



COMPOUNDING COMPLICATIONS IN YEMEN: AN ASSESSMENT

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Yemen has long been a breeding ground for conflict. The poorest country in the Arab region has become a violent playground for internal, regional and international actors. Now nearing its sixth year, the war has led to what the United Nations (UN) has called a ‘countdown to catastrophe’. COVID-19 has further worsened the already fragile and decimated system which has been under an endless mushroom cloud of drone strikes and bomb blasts.

Conflict has rendered Yemen’s state system fragmented. At present, the country is largely split between two authorities: the internationally recognized government under President Mansoor Hadi controls the south, while Houthi rebels hold power over much of the northern part of the country (which includes the capital Sanaa). The power division is tainted by shifting frontlines and regional discrepancies between the Saudis and Emiratis.

Computing the Costs of the Yemen War

According to the UN, by July 2021, more than half of Yemen’s population will have crossed the critical threshold of hunger. The number of people, one step below starvation will increase from 3.6 million to 5 million.¹ Cholera continues to escalate - 180,000 new cases were reported between

¹ “Window to prevent famine in Yemen is narrowing, UN agencies warn,” *UNICEF*, December 3, 2020, <https://www.unicef.org/press-releases/window-prevent-famine-yemen-narrowing-un-agencies-warn>

the Hadi government in the north. Government forces, supported by the Saudi-led coalition, use Ma'rib as a base for carrying out military operations against the Houthis.



*Source: BBC News*⁹

Ever since the start of 2020, Ma'rib has become the focus of combat since Houthi forces are persistently pursuing a seizure of the province. Ma'rib stands as a bastion from which not only can Sanaa be retaken but it also provides access to the oil rich governates of Hadramawt and Shabwa. Since January 2020, fighting has pushed almost 100,000 people into the governate. Almost 70 per cent of the country's displaced population now resides in Ma'rib city and Ma'rib Al Wadi.¹⁰

Trump's Yemen Swan Song

As Mr. Trump gets ready to depart the White House, he is, as a final valediction, attempting to entitle the Houthis as a Foreign Terrorist Organization.¹¹ The maneuver is aimed at intensifying pressure on Iran and its allies in the region which include the Houthis. If this materializes, it will complicate President elect Biden's efforts to renegotiate the Iran nuclear deal, which Mr. Trump had abandoned in 2018.

⁹ "Yemen crisis: Why is there a war?" *BBC News*, June 19, 2020, <https://www.bbc.com/news/world-middle-east-29319423>

¹⁰ "Marib Governorate - Marib city and Marib Al Wadi District profile," *Relief Web*, November 19, 2020, <https://reliefweb.int/report/yemen/marib-governorate-marib-city-and-marib-al-wadi-district-profile-19-november-2020>

¹¹ "Trump Plans to Designate Houthis as Terrorist Group," *Foreign Policy*, November 16, 2020, <https://foreignpolicy.com/2020/11/16/trump-administration-plans-designate-houthis-terrorists-yemen/>

A conclusion of the move would subject individuals and groups who work with the Houthis to financial sanctions and potential criminal prosecution. The act of securing administrative exceptions from the US government would work to either deter companies dealing in areas such as commercial shipping and insurance within Yemen or leave such groups in limbo for some time until the legal paperwork comes through.

Lawmakers as well as international aid organizations have warned against such a move saying that it will further exacerbate the humanitarian crisis since it would hamper aid work in a country where more than 24 million people rely on aid to survive - majority of whom reside in Houthi controlled territories.¹² Moreover, it would discourage international donors at a time when there is already a crippling shortage of food in Yemen. Already, this year the UN received less than half of the \$3.4 billion aid it had requested.¹³

Conclusion

The deteriorating situation of the Yemenis appears to be staggering towards a complete breakdown. During his campaign, President elect Biden had unambiguously stated that he was opposed to US involvement in the Yemen war. He had also threatened to cut off US weapon sales to the Saudi coalition. If he follows through on his word, there is a chance - albeit a very narrow one - that Yemen may yet be saved. Otherwise 2021 is already anticipated to be an exceptionally bleak year for so many in the world. In such circumstances, Yemen will no doubt be among the hardest hit.

¹² "Aid groups in Yemen say Houthi terror designation would deepen crisis," *Al Monitor*, November 18, 2020, <https://www.al-monitor.com/pulse/originals/2020/11/yemen-houthis-trump-terrorist-designation-aid-delivery-fto.html#ixzz6fr76PTIF>

¹³ "Deadly Consequences: Obstruction of Aid in Yemen During Covid-19," *Human Rights Watch*, September 14, 2020, <https://www.hrw.org/report/2020/09/14/deadly-consequences/obstruction-aid-yemen-during-covid-19>