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Yemen, Conflict

### **Yemen: A non-military approach for a conflict-ridden region**

The name Yemen is derived from an Arabic word meaning “south,” meant to signify its place in the Arabian Peninsula (Beeston et al 168). Unfortunately, conditions in Yemen seem to be going more South than its location. For the past few years, Yemen has been ravaged by a persistent food and water crisis. Yemen ranks near the very bottom in the Global Food Security Index: 111th of the 113 countries listed (Global Food Security Index). This is one of the worst crises in the world, and it is nearly entirely man-made. Due to a brutal civil war, involving a tangled web of alliances, the Yemeni people have been left without food, water, or fuel. Accompanying the war is a severe economic catastrophe that has induced currency devaluation and rampant inflation. The economic crisis in conjunction with the war has created a political quagmire which will be difficult to traverse. However, not all hope is lost. There are a few pragmatic means of intervention through which to resolve this crisis. Before looking to the solution, we must first understand the proximate causes of the war and learn a bit about Yemen as a nation. Only then can we flip the direction and make the southern country go north again.

The two major combatants in the destructive civil war are the Ansar Allah Movement (The Houthis) and the Yemeni Government (The Hadis). Each group is backed by various foreign powers, making this conflict far more than a localized set of minor skirmishes.

The Houthis, named for their leader’s tribe, are an Islamic insurgency group from Northern Yemen. For the past 20 years, the Houthis have been a powerful anti-establishment force in Yemeni politics, frequently opposing the government regardless of the leader in power. In 2004, the Houthis armed themselves in response to the brutal execution of their leader by the Yemeni army. Since then, they have been intermittently at war with the Yemeni government. In 2011, as the wildfire of Arab Spring swept the Middle East, the Houthis spearheaded the overthrow of the unpopular and authoritarian President Saleh and, in a surprise to many international relations scholars, supported his successor: Abdrabbuh Hadi. For the first time in years, the future of Yemen looked bright (Riedel).

Unfortunately, that hope lasted very briefly. The sheer incompetence of President Hadi swiftly crushed any hope of a stable Yemen. Hadi’s promises of reform fell flat in the face of challenges ranging from jihadist movements to a burgeoning economic crisis. The Hadi government, while less repressive than its predecessors, was also exceptionally corrupt, further exacerbating tensions between the Houthis and the Hadis. Finally, an ill-advised decision to raise fuel subsidies pushed Houthi frustrations over the brink. On September 9, 2014, Houthi protesters, led by their leader Abdul-Malik al-Houthi, marched on the cabinet and were brutally gunned down by the military. The Houthis quickly retaliated, invading the Yemeni TV district and easily seizing control of many government buildings (Baron). The Houthi’s triumphantly dissolved the government, leading to the resignation of Hadi and his Prime Minister. From there the Houthis, strengthened by support from pro-Saleh (the former President) militant groups, began a seemingly inexorable march across Yemen, easily dispersing the fractured pro-Hadi military. Unfortunately for the Houthis, their dream of a Houthi-led Yemen would soon be dashed by a Saudi-led coalition of Arab states (Al Jazeera). The meddling of Saudi Arabia marked the shift from a regional civil war to one hopelessly intertwined with global politics.

But why did Saudi Arabia intervene? The Saudi-led intervention has been perceived as an extension of a much larger conflict: The Iran-Saudi proxy war. The proxy war is a struggle for geopolitical influence in the Middle East. What began as a religious dispute between Shia and Sunni sects of Islam has inflated into what political pundits have dubbed “The New Cold War” (Cliffe). The Houthis are backed by Iran and the Saudis, fearing an Iranian overreach, invaded to check Iranian influence (Malsin). Since the Saudi intervention, the situation in Yemen has deteriorated into what might colloquially be described as a dumpster fire. However, one aspect of the Saudi intrusion into Yemen is especially pertinent to our discussion of food insecurity: The blockade of Yemen by air, sea, and land.

Before talking about the blockade, we need to first understand the Yemeni people, their agricultural practices, and infrastructure (or lack thereof) for food distribution. As of 2020, Yemen has a population of 29 million, many of whom live in rural areas (“*Yemen Population 2020*”). While the numbers have altered drastically due to the war, as of 2018, 36.6% lived in urban areas with the other 73.4% being dispersed throughout the countryside (“Urban Population % of Total Population - Yemen, Rep., Middle East & North Africa.”). The climate of Yemen is arid and hot (Weatheronline). The lack of rainfall makes it difficult to grow high yield groups (“FAO/WFP CROP AND FOOD SECURITY ASSESSMENT MISSION TO YEMEN.”). When Yemen does get rain, it usually arrives in intermittent bursts during the winter months. In terms of location, Yemen is located on the southern peninsula of the Middle East. Most of its major cities are along its coast.

There are 6.7 members in the average Yemeni family and 82% of households have children under the age of 15 (United Nations). Most often live in straw huts, clay homes, or makeshift shelters. As the war has intensified, many have fled their homes in fear of missile launches or bombings by both sides. Some have been forcibly evicted by soldiers in need of living space. Before the war, most Yemenis worked as street vendors or crop growers. About a third of their population was employed by the government in various administrative roles (Taylor). Poverty runs rampant in Yemen and was only worsened by the war. As the war continues, Yemen is predicted to become the poorest country in the world, with 75% of its population projected to live in destitution by 2022 (“Yemen to Become World's Poorest Country If War Continues: UN.”).

Before the war, the average Yemeni’s diet consisted of grains (most often rice), bread, and meat. Food prices before the war were relatively affordable, though there was still a significant portion of the population suffering from malnutrition. Since the war, however, economic crises have caused the price of bread to balloon, rising nearly 60% (Tinka). Meat has become unaffordable. Many families are forced to survive on what little food they can scrounge from the markets or the dumpsters. 20 million people live in a state of continuous food insecurity, many with small children who need to be fed (“Yemen Crisis.”). This is one of the largest food crises in the world, which posits an important question: Why can’t the Yemenis grow more food?

Unfortunately, Yemen cannot grow more food simply because it lacks the necessary agricultural infrastructure to do so. Even before the war, agricultural efficiency was never a priority of the government. Yemen was and will continue to be an oil-producing country, an industry far more lucrative than agriculture. The average farm size is about 1.1 hectares large and usually grows millet, corn, wheat, or sorghum. Even though agriculture consists of 15% of the Yemeni GDP, Yemeni farmers are unable to meet domestic demand because they cannot ramp up production in response to the snowballing food crisis (“FAO/WFP CROP AND FOOD SECURITY ASSESSMENT MISSION TO YEMEN.”). The high cost of land and the absence of governmental and corporate investment in agriculture inhibits the potential of Yemeni farmers. These are rural subsistence farmers, not corporate food machines (“Yemen -

Agriculture”). As a result, Yemen had, up until the Saudi intervention, imported 90% of its food (Tinka). It is in the context of this statistic that the Saudi blockade becomes all the more disastrous. The blockade prohibits Yemen from importing food, clean water, and medical supplies. It also restricts the amount of aid non-governmental organizations and charities can provide (“Yemen: Coalition Blockade Imperils Civilians.”). By essentially strangling Yemen in a more malevolent version of Winfield Scott’s Anaconda plan deployed during the American Civil War, the Saudi coalition has condemned millions of Yemenis to starvation.

Fighting has also destroyed many roads and other food distribution conduits. Even if food is grown, it is difficult to navigate through a country that has essentially been turned into a battlefield. The conflict has also restricted access to necessities such as healthcare, electricity, and even water (Alles). The blockade has limited the amount of fuel imported into Yemen, a problem that has ramifications for Yemeni water distribution. Because Yemen has no fuel, it is unable to power any of its water pumps. The water cannot be pumped, purified, or transported due to devastating fuel shortages (Suter). This is truly one of the worst food crises of our age. What can be done?

An effective solution is one that practices political neutrality, both in its intentions and actions. A military solution to the conflict is not plausible. Many have argued for a US-led alliance to drive the Saudis from Yemen and wholeheartedly support a Houthi led government. However, such an extreme solution fails to take into account the nuances of the situation at hand. Firstly, claims of some abstract ethical obligation to support the Houthis seems to imply that the conflict is black and white, the good Houthis vs the bad Saudis and Saudis. Unfortunately, the Houthis are not David nor are the Saudis Goliath. The Houthis have frequently committed atrocious human rights violations. They conscript children to join their movement, disrupt food distribution lines, and take hostages to extort money from families (Topcu). Additionally, a purely Houthi led Yemen would be a nightmare for everyone involved. The Houthis are explicitly anti-American and anti-Zionist (Karmon). Economically, an international intervention would be disastrous for markets, specifically the oil market. As of 2019, Saudi Arabia had 263.2 billion barrels of oil in its reserves (AFP). While the US has slowly weaned its reserves away from Saudi oil, it is still expected to import 600,000 barrels of Saudi oil a day as of April 2020 (Singh). Should the world intervene in a way unfavorable to the Saudis, the Saudis would likely retaliate by refusing to export oil, inevitably leading to a global economic crisis. So how can we assuage the suffering of Yemen while simultaneously avoiding the wrath of the Saudis?

The solution is a combination of political and economic tactics. Since it is infeasible to militarily intervene, manipulations of the market and common-sense negotiation can help rectify the Yemeni food crisis quickly and efficiently. It is also important to note that this must be an international stand rather than the work of a few good-samaritan nations. I’ll discuss why, despite the sizable financial investment necessary, my solution will yield considerable returns for the nations that participate in implementing it. To alleviate the food crisis in Yemen, a coalition of foreign nations ought to 1) provide foreign exchange aid by buying Yemeni currency, 2) convince Saudi Arabia to reopen key ports along the gulf and 3) set strict humanitarian guidelines, and financially compensate both civil servants and small farmers. Only through this three-pronged economic solution can we hope to pragmatically feed Yemen.

First, let’s focus on currency. But what does currency have to do with the crisis? I mentioned earlier that many are unable to afford what were previously staples of their diet, namely bread and meat, due to egregiously high food prices. A major reason these food prices are too high is because of rampant inflation caused by the devaluation of their currency. The Yemeni Rial has been depreciating at a rapid rate. Using the US Dollar as a standard of comparison, the exchange rate ballooned from 215 rials to one

dollar to a peak of 800 rials to one dollar (Joplin). This low exchange rate dramatically tanks the purchasing power of the rial, meaning that Yemenis cannot afford to buy necessities. Inflation is only worsening the ailment. Prices increasing, in conjunction with currency value decrease creates an equation that spells out doom for Yemen, unless the currency is stabilized. If an international coalition were to infuse a sizable amount of cash into the Central Bank of Yemen, it would stabilize the rial and, more importantly, bring a degree of economic stability to a market that currently has no international credibility.

The economics are simple. Market forces determine exchange rates. If people want more of a particular currency, it will appreciate. There are a couple of factors that influence exchange rates, chief among them being inflation, interest rates, and economic strength (Nobert et al). Currently, the Yemeni Rial is one of the weakest currencies in the world due to perceived incompetence by the Central Bank, lack of domestic stability, and rising inflation (Mashjari; Joplin). If the coalition were to invest in Yemen, it would empower the bank to enhance farming infrastructure and encourage small scale financial transactions to stimulate the economy. The bank could also buy up more of its currency, thereby increasing its value. On an aesthetic level, a stimulus package would signify confidence in Yemen to recover from this crisis, assuring investors of its financial security (World Bank). By combating currency depreciation, we can redress the devastating economic crisis and return buying power to the Yemeni people who can begin to afford necessities again. With the money, the Yemeni people can also start rebuilding agricultural infrastructure, therefore producing more food in the long run. This may sound theoretical, but it has been implemented in this market with great success. In the earlier stages of the war, the Saudis invested two billion US Dollars in the Yemen Central Bank, which strengthened the exchange rate from 800 to 1 to 700 to 1 (Joplin). Two billion is a comparatively meager amount of money, yet it had a dramatic effect. Imagine the remedying effect of 100 billion, if not more.

The second major step that needs to be taken is to convince the Saudis to end the blockade and negotiate more stringent humanitarian guidelines. I've described earlier how devastating the blockade has been to the Yemeni people. By reopening the ports, Yemenis will be provided with consistent access to supplies, thereby mitigating the worst effects of the food crisis. They will also get fuel to operate water pumps. This solution may sound infeasible, but recent events have made the Saudis more amenable to compromise. Due to COVID-19, the Saudis have recently agreed to a temporary ceasefire (Robertson). The ceasefire presents an immense political advantage. The Saudis have no reason to continue to strangle the Yemeni people if Houthi aggression subsides. We also need to consider the reason why the Saudis instituted the blockade in the first place. The Saudi's fear Iranian political encroachment. Currently, Saudi Arabia and Iran are locked in a war for influence in the middle east, with the upstart Iranians attempting to wrest control over the Middle East from the historically powerful Saudi Arabia. However, the blockade is counterproductive to Saudi motivations. What Saudi Arabia needs to recognize is that the starvation of the Yemenis is only galvanizing the Saudi opposition, both in the Middle East and the Western world. Only four percent of Americans consider the Saudis to be an American ally (Yglesias). Saudi detractors frequently cite the blockade, among other things, when calling for an international rebuke of Saudi Arabia. Simply put, the Saudis need better public relations; ending the blockade might silence at least a few of its critics and win the support of the Western world in its indirect conflict with Iran. Winning the wholehearted support of the West will almost certainly boost its reputation and give it much more leeway to take action against Iran. The coalition might also financially incentivize the Saudis to open up the ports by promising to purchase Saudi fuel at a slightly higher price and then provide it to the Yemenis free of cost.

The respite will also give the coalition to negotiate terms of the war, defining it in such a way so that it doesn't disrupt the livelihood of innocent civilians. I would recommend defining clear no-fire zones in densely populated civilian areas and prohibiting the destruction of roads and agricultural infrastructure. Of course, it is naive to assume that, once negotiated, these rules will be followed. However, the simple act of forcing both Saudi Arabia and the Houthis that their actions have humanitarian ramifications is a necessary symbolic step to at least mitigate some of the unnecessary violence. By prohibiting the destruction of roads, the coalition can reopen food channels and ensure that once food reaches the ports it is transported without the risk of violence.

The third and the last step to remedy the food crisis is to financially compensate both civil servants and small farmers. This can be done in a few different ways. For the civil servants, the coalition should provide compensation by directly infusing cash into the Central Bank of Yemen who will, in turn, pay their civil servants. As I mentioned earlier, the Hadi government employed around a third of the Yemeni workforce. With its unceremonious collapse, many were "laid off" and, much to their chagrin, not paid for their labors. Since then, many of these former civil servants have been working menial jobs to afford food or scrounging for scraps. If they were to be paid, they'd be able to start affording food. Additionally, more people spending money means more money in circulation; paying civil servants is thus a great first step towards repairing the fractured Yemeni economy (World Bank). The coalition should also compensate farmers, albeit in a different manner. This particular cash infusion ought to be directed towards rebuilding infrastructure associated with food distribution, namely roads, trucks, and farming equipment. The money will assist Yemeni farmers in growing high yield crops to efficiently feed the rest of Yemen. I would also recommend deploying neutral agricultural advisors to facilitate the process. By fixing roads, they are ensuring that once the food is packaged, it will be allocated equitably and quickly to those who need it most. This requires assurance from the Houthis that they will not blow up the roads, but such an agreement can easily be reached with a degree of Saudi cooperation.

Of course, my solution requires infusion of a significant amount of capital. I mentioned earlier that approaching the situation motivated solely by an ethical obligation is impossible given the many gray areas in the conflict. Similarly, assuming that an international coalition of nations, each with their own set of problems, will provide the money out of the goodness of their hearts is illogical. This brings us to a vexing question: Why would the world care enough to spend more money on Yemen? The answer is stability. The stability of the Middle East ought to be a principal concern for the rest of the world. Historically, a destabilized middle east has given rise to some of the world's most pressing problems, namely terrorism, oil crises, and even war. Failure to introduce at least a degree of humanitarian control into the region might lead to the conflicts intensifying. Tensions may inflame to such a level that more foreign powers are absorbed into the conflict. Additionally, a decently stabilized Middle East would moderate oil prices (Greiner). Now it is reasonable to argue that Yemen is but another cog in the Middle Eastern Machine. Surely there are more crucial structural issues to be resolved first? While the Middle East has many other issues, the fact remains that a starving Yemen stands out as a festering wound in the many scars of the Middle East. Fixing the food crisis would be a good first step to finally secure the Middle East.

So, how do we distribute capital to the right areas? I recommend that a foreign government and NGO coalition should collect and manage the money. This pan-governmental initiative could be led by the current Secretary-General of the UN: Antonio Guterres of Portugal. In addition to independent large-scale investments into Yemen, Guterres could raise the mandatory membership fee that countries pay to be a part of the UN and allocate the surplus money towards Yemen or ask member nations to contribute additional monies to this effort, The World Bank could also provide a supplementary development loan to

assist with the infrastructure aspect of my plan. The rest of the money could come from various NGOs, namely UNICEF. Through a comprehensive advertising strategy, UNICEF could capitalize on human altruism and raise enough money to help Yemen. The coalition must also be wary of misappropriation of funds by any intermediaries. Deploying impartial economic advisers would greatly reduce the risk of corruption.

Using these three solutions, we can finally hope to end the food crisis that plagues Yemen. International politics is a mess, to say the least. With arrays of often contradictory alliances and unreasonable leaders, it can be hard to solve problems on a global scale, but that doesn't excuse us from trying. The crisis in Yemen is a humanitarian one. We all have an ethical obligation to right the wrong and feed Yemen once again. It is time for world leaders to take a definitive stand against hunger.

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