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The Yemen War: Addressing Seven Misconceptions

What is really happening in Yemen, where more than 100,000 people have been killed in the last five years?¹ We do know that in 2015 a Saudi-led coalition intervened on the side of the government of Yemen (GoY) in its war with the Houthi rebels. Since then, the conflict has become more complex and difficult to track: new actors, new fault lines, and new tactics have all complicated resolution. Obtaining evidence from conflict zones and complex emergencies is challenging, and in this void, misinformation about the war has proliferated. In this policy brief, we clarify what we see as the seven most common misconceptions.

Brief Points

- Many rumors and misunderstandings about the Yemen War persist, due largely to a lack of transparency from aid organizations and a lack of access to information from the GoY and other conflict parties.
- Generally, the war has evolved from a conflict between the government and the Houthis into a multi-faceted conflict between splinter groups and militias backed by Iran, Oman, and the UAE, amongst others. The proliferation of actors complicates negotiations.
- Resolving the Yemen War will require a multi-pronged approach that engages more women and youth in peace building while also demanding more accountability from state and non-state actors alike, particularly in regard to data collection, aid expenditures, and the inclusiveness of peace-building talks.

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I. This Is a Proxy War between Iran and Saudi Arabia

While Saudi Arabia and Iran are amongst the key external actors in the conflict, Oman, Qatar, and the United Arab Emirates (UAE) are also present and pursuing their own strategic and security agendas, often independent of the conflict. Each of these nations supports at least one faction: Iran supports the Houthis, Saudi Arabia the GoY, Qatar supports Islah, and the UAE sponsors the STC and the Joint Forces. According to the UN Panel of Experts 2018 report, STC-loyal forces are trained and funded by the UAE but largely operate outside the Yemeni military command-and-control structure, thus “undermining the authority of the legitimate government.” Oman supports local tribes on its western border, and it has been an important mediator in the conflict, bringing together the Houthis with the Saudis since 2016.

Hezbollah has evolved to become a key actor in Yemen by providing extensive military, technical, political, and media support to the Houthis. Considering the array of external actors, episodes of intra-war tensions are frequent: Conflicts between Oman and Saudi Arabia in the al-Mahra governorate, and the intra-coalition fight between the Saudi-backed GoY and UAE-sponsored STC in the Southern and Eastern governorates illustrate the multilayered nature of the conflict.

2. The Houthis and the Government Are the Only Conflict Parties

Neither the anti-Houthi forces, nor the Houthis themselves are monolithic. The same can be said about the domestic conflict actors. One of the greatest post-war challenges for Yemen will be the proliferation of Salafi militant groups and local militias operating outside the state's security apparatus. The most recent illustration of this prospect appeared in the August 2019 armed clashes between the Yemeni Armed Forces and militants loyal to the STC in the governorates of Aden, Abyan and Shabwa. Early in the war, the STC and the Yemeni military fought together against the Houthi threat, then turned against each other, and following the November 2019 Riyadh Agreement, STC-loyal forces were meant to be integrated within Yemeni military structures.



Figure 1: Regional map of the Middle East

However, alliances in Yemen are opportunistic and fluid. For example, the UAE-backed Salafis, Islah and the Houthis fought in the city of Taiz. In the nominally Houthi-controlled northern Hajjah governorate, the fighting between the Houthis and the Tribes of Hajour raised serious doubts about the Houthis' ability to assert effective control in areas under their control. To complicate matters further, several prominent Houthis from the Zaydi Shia religious minority, which adheres to the Fiver sub-sect of Shia Islam, have reportedly converted to Twelver Shia practices. This development has not been well-received by every member of the group as Twelver practices are alien to Yemen and signal closer ties to Iran.

3. South Yemen Seeks Independence

Although the STC achieved a political victory by signing the Saudi-sponsored Riyadh Agreement with the government, their larger aspirations to foment a Southern Independence Movement has not been realized, and for three reasons. First, the South isn't a single front. The Hadramawt and al-Mahra governorates have aspirations of their own that do not sync with the independent South formula. Second, several Southern movements – including the Hadramawt Conference, the Southern National Coalition, and the Reference for the Tribal Alliance of Wadi Hadramawt – haven't endorsed the STC as their sole representative and, at times, have expressed discontent regarding the

STC and GoY talks in Jeddah. Third, federalism remains a more feasible option than secession in southern Yemen given the existing political differences in the South and the current internal fragmentation nationwide. According to the Yemen Polling Center, approximately 46% of people in the South support secession, and only 37% of Southerners support the STC.

4. The Yemen War Is the World's Worst Humanitarian Conflict

Our interviews with humanitarian actors and NGO representatives point to two challenges: lack of access to certain parts of the country and lack of data about the conflict. Only a limited number of organizations are on the ground in Yemen, among them Oxfam, Save the Children, Doctors Without Borders, the International Rescue Committee, and the International Committee of the Red Cross. Yet, even when these groups maintain country offices, they tend to be concentrated in Sana'a and have constant difficulty reaching the Houthi-held Northern governorates.

The lack of access to large swaths of the country translates into scant and poor quality data. Last year's headlines suggested that Yemen was on the brink of famine. MSF challenged this claim and reveal the unreliability of published numbers regarding how many people required aid. Humanitarian organizations have another hurdle: The most recent 2020 UN Panel of

Experts' report further confirmed that the Houthis have weaponized aid in Houthi-held territories, whereas the UAE and Saudi Arabia are not just active conflict parties, but also the largest donors. This duality of roles undermines basic humanitarian principles of humanity, neutrality, and impartiality.

5. There Is War Everywhere in the Country

Not every part of the country is experiencing the same type or level of conflict. The governorate of Taiz saw the highest number of fatalities, over 19,000 since 2015, due to the Houthis five-year siege. Meanwhile, until January 2020, Marib had been lauded as a "success story," largely because the local governor Sultan al-Aradah had maintained control over key institutions, using income from oil sales to pay local salaries and support development projects. However, recent Houthi attacks with drones and ballistic missiles in Marib suggest that stabilization efforts are fragile.

In Hadramawt, relative stability has led to an increase in foreign and Gulf tourism. According

to the Tourism Director in the governorate, the number of tourists increased 42% from 2018 to 2019 (58k visitors to 82k). And last year, famous travel bloggers, Eva zu Beck and Drew Bensky, travelled to Socotra and Shibam Hadramawt ('the Manhattan of Yemen'), respectively.

6. The UN Is the Only Peacemaker Present

Since the Arab Spring uprising in Yemen, the UN has been struggling to build peace on its own in the country, but they are not alone. In some parts of the country, regional and local peacebuilding initiatives have proliferated. The Oxford Research Group (ORG) has convened people-centered, integrative peacebuilding projects in Marib and Hadramawt to engage local communities. And in May 2018, UN Envoy Martin Griffiths met with tribal leaders and civil society workers who participated in the workshop.

Despite promising events like these, a framework coordinating Track I and II initiatives remains lacking. On the regional level, in November 2019, Saudi Arabia brokered a

power-sharing agreement between the GoY and the STC, months after the STC seized Aden. The Riyadh Agreement grants access to the STC to join the UN-led peace talks as part of the government in exchange for the Hadi government to re-enter Aden and reorganize local institutions. However, as of February 2020, the relationship between the government and STC remains tenuous, hampering the implementation of political and security provisions.

7. Women Are Absent from the Peace Process

Both the UN-led peace talks between the GoY and the Houthis, and the Saudi-led conversations between the GoY and STC, have included few women negotiators. The Stockholm Consultations included only one woman (as a government representative) among the 24 people taking part. These low participation numbers do not honor the resolutions from UNSC 1325 and the 2014 National Dialogue Conference (NDC), which set a 30% quota for women in decision-making processes.

However, it would be myopic to assess women's



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engagement in the peace process by looking only at Track I negotiations. Since the conflict intensified in March 2015, Yemeni women have established advocacy platforms (e.g., Peace Track and Women4Yemen Network) to strategize for women's engagement internationally, advocate for participation and inclusion, raise awareness on conflict consequences, and identify pathways to peace. Dr. Bilqis Abu-Osba, Rasha Jarhum, Muna Luqman and Radhya al-Mutawakel are among many who have been prominent champions for increased women's involvement in peace processes and spoke at the UNSC between 2016 and 2019. The UN Special Envoy Office in Amman, Jordan, recently instituted a women advisory group and convened intra-women discussions.

Recommendations

Target fragmentation: Given the proliferation of external and internal non-state actors in the Yemen War since 2014, The UN, together with regional actors, should replace the current replace the current piecemeal peacemaking approach with inclusive and nationwide peace talks. Developing a multi-track peacebuilding strategy can be the first step.

Support governance and reconstruction: The Saudi-led coalition must invest in strengthening the Yemeni government and develop long-term plans to integrate Yemen into the Gulf Cooperation Council (GCC).

Bring more women to the table: A lasting peace and resolution will require more women's voices in national peace processes. The UN Special

Envoy should incentivize negotiating parties by developing buy-in strategies for including women in their teams in accordance with the NDC outcomes.

Make aid transparent: The international community should press for greater aid transparency consistent with local advocacy campaigns (e.g., "Where is the money?") and rethink data collection and verification procedures.

Focus on youth: Young people are the largest segment of the Yemeni population. The UN Envoy Office should establish a youth advisory group and include youth in the peace processes on all Tracks. ■

Note

1. The source for the claim that more than 100,000 people have been killed in Yemen in the last five years is the Armed Conflict Location & Event Data Project (ACLED). Available at: acleddata.com/#/dashboard.

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THE CENTRE

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