

PPWG Assessment – Yemen

Prepared for the United States Atrocity Early Warning Task Force

Conflict Background:

Yemen's political instability began after a 2011 Arab Spring uprising that ousted President Ali Abdullah Saleh from power. Then Vice President Abdrabbuh Mansur Hadi, became Yemen's interim president for what was supposed to be a two-year term, as they moved to a more representative form of government with regular elections. In 2014, channeling the frustration of many Yemenis' complaints of rampant corruption, unemployment, increase in fuel prices, and the subsequent unrest across Yemen including calls for an independent Southern Yemen, the Houthis took control of Yemen. They entered Sana'a in September with the assistance of ex-president Saleh, and put Hadi under house arrest. Saudi Arabia, having already fought with the Houthis in support of Saleh in 2009, were alarmed by the Houthis' control of large parts of Yemen.

After the Houthis took control of Sana'a, Yemen's warring political factions began internal Yemeni peace negotiations, and were on the [verge](#) of a power-sharing deal mediated by former UN envoy Jamal Benomar. In press reports, Benomar indicated that he was completely unaware that Saudi Arabia would begin aid-raids while he was still in Sana'a on his diplomatic mission. With the stated goal of reinstating Hadi to power, Saudi Arabia formed a coalition of nine Arab countries including its major supporter in the war, the United Arab Emirates, and all Gulf Cooperation Council countries except Oman. Saudi Arabia framed the conflict in sectarian terms insisting Iran was supporting the Houthis, an indigenous group. The coalition was backed by the US and the UK. In March 2015, Saudi-led coalition's operations began with airstrikes and a naval blockade against Yemen.

The Saudi government was motivated to support reinstalling Hadi to power for many reasons. They were alarmed by the rise of the Houthis at their southern border who they believed to be backed by their main regional competitor, Iran. Additionally, the Bab al-Mandab Strait off the coast of Yemen is a critical oil shipping lane that links the Red Sea and the Gulf of Aden. This sea route facilitates the movement of millions of barrels of oil per day for Saudi Arabia and is critical to the world's oil supply. The Yemen war has also served the political ambitions of Mohammad bin Salman, who has used this conflict to gain national recognition and consolidate power in Saudi Arabia.

The Saudi/UAE-led coalition's war on Yemen has received almost unwavering military support and weapons sales from the US, UK, France and other Western countries. In 2015, the Obama administration accommodated Saudi Arabia's request for military backing of the coalition's war on Yemen and agreed to provide targeting assistance and logistical support for coalition airstrikes, midair refueling for Saudi war planes, spare parts transfers, and billions of dollars in weapons sales.

During President Trump's time in office, support for the war continued despite the fact that Yemen had become the world's greatest humanitarian crisis and Congress passed several bipartisan resolutions to end unauthorized military participation and weapons sales to Saudi Arabia and the United Arab Emirates. His administration often cited the economic benefits and jobs created from the weapons sales to Saudi Arabia and the UAE as justification to keep the US supporting the Yemen war. The war against the Houthis became a de-facto part of President Trump's maximum pressure campaign against Iran and its proxies in the region. Saudi Arabia, along with the UAE, have often overlaid the threat of Iran in Yemen as part of a larger regional strategy of keeping the US engaged militarily in the Middle East indefinitely, so they can continue to enjoy the benefits of the U.S. security umbrella.

Since a 2020 UN appeal for assistance to the war-torn country came out over a billion-dollar short, alongside a suspension in assistance by the United States Agency for International Development (USAID), and reports of rapidly increasing cases of the novel coronavirus in Yemen, health experts fear there will be a convergence of crises that completely overwhelm the country and have devastating consequences for the population.

Humanitarian work in Yemen is absolutely critical as roughly 4 million people have been displaced and 80 percent of the country's approximately 30 million people rely on some form of assistance for survival. Additionally, the UN has reported that 2.3 million children are expected to suffer from acute malnutrition in 2021 and 400,000 children are projected to suffer from severe acute malnutrition, which is the most extreme form of undernutrition and can lead to death if left untreated. Last March, the Trump administration made drastic cuts to international aid to Yemen, including the suspension of \$73 million in USAID assistance to Houthi-controlled territories in northern Yemen, where currently 80 percent of the population lives. To make matters worse, this suspension of USAID funding occurred alongside a 50 percent cut in aid to most of the country by the World Food Program, the reduction or closing of three quarters of all major United Nations aid programs, and a rollback of World Health Organization programming.

In Secretary of State Pompeo's final weeks in office, he further complicated aid delivery by issuing Foreign Terrorist Organization (FTO) and Specially Designated Global Terrorist (SDGT) designations on the Houthis of Yemen. Despite near unanimous condemnation from the UN, operational humanitarians in Yemen, former career diplomats who served under both Republican and Democratic presidents, and bipartisan members of Congress. While the Houthis share much blame, alongside the Saudi/UAE-led coalition, for horrific human rights violations in Yemen, the designations do nothing to address these concerns. They will, however, prevent the delivery of critical humanitarian assistance to millions of innocent people, greatly hurt the prospects for a negotiated settlement to the conflict, and further undermine U.S. national security interests in the region.

Keeping in place the FTO designation on the Houthis would have continued to exacerbate the crisis by disrupting the flow of much-needed food, medicine, and aid delivery to the majority of Yemen's people. Indeed, leaders of the world's top humanitarian aid organizations working in Yemen warned in a joint statement that an FTO designation on the Houthis "could cause even greater suffering, given the number of people under its jurisdiction, its control over state institutions, and the already frightening levels of food insecurity and humanitarian need across Yemen."

Prior to these designations, commercial shippers have been reluctant to import to Yemen given the high risk of delays, costs, and risks of violence. These designations only increase this level of risk for commercial entities and further places the vital work of humanitarian and peacebuilders at risk. As a result, even if humanitarian exemptions are permitted, financial institutions, shipping firms, and insurance companies, along with aid organizations, are likely to find the risk of potential violations to be too high, resulting in these entities dramatically scaling down or even ending their involvement in Yemen – a decision that would have indescribably severe human consequences.

There have been promising policy changes by the Biden administration since they took office. On February 16th, the State Department lifted the FTO and SDGT designations on the Houthis. On February 4th, the Biden administration announced an end to U.S. military participation and weapons for offensive operations in the Saudi/UAE-led war on Yemen and the appointment of Tim Lenderking as the U.S. envoy to Yemen. While questions remain about the difference between "offensive" and "defensive" support and when the administration plans to reverse the aid suspension to Houthi held territory in northern-Yemen, but these initial steps have been welcomed by the UN, members of Congress, humanitarians, and civil society.

What is clear is the military intervention in Yemen by regional and international actors has only caused more suffering for the people of Yemen. Regional and international actors must stop fueling the war on Yemen and instead work to facilitate a ceasefire agreement between all warring parties, an end to the blockade, an end to the obstruction of trade and humanitarian assistance, and accountability for all violations of human rights.

Ending U.S. military support for the Saudi-UAE led coalition's war in Yemen is not enough to end the violence and humanitarian crises that has continued for several years. The U.S. must restore suspended USAID funding to northern Yemen and pressure the gulf states to support both UN-led peace talks for an immediate ceasefire, and an expansion of aid to all parts of the country.

War and Humanitarian Crisis/Atrocity Risk Factors

- 16.2 million Yemenis are living on the brink of famine
- 80% of 29.8 million people population depends on emergency relief and humanitarian assistance

- Over 2 million Yemenis are infected with cholera
- At least 85,000 children under the age of 5 have died of starvation by 2018
- Yemen has the highest fatality rate in the world from COVID-19 at 29%, which is five times the global average
- In 2020, the UN appeal for aid was short \$1.9 billion
- 3.6 million Yemenis are internally displaced
- At least [230,000](#) people have been killed by 2019, including 18,500 civilians from airstrikes
- The UN has reported that 2.3 million children are expected to suffer from acute malnutrition in 2021 and 400,000 children are projected to suffer from severe acute malnutrition, which can lead to death if left untreated
- The Saudi-led coalition air, land and sea blockade on Yemen has cut off all ports of entry, and restricted the flow of food, fuel, medicine, and essential goods, especially Hodeida port
- The blockade has prevented commercial access to Yemen and has limited humanitarian aid from entering the country at the required levels to accommodate the needs of the roughly 30 million Yemenis
- It has also been documented that Saudi Arabia and the Emirates are obstructing the flow of humanitarian aid into the country, despite the acute need of the millions of Yemenis living on the brink of starvation. This includes UN approved ships that are prevented from entering Hodeida harbor to deliver critical assistance
- Before the war, Yemen relied on foreign imports to provide 90% of its food and currently the coalition determines what and how many goods are allowed in. This can vary greatly. Fuel has been restricted to [1%-15%](#) of what the population needs in the last 6 months.
- In a UN report released in September 2020, it was concluded that the US, UK, and France, may be complicit in war crimes, by providing military aid, intelligence sharing, logistical support, and weapons to the Saudi-UAE led coalition war on Yemen.
- The UN report documents horrific violations of international law including illegal Saudi-UAE airstrikes targeting civilian and agricultural infrastructure, arbitrary killings, torture, detention, as well as sexual violence against women
- The utter collapse of the Yemeni economy and the devaluation of the Yemeni currency plunged millions of Yemenis into sudden poverty
- All internal Yemeni conflict parties exasperated corruption on all levels (economic, political, and humanitarian related corruption)
- All major external (regional and international) parties fueled the internal Yemeni infighting which resulted in expanding the conflict throughout the country (Previously southern Yemen was relatively peaceful. However, moving Hadi to Southern Yemen expanded the conflict to the South as well).

Recommendations

For the State Department

- Prohibit military support to the Saudi/UAE led coalition, including targeting assistance, intel sharing, logistical support, and spare parts transfers, used for airstrikes
- Prohibit the sale of weapons to Saudi Arabia and the UAE
- Reverse the aid suspension on northern-Yemen and quickly restore and expand humanitarian assistance to all parts of Yemen, in line with UN appeals
- Push for a new UN Security Council Resolution that calls on the international community to stop supplying weapons and military support to all warring parties, that calls for an end to the Saudi-led coalition blockade on ports of entry, that calls for an end to obstruction of humanitarian aid by all parties, and calls for a nationwide ceasefire and a peace process that includes all parts of Yemeni society
- Immediately call on Saudi Arabia and the UAE to lift the blockade on all ports of entry to Yemen
- Publicly call on the UAE to end its occupation and annexation of Socotra and other parts of Yemen
- Work to expand funding to the WHO and call for Yemen's COVAX share to increase
- Call on all parties to support a nationwide ceasefire and good-faith negotiations
- Call on Saudi Arabia and the UAE to meet and expand funding pledges for humanitarian and reconstruction for Yemen
- Call on regional actors involved in the Yemen conflict to pay reparations for the millions of Yemeni people that lost their lives, livelihoods, and were displaced from their homes due to indiscriminate air-raids and bombings
- Initiate/facilitate a dialogue between the Saudi government and the Houthi to live in peace as neighbors. This approach could greatly mitigate the Houthi reliance on Iranian support. Creating peace between the Saudis and Yemeni would lead to economic benefits and stability for both sides. This type of diplomacy will be applauded by the region and improve the U.S. reputation as a peacemaker.

For the Department of Defense

- Prohibit military support to the Saudi/UAE led coalition, including targeting assistance, intel sharing, logistical support, and spare parts transfers, used for airstrikes
- Prohibit the sale of weapons to Saudi Arabia and the UAE
- End any U.S. military support for the Saudi/UAE-led coalition's air, land, and sea blockade Yemen

For USAID

- End the suspension of aid to northern-Yemen and push for a restoration and expanded humanitarian aid to all parts of Yemen
- Expand funding to the WHO and call for Yemen's COVAX share to increase

- Expand humanitarian funding programming to address acute malnutrition, cholera, dengue fever, and COVID-19, to at least FY2019 levels of 746 million
- Invest in training of youth on nonviolent approaches to conflict resolution
- Invest in programs to bring Yemeni women to the negotiations table
- Invest in training of community peacebuilding advocates as Yemen prepares for national dialogues to prevent hate speech, ethnic cleansing, and rise in terrorism. All political actors in the entire country need to undergo training on resolving conflict without violence

For Congress

- Pass new legislation to permanently end military support and weapons sales for the Saudi/UAE led coalition's war on Yemen
- Publicly call for an end to the Saudi blockade on all ports of entry into Yemen
- Work to make public the nature of any U.S. military support for, and the humanitarian impact of, the Saudi/UAE-led coalition's blockade on Yemen
- Publicly urge donors, including Saudi Arabia and the UAE, to meet and expand humanitarian funding pledges to Yemen to address the crisis and support reconstruction
- Call on all parties to support a nationwide ceasefire and good-faith negotiations to end the Yemen war and support a peace process that includes all parts of Yemen's society
- Hold hearings on the Biden administration's plans to address the conflict and address the humanitarian crisis
- Provide ample funding for the humanitarian response to Yemen
- Pressure the warring parties to end their weaponization of food, fuel, and other imported commodities
- Urge the State Department support a new and more balanced UN Security Council Resolution for Yemen, that supports a nationwide ceasefire, calls for an end to the blockade and humanitarian aid obstruction, ends any type of military support or weapons sales to the warring parties, and works to engage all parties in political dialogue towards a peaceful resolution to the conflict