S/RES/2451(12/21/2018)- This resolution supported the dialogue between the Houthis and the Yemeni government that occurred in Stockholm, Sweden. It endorsed the agreements reached by the parties on how to govern the key port city of Hodeidah, as well as the ports of Salif and Ras Issa. It also called on the Yemeni government and the Houthis to cease their impediment of humanitarian goods and services to benefit the civilians of Yemen.

S/RES/2452 (1/16/19)- Established the UN Mission to support the Hodeidah Agreement for 6 months. It lays out most of the plans for ensuring that the cease-fire agreement remains in place, and that humanitarian goods are delivered in a timely manner.

First Person Account

From an interview by Peter Bouckaert, acting director of the Global Observatory on Human Rights at Sea, a Barcelona NGO dedicated to studying maritime migration routes and violations of human rights at sea

Forced to flee Yemen

The brutal conflict in their home country left many of the Yemeni asylum seekers in Mayotte with little choice but to flee abroad. Many described forced recruitment by various militias and, when they fled to other cities in Yemen to seek safety, they often faced similar forced recruitment attempts by other groups, or suspicions that they were spies. Internal exile proved virtually impossible.

Ameen, 43, was a worker in Saudi Arabia who returned to Yemen in September 2016 to visit his family. As soon as he reached his home in the capital Sana’a, Houthi officials came and ordered him to join them as a fighter. When he refused, they forced him into their vehicle which transported him to a Houthi training camp. After just two weeks of training, he was sent to the frontlines to fight, but he managed to escape by
saying he had to use the toilet and running away. He hid at his in-law’s home in Sana’a, where a Houthi rebel leader came to look for him, saying he didn’t care if he found him dead or alive.

After a week in hiding, Ameen, disguised as a woman, fled the city and returned to his work in Saudi Arabia, but in April 2018 he was part of thousands of foreign workers expelled from Saudi Arabia. On his return to Sana’a, he was surprised to learn the Houthis were still searching for him, and immediately went into hiding, obtaining a new passport and then travelling by plane to Khartoum. It took him months to finally make his way south to Madagascar, with a number of costly failed attempts setting him back in his tracks each time. Then he took a boat to Mayotte. He spent an estimated $14,000 on the journey, his entire life savings.

Abdul Ghani, 27, left his native Aden for Sana’a in 2017 for love, not war: he wanted to marry a neighbor’s daughter, and his parents didn’t approve. But the war pursued him in Sana’a, when a Houthi recruiter demanded he become a spy for them in early 2018. Abdul Ghani refused, but the Houthis wouldn’t take no for an answer: a short time later, someone tried to firebomb his home.

He fled back to Aden to escape being recruited but, almost immediately, was detained by the Ansar al-Sharia militia in control of Aden and interrogated. He told them he had fled attempts by the Houthis to recruit him, but Ansar al-Sharia insisted he had to come fight for them and made him complete an “application” to join their movement. Desperate to escape, he lied to them that he first wanted to take his young wife to her in-laws, and instead flew to Khartoum, the only destination he knew that didn’t require visas for Yemenis.

Like many other Yemenis, Abdul Ghani embarked on a desperate journey across the Sahel to reach Europe, find safety and a way to provide for his family in Yemen. First, he crossed the Sahara from Mauritania, western Africa, and made a failed attempt to jump the fence between Morocco and the Spanish territory of Melilla, only to be imprisoned and tortured in Algeria. His wife then sold her wedding jewelry to allow him to travel across the continent to Madagascar and travel by boat to Mayotte

**Questions to Consider:**
What is your country’s opinion on the Yemen civil war? Have they provided any support for the coalition? Is it within the realm of the UN to interfere in a domestic civil war? Does your country support the coalition’s actions? How can your country help to end the humanitarian crisis? What can be done to assist in the transfer of power? Is the Stockholm agreement comprehensive enough to ensure the conflict does not reignite? How can a situation like this be prevented?