

Arrogance and Avarice and a Lust For Power

How the Yemen Civil War Is Both A Humanitarian Crisis and a Source of
Billions For America and Saudi Arabia

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Dante wrote that “the hottest places in Hell are reserved for those who in times of great moral crisis, maintain their neutrality”. We must ask ourselves, as educated people, as moral beings, as citizens of the most powerful country on Earth, what history will say of our blind eyes in the face of “the worst humanitarian crisis of our time” taking place today in Yemen. We must ask ourselves and our elected officials how the fourteenth wealthiest nation in the world, one with such a lengthy documented history of horrific authoritarian tendencies, still needs and receives such vast amounts of American arms¹? How are American businesses still allowed to profit on atrocities that are being committed against civilians using American arms? How did Yemen’s failed Arab Spring uprising lead to the chaos that now exists and how can this conflict end?

The Who, What, Where, When, Why

In 2014, Iran-aligned Houthi rebels took control over northern and central Yemen, the Middle East’s poorest nation. They drove out the internationally recognized government from the capital of Sanaa and in early 2015, a Saudi-led and American backed coalition began a brutal air campaign to prevent rebels from overrunning the country’s south. The latest numbers show tens of thousands of civilians killed and hundreds of thousands dead, more likely unaccounted

¹ Suneson, Grant. “These Are the 25 Richest Countries in the World.” USA Today. Gannett Satellite Information Network, July 8, 2019.

for². Over fifteen million people are on the brink of starvation and cholera runs rampant throughout the population³. Meanwhile, the American government and contractors make billions selling arms and training to the coalition as there is no end to the conflict in sight. Allegations of war crimes committed by both sides have been reported by the United Nations⁴. There are many key players to consider: the internationally recognized government of Yemen, the Houthi rebels, al-Qaeda, the coalition, the United States, as well as the United Nations. And, as with any war, bullets and bombs make it go ‘round, so examining the businesses that are funding this war is an important part of the conversation.

Located in the southern part of the Arabian Peninsula, Yemen has Saudi Arabia to its north and Oman to the east, with the Red Sea to the west. In May 1990, the Yemen Arab Republic (North Yemen) merged with the People’s Democratic Republic of Yemen (South Yemen). Sanaa, formerly the capital of North Yemen, became the political capital of the country, while Aden, formerly the capital of South Yemen, functions as the economic center⁵. Since the

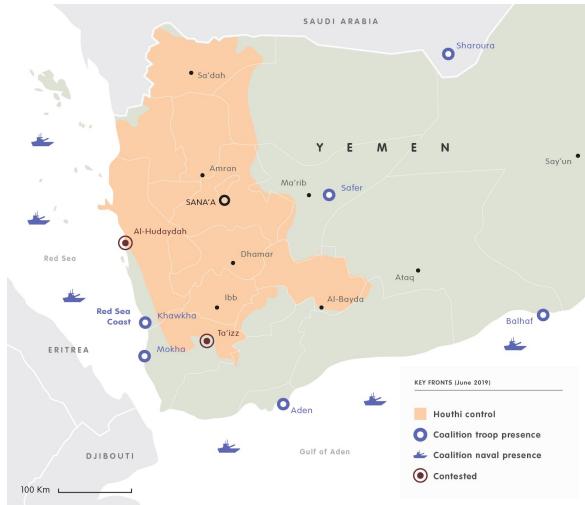
² Magdy | AP, Samy. “Report: Death Toll from Yemen's War Hit 100,000 since 2015.” The Washington Post. WP Company, October 31, 2019.

³ “Yemen Refugee Crisis: Aid, Statistics and News: USA for UNHCR.” Yemen Refugee Crisis: Aid, Statistics and News | USA for UNHCR. The United Nations Refugee Agency. Accessed October 31, 2019.

⁴ Cumming-bruce, Nick. “War Crimes Committed by Both Sides in Yemen, U.N. Panel Says.” The New York Times. The New York Times, September 3, 2019.

⁵ Wenner, Manfred W., and Robert Burrowes. “Yemen.” Encyclopædia Britannica. Encyclopædia Britannica, inc., October 3, 2019.

beginning of the war, the nation is largely divided into control by the Houthis, Coalition troops, and Al-Qaeda.



Key Front Lines in Yemen Civil War as of June 2019⁶

The Houthi movement is made up of Yemen's Zaidi Shia Muslim minority, who fought a series of rebellions against Former President Ali Abdullah Saleh during the previous decade. They are loyal to the Former President Saleh, who was ousted in 2011 and was thought to back his enemies in a bid to regain power. When President Abdarbuh Mansour Hadi took power in 2011, the Houthi rebels took control of the northern Saada province. In September 2014, the rebels secured control over Sanaa. The largely Shiite army has assault weapons with the

⁶ Baron, Adam. "Mapping the Yemen Conflict." Mapping the Yemen conflict . | European Council on Foreign Relations, July 2019.

movements' slogan emblazoned on them: "God is great! Death to America! Death to Israel! A curse on the Jews! Victory for Islam!"⁷.

Following the Houthi occupation of Sanaa, a group of nations known as the coalition (Saudi Arabia, the UAE, Jordan, Bahrain, Egypt, Kuwait, Morocco, Pakistan, Djibouti, Senegal, Sudan, Qatar and Malaysia) began to launch airstrikes against the rebels in support of the internationally recognized government of President Hadi.

Iran also has had an increasing presence in Yemeni politics since 2010 and after President Saleh resigned in 2011, he turned to Tehran for aid. Analysts believe it was likely the Iranians who forged an alliance between the Houthis and their former adversary. While they have no troops on the ground nor have publicly stated support for the rebels, the U.S. Navy intercepted an Iranian ship carrying 40 tons of military supplies into the country.

Saudi Arabia and the United States have been tenuous allies for decades following the discovery of oil in 1938. Since then, there are deep business and security ties that managed to survive the 1973 oil embargo and 9/11⁸. Relations are also cemented by a geopolitical alliance against Iran, as well as \$109.3 billion worth of "offensive weapons, surveillance equipment, transportation, parts, and training" in the past decade⁹.

⁷ Niarchos, Stavros. "Making War." *The New Yorker* 93, no. 45 (2018): 30.

⁸ "U.S.-Saudi Arabia Relations." *Council on Foreign Relations*, Council on Foreign Relations.

⁹ Kane, Alex. "Here's Exactly Who's Profiting from the War on Yemen." In These Times, May 20, 2019.

Following the beginning of the Civil War in 2015 and the Saudi-led bombings, Saudi diplomats in Washington assured the West that the war would be over in six weeks, leading to a U.N. Security Council authorization that legitimized their intervention. According to the then Deputy Assistant Secretary of Defense for Middle East Policy Andrew Exum, “the [Obama] Administration was unsure about whether it wanted to be involved in the war”. Despite skepticism toward the Saudi war plan and evidence of civilian casualties, the Administration authorized a weapons sale worth \$1.29 billion in November 2015¹⁰.

Since 2016, the United States and the Saudi's have had improved relations, largely due to the warm relationship between President Trump and Crown Prince Muhammed bin Salman. Events like the horrific murder of journalist Jamal Khashoggi has done little to dim the fire between the two despite congressional and international condemnation¹¹. In May, the Trump Administration moved forward with a \$8.1 billion arms deal with Saudi Arabia¹².

The United Kingdom has provided weaponry and training to members of the coalition¹³. The United Nations considers Yemen to be the world's largest and worst humanitarian crisis. In October of 2018, the EU parliament called on member states to suspend weapon sales to Saudi

¹⁰ Niarchos, Stavros. "Making War." *The New Yorker* 93, no. 45 (2018): 30.

¹¹ "U.S.-Saudi Arabia Relations." *Council on Foreign Relations*, Council on Foreign Relations.

¹² Robiou, Marcia. "What You Need to Know About Trump's \$8 Billion Saudi Arms Deal." PBS. Public Broadcasting Service, July 16, 2019.

¹³ Roth, Kenneth. "World Report 2019: Rights Trends in Yemen." *Human Rights Watch*, 17 Jan. 2019.

Arabia amid calls for sanctions against whoever was actively obstructing humanitarian assistance

¹⁴.

There are many American businesses profiting off of the civil war. Their weapons are being used by the coalition, leading to, according to the Armed Conflict Location & Event Data Project, over 100,000 people dead¹⁵. The largest American profiteer is Boeing, who has made over 21 billion dollars selling weapons and parts to Saudi Arabia over the past ten years. 1.2 billion worth of their sales have been in relation to the Yemen civil war. Their sales have included 82 helicopters, 84 fighter jets, and 6,000 guided missile kits that have been linked to 180 deaths. Lockheed Martin has made over 7.2 billion dollars from the Saudi's in the past decade, including selling four warships, 165 targeting systems, and thousands of Hellfire missiles. They have received \$1.36 billion in maintenance and support contracts during the war. Companies such as General Electric, Raytheon and General Dynamics have collectively made over \$3.124 billion selling weapons to the Saudi's in the past decade and produced tens of thousands of anti-tank missiles, guided bombs, and hundreds of fighter jets¹⁶.

¹⁴ Roth, Kenneth. "World Report 2019: Rights Trends in Yemen." *Human Rights Watch*, 17 Jan. 2019

¹⁵ Magdy | AP, Samy. "Report: Death Toll from Yemen's War Hit 100,000 since 2015." The Washington Post. WP Company, October 31, 2019.

¹⁶ Kane, Alex. "Here's Exactly Who's Profiting from the War on Yemen." In These Times, May 20, 2019.

What Do The Experts Tell Us?

In *Regime and Periphery in Northern Yemen: The Houthi Phenomenon*, Salmoni describes how “the [Houthi-Government of Yemen] conflict pits a conventional military using heavy weapons against an unconventional opponent made up of small groups of temporary fighters”¹⁷. This war is not a traditional one with armies in line on a battlefield, or a modern one waged through technology and hegemonic power, but one between groups with decades of historical turmoil that has been seized by larger powers to be their business venture and proxy war.

Clayton Thomas, an analyst of Middle Eastern Affairs at the Congressional Research Service, published a paper titled “Arms Sales In The Middle East: Trends and Analytical Perspectives For U.S. Policy”. He examines the sale of American arms to seven Middle Eastern nations as well as the intents that these nations have and what they did with those weapons. He discusses the tension in the government between “values and security”, about trying to walk the line between admonishing nations over human rights abuses while also maintaining “the security implications of potentially harming cooperation with partner governments”. He wrote how “proponents of the sale argued that such technologies serve to minimize the risk of civilian casualties, defended Saudi Arabia’s right to legitimate self-defense, and warned about the overall

¹⁷ Salmoni, Barak A., Bryce Loidolt, and Madeleine Wells. *Regime and Periphery in Northern Yemen: The Houthi Phenomenon*. RAND Corporation, 2010.

impact on U.S. efforts to combat Iranian influence, describing the Houthis as Iranian ‘proxies’”, describing how “opponents of the sale cited a number of concerns, including Saudi Arabia’s reliability as an ally, human rights concerns within the kingdom and the government’s role in promoting extremism, and the sale’s potential to downgrade Israel’s qualitative edge, among others”. Thomas notes how while Yemen had received 31 million dollars worth of defense articles and services between 2000-2009, whereas Saudi Arabia received 12,656 million in that same time period, demonstrating the divide between support of the nations even before the civil war started¹⁸.

In September of 2018, the United Nations Human Rights Council published a report on the situation of human rights in Yemen which includes violations and abuses since the civil war began in 2014. This report “examined alleged violations and abuses of international law committed by parties of the conflict,” using “international humanitarian law, international refugee law and international criminal law”. It found that participating parties in Yemen have committed many violations of international law, including attacks affecting civilians, restrictions on humanitarian aid access, arbitrary detentions, enforced disappearances, torture, violations of freedom of expression, sexual violence, and child recruitment. The report is especially critical of

¹⁸ Thomas, Clayton. "ARMS SALES IN THE MIDDLE EAST: TRENDS AND ANALYTICAL PERSPECTIVES FOR U.S. POLICY." *Current Politics and Economics of the Middle East* 8, no. 4 (2017): 477-529.

Saudia Arabia and the United Arab Emirates, who “may have conducted attacks in violation of the principles of distinction, proportionality, and precautions” as well as “cruel treamtent and torture, outrages upon personal dignity, rape and conscripting [...] children under the age of 15” that may amount to war crimes. They found that there have been at least 16,706 documented civilian deaths between March 2015 and June of 2018, however admit that the number is likely significantly higher in reality¹⁹.

Where Do We Go From Here?

“Civil wars leave nothing but tombs,” wrote French poet Alphonse de Lamartine. The path out of war is born of sweat and grit and piles of bodies on both sides too high to keep score of anymore. It is either a war of attrition or one of mutual exhaustion. This is not a war where one nation can simply drop a nuclear weapon on another to force a surrender, this is a war for one single homeland. Instead, the warring sides will have to either defeat the other or both come to the table to scrap together some sort of agreement that neither will like but will tolerate to end the bloodshed.

¹⁹ “Situation of Human Rights in Yemen, Including Violations and Abuses Since September 2019.” United Nations Human Rights. Office of the High Commissioner, December 17, 2018.

On November 5th, the internationally recognised government of Yemen, led by President Hadi, and the secessionist Southern Transitional Council (STC) signed the Riyadh Agreement which averted a civil war within a civil war. After the assassination of a high ranking STC military commander, the STC suspected the official government had had a hand in it and took Aden by force and claimed all the land that formerly belonged to South Yemen. Following three months of standoff that threatened the delicate balance of the anti-Houthi bloc, Saudi Arabia intervened. The agreement calls for the formation of a new, Aden-based, 24-member government comprising equal numbers of northern and southern ministers and for integration of STC-affiliated forces into national military and security structures as part of an initiative that will see fighters and heavy weapons removed from towns and cities across the south. In addition, it stipulates that the STC be included in government delegations to future UN-led talks with the Houthis over a political settlement to end the war. “Diplomats and UN officials say they are hopeful that the agreement will clear a path to a national-level political settlement”²⁰.

Following their claim a week before that they were responsible for the attacks against Saudi oil fields (a claim nearly everyone believes to be false and actually the work of the Iranians), On September 20th, the Houthis announced a unilateral suspension of strikes on Saudi

²⁰ Salisbury, Peter. “The Beginning of the End of Yemen’s Civil War?” International Crisis Group, November 8, 2019.

Arabia in return for a halt of Saudi airstrikes and the lifting of restrictions on their territory.

While the Saudis have not fully suspended airstrikes, they claim to have lessened them in some areas and helped facilitate the entry of fuel shipments to aid their fuel crisis. In response, the Houthis released almost 300 prisoners, including 3 Saudis. Both sides have given singles for a desire of de-escalation and have reportedly opened some back-channel discussions. As Alley describes, “the political stars are aligning in a way that offers an offramp from a war that has caused immeasurable humanitarian damage and threatens to become a trigger for a regional conflagration”. She goes on to argue that the U.S. “who has been complicit in Riyadh’s war and could now encourage its Saudi allies to reach an understanding with the Houthis that includes significant reductions in cross-border attacks”, which could search to place the bedrock for a U.N. brokered peace talks²¹.

Not only should the United States do all power through its diplomatic channels to aid a cease-fire and peace agreement, but it also has a chance to send a powerful message to the world. The most powerful way for Congress to stand up for Yemen is to simply suspend the transfer of weapons to Saudi- and Emirati-led coalition countries in the upcoming NDAA, a law that

²¹ Alley, April Longley. “How To End The War With Yemen.” *Foreign Policy*, October 15, 2019.

Congress passes each year to outline the budget and expenditures of the US Department of

Defense. Scott Paul lays out what should be included in it;

“it should be long enough to matter (ideally two years), it should be unconditional and

without any presidential waiver with respect to aerial bombs, which have been

consistently used in violation of the law of war, if other weapons (other than aerial

bombs) are conditioned, they should be conditioned on progress toward a political

settlement and support for the economy and aid delivery, it should apply to all member

countries in the Saudi- and Emirati-led coalition, and it should apply to all transfers of

arms, even those already licensed”²².

This plan is widely supported in Congress yet the Trump Administration has publically lauded

their large arms deals with the Saudis.

If Congress truly wants to right the wrongs it has supported, it should, in conjunction

with the business who have made billions on thousands of civilian casualties, support all

investigations into any allegations that they may be complicit in war crimes and offer financial

restitution to the innocents who have been killed with our weapons. It should send medical

supplies and teams to help with the widespread cholera and other medical issues. Land of the

²² Paul, Scott, Charles Porter, Ethel M. Janok, Ethel Janok, Alex July, and Tanterrian Taylor. “End the Arms Sales, End the Suffering.” The Politics of Poverty, June 6, 2019.

free, Americans cheer, and yet what is the morality of being a hegemonic power merely for neocolonial capitalistic gains when it has all the power and resources necessary to change the world? We frequently look to our president as being the Leader of the Free World, yet we are silent in the face of the war crimes we, at the very least, knowingly propped up.

Can American greatness be more than standing atop a pile of bodies and declaring victory? Can we be great when weighed against the souls of those we crushed to get to the top? Let us not look away from the empty eyes and starving stomachs of these children. Let not Anubis weigh our hearts against a feather and find it heavy with capitalistic sins, for history will always remember America as the Merchant of Death.



This image of 7-year-old Amal Hussain in October drew global attention to the humanitarian crisis caused by the Saudi-led war in Yemen, where the U.N. says 14 million could be on the edge of starvation. On Nov. 1, Amal's family said she had died in a refugee camp²³

²³ Karman, Tawakkol. "This Photo of a Girl Starving in Yemen Helped Define 2018." Time. Time, December 20, 2018.