



P.C. Amr Nabil via Associated Press

The Yemeni Conflict: Proxy War and the Start of Saudi Withdrawal

On April 9, Yemen witnessed the first cessation of hostilities since 2016, establishing a de-escalation period that could end the five-year war between the Saudi-backed Hadi government and the southern separatist forces.⁸ The original ceasefire, a unilateral decision made by the Saudi government, was due to the possible spread of coronavirus across Yemen.⁹ The global pandemic has created an opportunity for the Saudis to end their costly involvement.

While several internationally-supported factions are fighting this conflict, including the Saudi-backed government, the Iranian-backed Houthis, and the UAE-backed Southern Transitional Council (STC), the beginning of a ceasefire by the Saudis in the North paves the way for a long-term peace agreement.¹⁰ This is because Saudi Arabia's invasion changed the internal dynamics of the conflict, further exacerbating the violence.

The civil war began as a conflict between the Yemeni government and the Houthis, who received modest support from Iran. To combat Iranian influence in the region, Saudi Arabia launched military campaigns into Yemen, shifting the conflict to a proxy war. The original issues that led to war, including ethnic inequality, severe economic poverty, and oppressive regimes, only worsened.

The global pandemic has given Saudi Arabia a reason to withdraw its forces from Yemen without appearing to concede to Iran. The removal of the Saudi military force, a key aggressor in this civil conflict, allows for increased domestic control and paves the way for other actors, such as the United Nations, to end humanitarian suffering.

The Fine Line Between Proxy Wars and Civil Conflict

While the spread of COVID-19 in Yemen and Syria remains a critical threat, the pandemic may pave the way for peace by refocusing these conflicts on internal struggles of oppression.

Referring to the Syrian and Yemeni conflicts as proxy wars draws focus away from domestic disputes. Ignoring decades of domestic alienation and discrimination by the authoritarian regimes in power, the Syrian and Yemeni civil wars have forgotten their roots in the Arab Spring. By focusing on the role of external actors, such as Iran and Saudi Arabia in Yemen, and Russia, Turkey, and the US in Syria, these multifaceted conflicts are incorrectly reduced to proxy wars.

Understanding the conflict through external proxies complicates the peace process because the disputes are perceived solely as a war between Shiites and Sunnis in Yemen and as an extension of the US Cold War in Syria. By ignoring the years of oppression marginalized communities have faced in Syria and Yemen in favor of international interests, the prospect of finding long-term peace within these conflicts is lost.

The long-term effects of the coronavirus pandemic in the Middle East are unpredictable; however, the withdrawal of international powers from the region helps bring domestic issues to the forefront. The pandemic may help shift focus to reestablishing peace and protecting vulnerable civilian populations, a silver lining amid chaos.



Yemen Behind the Headlines

By Nadia Mokhallati and Alex Norris

P.C. Sami Jassar via Save the Children

Amidst the coronavirus pandemic, Yemen continues to suffer from a humanitarian crisis that has been described as the worst in the world.

Twenty-four million Yemenis—almost 80 percent of the population—are in desperate need of humanitarian assistance, with 50 percent of children under the age of five suffering from acute malnutrition. A non-international armed conflict, an acute water shortage, a widespread famine, and other factors indicate that the crisis is far from resolution. In light of the pandemic, the country needs a robust humanitarian response.

History of the Crisis

While the current conflict began in 2015, tensions in Yemen can be traced back to 1967 when British forces withdrew from the South, leaving the country divided as two separate entities—the Yemeni Arab Republic in the North and the People's Democratic Republic of Yemen in the South. For over 30 years, the country remained divided; even today, the modern republic of Yemen continues to face sectarian divisions that play a role in the current crisis.

After the unification of the two entities in 1990, Ali Abdullah Saleh, the ruler of the Yemeni Arab Republic since 1978, became the first President of Yemen. Shortly after, the Houthi movement formed, a group founded by Zaydi Shiites in Yemen who have continuously challenged Saleh's authority.¹ The past decade has seen a climax in

political unrest between the Houthi movement and the Yemeni government.

During the Arab Spring in 2011, a coalition of opposition groups pressured President Saleh to step down.² After failed attempts to appease the protestors, Saleh finally agreed to resign in 2012.

What seemed like a political achievement

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'Before 2011, the situation was excellent—after 2011, all safety [was] gone.'³

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then only marked the beginning of further conflict in the region—the country broke into civil war in 2015. Today, Yemen remains fractured between the influences of the Saudi-supported Yemeni government, Iranian-backed Houthi forces, and Al-Qaeda in the Arabian Peninsula.

As a result of this political turmoil, innocent civilians face devastating conditions, including widespread displacement, a blockade preventing access to food and medicine, and a famine.¹

As one Yemeni woman from a rural village outside Sana'a reported anonymously, "Before 2011, the situation was excellent—after 2011, all safety [was] gone."³

Yemen is Running Out of Food and Water

The ongoing drought has undercut access to potable water. In rural areas—where 70 percent of Yemenis currently reside—access to clean piped water is virtually nonexistent.⁴

The same Yemeni woman noted, “The water is unsafe to drink, and this has infected people with cholera, and it has caused so many deaths.”⁵

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With a recent history of epidemics, an insufficient healthcare system, and a huge population of internally displaced citizens, Yemen is at a high-risk for a COVID-19 outbreak.

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The water shortage increases the possibility of disease outbreaks, such as cholera and Acute Watery Diarrhea (AWD). Since 2017, one of the largest outbreaks of cholera in recorded history has plagued large portions of Yemen, infecting over two million people and killing thousands each year.⁶ Furthermore, with a compromised healthcare system, Yemen remains a breeding ground for emerging diseases.

Aside from the lack of clean water, food scarcity and malnutrition are also alarmingly widespread.

As a Yemeni woman described, “The issue of providing minimal daily food is a huge problem, especially after the government salaries stopped and the war-zones have expanded.”³

With 1.8 million children suffering from acute malnutrition every year and 400,000 cholera

cases threatening their lives, the famine is the main contributor to the deaths of 30,000 Yemeni children each year.

Not only has the famine affected the current population, but it also has implications on Yemen’s future generations. As a result of malnutrition, over one million pregnant and lactating women are anemic and their newborns are often underweight or in poor health. The weakness of future generations perpetuates a vicious cycle of poor physical and mental development.⁷

The conflict has also resulted in heightened drug abuse, dependence on which has drained much of Yemen’s already limited income, water, and land supply.

The drug in question is known as “Qat” (or “Khat”), a plant that, when chewed, produces amphetamine-like effects.⁸ Qat is used as an appetite suppressant, but in Yemen, it has become a normalized method of escaping reality.⁹ Many Yemeni adults use the plant daily.

Humanitarian Aid During a Global Pandemic

With a recent history of epidemics, an insufficient healthcare system, and a huge population of internally displaced citizens, Yemen is at a high-risk for a COVID-19 outbreak. Nationwide, only 500 ventilators and 700 ICU beds exist to serve a population of 30 million people, half of whom the WHO projects will be infected.

The COVID-19 pandemic poses new challenges to humanitarian aid efforts in Yemen. The nation cannot afford any cuts in their humanitarian support, but it seems humanitarian aid could face a steep decline with organizations and donors redirecting funding toward domestic coronavirus responses. International aid has significantly waned. In early June, for example, a Saudi-led fundraiser for Yemen fell short of its goal by over one billion dollars.¹⁰

Humanitarian responses are a lifeline for millions of Yemeni civilians. As the coronavirus pandemic creates new and unprecedented challenges for the nation, the need for a sizable humanitarian response is more necessary than ever before.

Annexation: Perspectives of Peace and Conflict

The Israeli-Palestinian conflict is one of the greatest geopolitical conflicts in human history. The land between the Jordan River and the Mediterranean Sea is the region both Israelis and Palestinians recognize as their homeland, thus creating religious, cultural, and political strife.

In January, President Trump devised a peace plan, aiming to put the decades-long conflict to an end—a plan that allows Israel to annex nearly 30 percent of the West Bank, including the Jordan Valley.¹

The Trump Plan follows years of diplomatic initiatives, most notably the 1995 Oslo Accords, in which Israel

retained control of nearly 60 percent of the West Bank in Area C. The other 40 percent was divided into two Palestinian areas: Area A, which is under Palestinian governance and military rule, and Area B, which is under Palestinian governance but Israeli military rule.

Many Israelis and Palestinians have rejected the Trump Plan for fear of instability and illegitimacy. However, a deeper investigation into the hearts and minds of Israelis and Palestinians as well as a consideration of the historical context of this issue, reveals insights about the conflict that are crucial for progress toward peace.

