Yemen's Forgotten War

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3 Main Points

Main question: How can Yemen's civil war, one of the worst examples of state failure in the world, be understood given its many actors and causes? Argument: It is best understood as a case of state collapse, not only because of internal strife but also due to regional power struggles and foreign intervention.Conclusion: This proxy warfare has resulted in a vast humanitarian crisis that largely remains ignored by Western Media.

About the Authors

1. Introduction

Yemen is regarded as one of the worst examples of state failure in the world. According to the UN agency for refugees, more than 4.5 million Yemenis, or 14 percent of the population, remain internally displaced. Even more alarming is the fact that more than 18.2 million people in Yemen, over half of the population, are in dire need of humanitarian assistance and protection services (as of March 2025). These catastrophes started since the war began in 2014. The war involves a wide range of actors, from regional powers such as Saudi Arabia, UAE and Iran to non-state armed groups like the Houthis and Al-Qaeda, making the conflict extraordinarily complex. This article argues that Yemen's civil war is best understood as a case of state collapse, not only because of internal strife but also due to regional power struggles and foreign intervention. This proxy warfare has resulted in a vast humanitarian crisis that largely remains ignored by Western Media.

1.1 Background

The civil war started in 2014 following unrest from the Arab spring. In 2011, there occurred a wave of protests around the Arab world. In Yemen, the protests were focused on corruption and inequality and demanded the resignation of president Ali Abdullah Saleh, who had been in charge for 20 years. The former president has been accused of fraud to such an extent that UN experts calculated his accumulation to be $30bn-$62bn of assets during and after his time in power. Discontent led to massive protests, some turning violent with many casualties. In the start of 2011, protesters staged two months of demonstrations. Then a deadly crackdown by government forces killed more than 130 people and prompted many to join the opposition. Abdul-Malik al-Houthi, the leader of the Houthi movement, publicly backed the mass protests demanding President Ali Abdullah Saleh's resignation. Saleh eventually agreed to step down leaving his Vice-President Abdrabbuh Mansur Hadi as the successor. Hadi allowed for elections but they were boycotted by the Houthis, showing their rejection of a transition they saw as influenced by the old regime and external powers like Saudi Arabia and the US. Additionally, Hadi's government cut fuel subsidies, causing sharp price hikes which infuriated the Houthis and other civilians. This was a final straw for the Houthis which led them to resort to violence and oust president Hadi. By mid-2014, Houthi-Sunni fighting reached Sanaa, leading to the Houthi advance on the capital later that year and the open civil war that followed. This takeover brought caution to Saudi Arabia, which viewed the Houthi's success as an expansion of Iranian influence on its southern border. The Saudis, together with the United Arab Emirates and the Arab League, launched a military intervention in March 2015 to restore Hadi's government, initiating a war that became a major regional proxy conflict.

2. Major Actors Involved in the Yemeni Civil War

2.1 the Houthis

The most famous actors in this conflict are the Houthis, otherwise known as Ansar Allah. They believe in Shia Islam, the second largest islamic sect,

which sprung from a religious youth organisation founded by Husayn al-Houthi. After the unification of Yemen in 1990, the Zaidis felt marginalised by the new Sunni-oriented state. They accused President Saleh's regime of corruption and subservience to Saudi Arabia and the United States. They adopted a slogan similar to that of the Iranian regime, with whom they also have a good relationship. Their slogan is: "God is great, death to America, death to Israel, a curse upon the Jews, and victory for Islam." Their goal is to diminish foreign influence, establish a purer islamic state and position themselves as part of the "axis of resistance" against the US, Israel, and Saudi Arabia. After Husayn al-Houthi's death, his brother Abdulmalik took over the Sanaa and Yemen's northwestern provinces, and they govern more than 70% of the country's population.

2.2 Yemeni governments

Opposing the Houthis stand the internationally recognised Yemeni governments, first under President Saleh, later under Mansour Hadi and lastly under an eight-member executive council created in April 2022 called the Presidential Leadership Council (PLC) . Saleh's main objective throughout his long rule was regime survival and personal power. He gained support from both Saudi Arabia and the US while also maintaining patronage networks with tribes and military commanders. After Hadi took over, Saleh retained the loyalty of key military units and much of his fortune, later allying opportunistically with the Houthis to retake Sana'a from Hadi, and then switching sides again. This could be seen as evidence that his overriding objective was personal comeback rather than any coherent ideological project. Hadi's government depends heavily on external backing from Saudi Arabia and its coalition. Its stated aim is to restore the pre-Houthi state and preserve an unified Yemen under internationally recognised institutions, but its control has often been limited to parts of the east and south. The PLC generally took over Hadi's goals but they consist of different Sunni parties with diverging interests making this coalition quite fragile. As with Hadi's administration, the PLC gets support from the Saudi led coalition and the West minus the help from the U.A.E which withdrew from the pact and supported a new cessationist group.

2.3 Jihadist Groups

Radical islamist groups have also exploited the chaos. Al-Qaeda in the Arabian Peninsula (AQAP) aims to create a strict Islamist state across Yemen and wage violent jihad against what it considers illegitimate Muslim regimes and Western influence. The erosion of the central government allowed AQAP to capture territory, mostly in central and southern Yemen. They operate via building training camps and their own governance structures. The so-called Islamic State (ISIS) also entered Yemen, aiming to spread its global caliphate vision. Both groups are enemies of virtually all other major actors in the war.

2.4 Middle-Eastern Countries

Saudi Arabia is an important player. It views Yemen as a buffer zone on its southern border and is warned of an armed Shia-aligned movement controlling Sana'a and parts of the Red Sea coast. Saudi Arabia's objectives are to limit Iran's regional power, restore a friendly government in Yemen, and to secure trade routes. Iran views the Houthis as a relatively low-cost way to put political pressure on Saudi Arabia and gain leverage over strategic waterways like the Bab al-Mandab and the Red Sea. Its objectives are to pressure the US, Israel and pro-Western Arab regimes as a movement called the "axis of resistance". The United Arab Emirates initially joined Saudi Arabia's coalition supporting Hadi's government however it soon developed its own agenda. The UAE is interested in securing authority over key southern coastal areas. It is also strongly opposed to Islamist movements. As a result, they began backing the Southern Transitional Council (STC), a separatist group in the south that fights for the re-establishment of an independent South Yemen. For the STC, the goal is political self-determination for the UAE, the STC is a useful ally that can help shape the future of southern Yemen in a manner that benefits Emirati interests. The STC has won a lot of territories recently, mostly against the non Houthi parties.

3. A Massive Humanitarian Crisis

The situation in Yemen has become one of the worst humanitarian crises in recent history. Since 2014, over 12,000 civilians have been killed in 2022, and four million people have been displaced within the country. Two-thirds of the population (approximately 21 million people) require humanitarian assistance, including 10.8 million children, which is the highest rate in the world today. Nearly half of the population suffers from severe food deprivation, with 2.3 million children facing malnutrition. Yemen now ranks as the third-most food-insecure country globally, worsening by 36% in the past year. The situation is aggravated by the collapse of the healthcare system, where only half of the facilities are operational. This has fuelled ongoing disease outbreaks, including cholera, with over 155,000 suspected cases recorded across 19 of Yemen's 21 governorates. Access to essential needs became dire: 15.2 million Yemenis do not have access to clean water, while 3.2 million children cannot attend school. In March 2025, the situation became even worse with the suspension by the US of 83 per cent of the USAID programs (US humanitarian and development assistance). As the main donor with 768 million dollars in 2024 (half of the humanitarian budget for the whole aid for Yemen), this suspension has massive impacts on the country's welfare. Twenty-two women's safe spaces have been forced to close, and hundreds of thousands of people have lost access to healthcare, psychosocial support, and legal aid.

4. Yemen War in the Western Media

The representation of the war in Western media can be biased. The media has examined the civil war as a matter of religious sectarianism between the Houthis and the Sunni-led Yemeni government. However, religious divisions were not at the heart of the conflict in 2014. The conflict is also a

matter of regional division between Saudi Arabia and Iran for geopolitical purposes. This reductionist view of the civil war obscures the real causes of the conflict and humanitarian crisis. For example, many media outlets and Western governments blame the Houthis for the failure of peace negotiations, while ignoring the impact of the Saudi blockade on the country. Therefore, from a Western perspective, the polarisation makes it impossible to criticise one side of the war without being accused of supporting the other. A journalist interviewed by the Atlantic Council summed up the situation by stating that calling for peace risks being labelled pro-Houthi.

5. Prospects for Peace

As 2025 comes to an end, the Yemen civil war is one of the deadliest conflicts in the world. Despite the recent calm, the chance of an increase in violence is still present. For instance, there is a risk of escalation of violence between Israel and the Houthis that started to attack each other by airstrikes causing 300 casualties in Sanaa. Peace efforts remain stalled. In September 2025, Yemeni President Rashad al-Alimi admitted that attempts to contain the Houthis had failed and called for the establishment of an international coalition. In response, the US imposed an unprecedented series of sanctions targeting 32 individuals and entities linked to the Houthis. The prospects for resolving the conflict remain unclear. Researchers at Radboud University believe that the solution lies in a regional dialogue involving Iran, Russia, China, Saudi Arabia and the US, rather than with the Yemenis themselves. They also propose structural reform of the UN, including the integration of the human rights monitoring mission (UNMHA) into the office of the special envoy.

6. Conclusion

Yemen is one of the poorest and clearest cases of state failure today. After the 2011 uprising against President Saleh, a flawed transition under Hadi, and the 2014 Houthi takeover of Sana'a drew in Saudi Arabia, the UAE and Iran, turning the country into a regional proxy battleground. The war now involves the Houthis, a fragmented internationally recognised government, southern separatists and jihadist groups like AQAP and ISIS, leaving the state shattered. Additionally, news coverage is limited both by the extreme dangers journalists are facing in Yemen and strategic interests of the Western states that arm actors like Saudi Arabia and the UAE. When the conflict is reported, it is often reduced to a simple Sunni-Shia religious sectarian struggle neglecting the role of power politics. The result is a massive, yet largely "forgotten" humanitarian crisis in which millions are displaced and depend on aid. Despite widespread suffering, meaningful peace talks remain stalled and any real solution will likely require wider regional negotiations.