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YEMEN WAR: WORSENING HUMANITARIAN CATASTROPHE

Dr. Dipanwita Chakravorty
Research Associate, CAPS

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On 19 September 2018, the UN Humanitarian Chief Mark Lowcock said, "A famine inflicting huge loss of life could strike at any time in Yemen, as food prices soar and the battle rages over the country's main port. By the time an imminent famine is confirmed, it would be too late to stop it."¹ Yemen is undergoing the world's worst humanitarian crisis in recent years due to the ongoing conflict between the Houthis in Yemen and the Saudi led-coalition. It is time that the world is given a wake-up call on Yemen to find a new strategy to end conflict and prevent the suffering of civilians.

The winds of political change hit the shores of Yemen in early 2011 when most of the Arab world was fighting a new wave of popular dissent which came to be commonly known as the Arab Spring. On 27 January 2011, a major demonstration of over 16,000 protesters took place in Sana'a. The people came out on streets protesting against the rising food prices, unemployment, corruption and deteriorating

economic conditions. Due to the apathy shown by the government, the protests soon turned against President Saleh. In February, President Saleh announced that he would not run for re-election in 2013, nor would he pass power on to his son. To end the crisis, a Gulf Cooperation Council (GCC) initiative was proposed that offered a solution by implementing a transition of power from Saleh to Vice President Abdrabuh Mansour Hadi in a systematic manner. As a result of the initiative, early Presidential elections were called on 21 February 2012. Abdrabuh Mansour Hadi became the President of Yemen on 21 February 2012 in an uncontested election. According to the initiative, President Hadi and the government had two years to implement an inclusive national dialogue that would help in the drafting of a new constitution before fresh elections are held in 2014².

The transition of power was followed by a series of uprisings and protests that created a situation that swiftly deteriorated into a civil

war. The Zaidi-Shia group known as the Houthis, who live in the north-western part of the country protested against the transition government as well as against the National Dialogue Conference (NDC). By this time, they were running a parallel government in three important provinces in Northern Yemen namely Sada'a, Jawf and Hajjah. They not only had access to military bases but also had access to the Red Sea through Port Midi through which they carried out independent trade of weapons and petroleum. Flushed with money and weapons, they became strong opponents of the transition government.³

By August 2014, the Houthis came out in large numbers to protest against the Hadi government. They laid a siege on the President's office, forcing him to resign and flee to Saudi Arabia. On 21 September 2014, they captured Sana'a. Further, they occupied several key government buildings and other institutions. On 6 February 2015, a Houthi representative announced from the Presidential Palace that the group had formally taken control over Yemen. He also stated that the House of Representatives was dissolved and a presidential council would soon be formed to lead Yemen for the next two years.⁴ The U.N. refused to acknowledge the announcement and the GCC also condemned the coup.

In retaliation to the coup, Saudi Arabia along with other GCC countries launched 'Operation Decisive Storm' in March 2015 and concluded it in April 2015. Soon after, they

launched 'Operation Restoring Hope' which continues till date. The number of civilian deaths cannot be verified but United Nations have put the number around 16,200 civilian casualties due to the ongoing air-strikes.⁵ In the April 2018 briefing, the UN has stated that the total number of casualties including fighters, civilians and unverified cases would be much larger than what is being presumed.⁶ Since 2015, the Saudi Arabia-led coalition has undertaken 18,000 airstrikes which translates to one strike in every 99 minutes, out of which one third of them have hit non-military targets.⁷ The extent of damage of infrastructure or the economy cannot be quantified. Approximately 22.2 million Yemenis are in need of medical and financial assistance, out of which eight million are at a risk of famine. Over one million people have been affected by a cholera outbreak in July 2017 which has resulted in the death of more than 5000 people.⁸ In 2017 alone, 50,000 children have died according to the latest report by 'Save our Children'.⁹

Famine is the new threat that has engulfed Yemen by throwing millions into food insecurity. On 4 November 2017, Saudi Arabia intercepted a missile fired over Southern Riyadh. The Houthis claimed responsibility for the same and added that they intended to target the Palace in the capital.¹⁰ In response to these attacks, Saudi Arabia announced a new blockade on all air, sea and land ports of Yemen which effectively locked in the entire population of Yemen and kept away all the possible humanitarian assistance.

According to the UN, the estimated amount of food and fuel that could not reach Yemen was around 500,000 metric tonnes (MT) leading to acute famine in various parts of the country.¹¹ Due to international pressure, Saudi Arabia reopened some of the ports but the major ports of Hodeidah and Saleef are still under their control.

Despite the complete devastation, the Houthis have managed to continue their fight against the coalition and maintain their strong hold. Saudi Arabia seems determined to continue its assault until it succeeds in installing the Hadi government in Sana'a – without regard to the increasing casualties and devastation. How long will the conflict continue would depend on Saudi Arabia as well as on the amount of resources the GCC is willing to put in this operation, especially in light of the current fluctuating oil price. While the conflict continues to rage, the civilians in Yemen continue to endure complete devastation of their country and their lives.

(Disclaimer: The views and opinions expressed in this article are those of the author and do not necessarily reflect the position of the Centre for Air Power Studies [CAPS])

Notes:

¹ For full speech, please read United Nations News, September 2018, <https://news.un.org/en/story/2018/09/1019752>, accessed on September 25, 2018.

² Sinjab, Lina 'Yemen protests: 20,000 call for President Saleh to go,' *BBC*, 29 January 2011, <http://www.bbc.com/news/world-middle-east-12353479>, accessed on September 25, 2018.

³ Al-Bukhaiti, Hussain, 'From Failure to Success: How the Houthis saved the Arab Spring,' *The Yemen Times*, 18 February 2015,

<http://www.yementimes.com/en/1861/opinion/4909/From-failure-to-success-How-the-Houthis-saved-the-Arab-Spring.htm>, accessed on September 25, 2018.

⁴ "Yemen's Shia rebels finalize coup, vow to dissolve parliament," *The Globe and Mail*, 6 February 2015, <http://www.theglobeandmail.com/news/world/yemens-shia-rebels-finalize-coup-vow-to-dissolve-parliament/article22829401/?cmpid=rss1>, accessed on September 25, 2018.

⁵ "Yemen", *Council on Foreign Relations*, <https://www.cfr.org/interactives/global-conflict-tracker?marker=19#!/conflict/war-in-yemen>, accessed on September 25, 2018.

⁶ The United Nations Human Rights Office of the Commissioner, April 2018, <https://www.ohchr.org/en/NewsEvents/Pages/DisplayNews.aspx?NewsID=22980&LangID=E>, accessed on September 25, 2018.

⁷ Press Release, *International Rescue Committee*, September 2018, <https://www.rescue.org/press-release/civilian-deaths-yemen-164-united-states-recertifies-support-war>, accessed on September 26, 2018.

⁸ Akram, Sophia, "It's time to get real about the death toll in Yemen," *The New Arab*, 29 December 2017, <https://www.alaraby.co.uk/english/comment/2017/12/29/its-time-to-get-real-about-yemens-death-toll>, accessed on September 26, 2018.

⁹ "Save our Children say 130 children die every day in Yemen," *The AP News*, 16 November 2017, <https://www.apnews.com/56f80edbd9cd44b1912debe02fe900cf>, accessed on September 26, 2018.

¹⁰ "Missile intercepted over Riyadh," *BBC*, 4 November 2017, <https://www.bbc.com/news/world-middle-east-41872995>, accessed on September 26, 2018.

¹¹ "Missiles and Food: Yemen's Man-made Food Insecurity Crisis," Oxfam Briefing Note, December 2017, <https://reliefweb.int/sites/reliefweb.int/files/resources/bn-missiles-food-security-yemen-201217-en.pdf>, accessed on September 26, 2018.