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## Issue Brief

# Yemen: The Forgotten War

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One of Middle East's bloodiest conflicts is also one, which is most overlooked. The almost three year old war in Yemen has killed more than 10,000 people and triggered a massive humanitarian crisis. But press coverage has been minimal, overshadowed by other events regarding ISIS in Syria and Iraq.

The Yemen conflict comprises of two sides. On one end are the Houthi rebels backed by Iran. On the other is the former Yemini government of Abdrabbuh Mansur Hadi backed by a coalition of ten countries led by Saudi Arabia, who is also ultimately backed by the United States. Civil war in the country erupted in 2015, when the Houthis, a Shia group who receive money and weapons from Iran<sup>1</sup> took up arms to overthrow Yemen's government claiming that the government discriminated against them for years, mistreated them on a large scale and that their fight is a fight to be treated fairly. Many in the region by contrast see the situation very differently. They view it as a shadow war between Saudi Arabia and Iran for control over the entire region.

While the Saudis are leading the campaign, the blame also lies directly on the US who is directly sponsoring the carnage. The US has supported the Kingdom of Saudi Arabia's (KSA) military since World War II, selling arms, providing military aid and training the Saudis on how to use US manufactured planes and other weapons. The most recent defence deal between the two countries shows twenty

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<sup>1</sup> <http://www.reuters.com/article/us-yemen-security-iran-idUSKCN12K0CX>

damage replacements - the battle of course is Yemen.<sup>2</sup> The weapons the US sells also include cluster bombs banned by most of the international community and F-15 fighter planes<sup>3</sup> which make up a mass bulk of what the Saudi air force is using to bomb Yemen. The biggest factor of the civilian killings from the start has been the Saudi air strikes. Human Rights Watch has documented the coalition using internationally banned cluster munitions in at least 16 attacks that targeted populated areas, killing and wounding dozens and has identified six types of air-dropped and ground-launched cluster munitions in multiple locations in Yemen<sup>4</sup>, including those produced in the US and Brazil. This has been further evidenced by Amnesty International that has documented the use of UK-made cluster munitions.

This war has evolved into a bloody stalemate. The indiscriminate bombing prompted the United Nations to investigate. A United Nations panel of experts has concluded that most of Saudi airstrikes on Yemen over the past two years have not actually targeted legitimate military positions. In a report sent to the Security Council, the UN monitors state that Riyadh's failure to meet international humanitarian law requirements of proportionality and precautions could amount to war crimes. According to the report, the Saudi warplanes killed nearly three hundred Yemeni civilians, including at least 100 women and children between March and October 2016.<sup>5</sup> The panel further described the Saudi war on its impoverished southern neighbour as devastating to both infrastructure and civilians.

"In eight of the 10 investigations, the panel found no evidence that the airstrikes had targeted legitimate military objectives,"<sup>6</sup> the experts said in the 63-page report, which was presented to the UN Security Council on January 27, 2017.

The UN has estimated that 10,000 people have died in the fighting; 370,000 are malnourished children and 10,000 other children have already died from preventable disease, while nearly 3 million people have been pushed out of their homes in the last year of fighting alone.<sup>7</sup> In a report just published by UNICEF, at least one child dies every 10 minutes in Yemen.<sup>8</sup> The United Nations has also warned of a

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<sup>2</sup> <http://www.defenseone.com/business/2016/08/us-tank-deal-exposes-saudi-losses-yemen-war/130623/>

<sup>3</sup> <http://www.thehindu.com/opinion/lead/Such-a-long-silence-on-Yemen/article14582324.ece>

<sup>4</sup> <https://www.hrw.org/world-report/2017/country-chapters/yemen>

<sup>5</sup> <http://www.telegraph.co.uk/news/2017/01/31/un-experts-say-yemen-opponents-may-have-committed-war-crimes/>

<sup>6</sup> <https://www.rt.com/news/375549-un-yemen-strikes-war-crime/>

<sup>7</sup> <http://news.antiwar.com/2017/01/16/un-reports-yemen-death-toll-has-passed-10000/>

<sup>8</sup> <http://www.aljazeera.com/news/2016/12/unicef-child-dies-10-minutes-yemen-161212192354606.html>

looming “humanitarian catastrophe”<sup>9</sup> in Yemen, as the conditions in the country deteriorate due to heavy fighting. A joint assessment by UN agencies says that the number of food insecure people in Yemen has risen by three million in seven months, with an estimated 17.1 million people – more than two-thirds of the entire population of 27.4 million – now struggling to feed themselves. The United Nations aid chief Stephen O'Brien has stated that Yemen is sliding deeper into humanitarian crisis and could face famine this year.<sup>10</sup>

According to Human Rights World Report 2017<sup>11</sup>, parties in Yemen’s armed conflict violated the laws of war with impunity. The organisation has documented 58 apparently unlawful coalition airstrikes since the start of the campaign, which have killed nearly 800 civilians and hit homes, markets, hospitals, schools, civilian businesses, and mosques. Some attacks have included airstrikes on a crowded market in northern Yemen on March 15, 2016 that killed 97 civilians, including 25 children, and another on a crowded funeral in Sanaa in October that killed over 100 civilians and wounded hundreds more. Human Rights Watch have also investigated 18 apparently unlawful strikes, some of which used US or UK-supplied weapons, on 14 civilian economic sites. Following the attacks, many of the factories ended production and as a result, hundreds of workers lost their livelihoods. Moreover, numerous airstrikes unlawfully struck or damaged health facilities in Yemen. On August 15, 2016, a Saudi-led coalition airstrike hit a Medecins Sans Frontiers (MSF)-supported hospital in Hajja, killing 19 people- this was the fourth attack against an MSF facility in less than a year.

In August 2016, the Saudi Arabian-led coalition lashed out at rights groups' evidence that it is causing a humanitarian catastrophe in the country by blocking aid and goods bound for the country.<sup>12</sup> However in an open letter to Saudi-Led Coalition Joint Incidents Assessment Team (JIAT) on January 13, 2017- the Saudi-led coalition’s investigative mechanism - Humans Right Watch stated that the JIAT is failing to meet international standards regarding transparency, impartiality, and independence. In 10 of the 14 strikes JIAT investigated, JIAT absolved the coalition of responsibility for alleged violations; often reaching different factual and legal conclusions than the UN or human rights organisations that had documented the same strikes. Also, while the JIAT recommended the coalition pay reparations to victims of three of these attacks and that appropriate action be taken against officers involved in two of

<sup>9</sup> <http://webtv.un.org/news-features/watch/yemen-conditions-worsening-humanitarian-catastrophe-looms-warns-un/5318715737001>

<sup>10</sup> <https://www.rte.ie/news/2017/0127/848069-yemen-humanitarian-crisis/>

<sup>11</sup> <https://www.hrw.org/world-report/2017/country-chapters/yemen>

<sup>12</sup> <http://www.middleeasteye.net/news/saudi-led-coalition-denies-blocking-yemen-aid-1372092741>

these incidents, Human Rights Watch said that it was unaware of any concrete steps taken to put a reparation process in place or to hold individual officers accountable for possible war crimes<sup>13</sup>. The organisation has called on concerned governments to seek accountability for all violations and suspend armed sales to KSA.

The UN has called Yemen's humanitarian situation the worst in the world<sup>14</sup>. The appeal to the UNSC is sure to fall on deaf ears since some members of the UNSC are selling weapons to commit these war crimes routinely. This war is going into its third year this March. Truces have come and gone while peace talks have fallen through. The question then arises; how to get people interested in the consequences of the war in Yemen? The underlying problem is that there is no external refugee crisis for the world to see because everyone is trapped within the country. Eighteen million people are in dire need for humanitarian assistance while starvation is fast becoming a reality. The locals are waiting helplessly for international organisations to help. So what will it take for the world to avert a humanitarian crisis in a country ravaged by war?

Firstly and foremost, the weapons supply to Saudi Arabia need to be halted immediately. The airstrikes need to stop and the embargo needs to be lifted. People cannot escape the areas of conflict either by land or by sea.

Secondly, the groups involved need to be brought to the negotiating table. Right now, there is a desperate need for a sustainable settlement.

Thirdly, aid has to be allowed to get through to the people. At this point 7.3 million Yemenis<sup>15</sup> do not know where their next meal is coming from. More than half of Yemen's health facilities have been destroyed and the health department does not have an operational budget. Moreover, people cannot reach the designated feeding centers because they can't afford the transport. Hence aid needs to get to the people and a proper rehabilitation process needs to start immediately. Failure to do so would result in nothing short of a holocaust.

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<sup>13</sup> <https://www.hrw.org/news/2017/01/16/letter-saudi-led-coalition-joint-incidents-assessment-team-regarding-yemen>

<sup>14</sup> <https://www.pri.org/stories/2015-12-22/yemen-now-world-s-worst-humanitarian-crisis>

<sup>15</sup> <http://www.reuters.com/article/us-yemen-security-un-idUSKBN15N14Q>