The Yemeni Quagmire: A Humanitarian Tragedy of Dire Proportions

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The war in Yemen, which escalated in March 2015, is making a dire humanitarian situation worse, with insurgent groups expanding and no end in sight to an intractable ideological conflict between warring political factions who appear further entrenched in their enmity than ever before, despite UN efforts to push Yemeni leaders towards new negotiations. The conflict has turned the country into a “humanitarian catastrophe”; fighting on the ground and air strikes have killed 10,000 people and displaced more than three million. According to the UN Office for the Co-ordination of Humanitarian Affairs (OCHA), nearly 19 million people, almost 70 percent of the population, are in need of humanitarian aid.

Having its roots in the failure of the political transition in 2011, the conflict in Yemen quickly descended into an armed conflict between the Houthis (a minority Shia group from the north of the country) and the government of then longtime authoritarian president, Ali Abdullah Saleh, culminating in the spectral transfer of power to Abd-Rabbu Mansoor Hadi, his deputy and the head of interim government. While Hadi struggled to deal with a wider array of problems, including corruption, widespread poverty and economic stagnation, the Houthis and the security forces allied with Saleh took control of the entire country, forcing Hadi to flee abroad in 2015. Alarmed by the rise of a rebel group believed to be backed militarily by Iran, a Saudi-led coalition, with logistical and intelligence support from the US, UK and France, attempted to restore legitimacy to Hadi’s government. However, since then, despite an air campaign, pro-government forces have failed to dislodge the Houthis from their northern strongholds.

Although Yemen’s instability stems from a long history of political discord, poverty and violence, the conflict intensified when the Yemeni government led by Saleh launched a large military offensive against the Houthis in 2009 and cracked down on its political opponents, with allegations of extrajudicial incarcerations, torture, and forced disappearances. In 2011, the Houthis responded to the Arab Spring revolutions by expanding their influence and seizing greater territory, eventually gaining administrative control in areas where they had only a foothold before, with mixed results that have brought a country already beleaguered and dazed by insurgent groups and economic crisis into a new period of even graver

uncertainty. Throughout 2013 and 2014, despite participating in internationally supported political talks, the Houthis continued to consolidate their political power and played a significant role in the government, effectively controlling parts of the country's north and centre, while also addressing their legitimate social, political and economic grievances.

Many analysts describe the Yemen imbroglio as a proxy battle between Saudi Arabia and Iran, although this portrayal falls short of explicating the extent of Yemen's internal divisions and an ongoing domestic power struggle exacerbated by the tumultuous events of the Arab uprisings. Nevertheless, Iran and Saudi Arabia's intervention in Yemen, particularly the outflanking of the latter by the former, has engendered the rise of many splinter groups backed in recent years by US Special Forces and extremists in the Arab world, who have established bases in Yemen and appear to be gaining a lot of ground as other countries and players are sucked in. While the struggle between Riyadh and Tehran has geopolitical implications, the conflicts in Yemen and Syria are the closest they have come to open confrontation as the struggle for greater economic and political legitimacy in the region has transcended the placid waters of the Gulf, encompassing almost every major conflict zone in West Asia.

In such a supercharged ambience, Yemen's topsy-turvy war, although overshadowed by the devastating crisis in Syria, is a major calamity. Unlike in Yemen, in Syria the US administration has favoured a "hands-off strategy", preferring not to get sucked into more Middle East wars. Moreover, since the Syrian conflict has bled beyond its borders, with ISIS carrying out harrowing attacks across Europe and other Middle Eastern countries, it has monopolised the US government's diplomatic energy to the disadvantage of Yemen. Seeing the world as a giant game of risk, the unintentional message of political stakeholders in the West to Tehran and the Houthis has been that Yemen is not a priority. Hence, due to the US and UK's strategic imperative in Yemen, repeated UN initiatives to achieve some kind of peace settlement have been severely impaired.

There are reports of looming famine, with the conflict triggering a humanitarian catastrophe, leaving an unprecedented 81 million people needing food aid in 2017 (at least 17 million people are considered food insecure, and 6.8 severely food insecure). The ongoing conflict, as per a report published by Doctors without Borders/Médecins Sans Frontières (MSF), has placed overwhelming strain on the country's deteriorating health system, with consequences far larger than the immediate wartime implications. As the health system continues to collapse, those hospitals that remain open are crippled by a lack of fuel, coupled with insecurity and damage to markets, electricity blackouts, and lack of medical supplies for surgery. This health care crisis is further exacerbated by contaminated water and poor sanitation, making people more vulnerable to diseases and killing nearly

2,000 people and infecting more than a half million. Researchers warn that the total number of people infected could eventually rise to over 600,000, ultimately rivalling the largest outbreak in Haiti, which affected at least 770,000 people in 2010, making it one of the largest outbreaks recorded since 1949.

Those affected by the epidemic of life threatening diseases, and the wider conflict, find it very difficult to access medical facilities because of ongoing fighting, which has left only 45 percent of Yemen's 3,500 health facilities fully functioning, and even they face severe medicine shortages due to import difficulties, inflation or lack of equipment and staff. With 80 percent in desperate need of humanitarian aid and 2 million staring at death due to malnourishment, children under the age of 5, accounting for close to half of all fatalities due to a high incidence of cholera, are bearing the brunt of the conflict in Yemen.

The war in Yemen has taken a devastating toll on the educational sector, leaving hundreds of schools destroyed, the remaining few unfit for use due to destruction, presence of displaced people or occupation by combatants. The situation has driven many Yemenis, in a phenomenon seldom seen anywhere, to purchase their educational essentials on a black market that has emerged in Sanaa and other governorates.

In the face of this senseless humanitarian tragedy, increased awareness and attention to the conflict is essential before it unfolds into a quagmire that the world will regret. The war has had a ripple effect in the Middle East, especially on the GCC, with the conflict heading in a downward spiral, that could potentially develop into the world's next full-blown refugee crisis. The United Nations brokered peace talks have stalled, all willful perpetrators having failed to reach a resolution because everyone is holding the humanitarian status quo as a political chip to bargain with at a table where no one is interested in establishing peace, while the country is imploding and the world is watching this quagmire break down. According to Stephen O'Brien (the Under-Secretary-General for Humanitarian Affairs and head of UN Emergency Relief), USD 2.3 billion in humanitarian aid is needed this year to allow the consumption of commercial food and other imports, but only 41 per cent of that amount has been received.

It is critical that all stakeholders push for an immediate cessation of hostilities in order to provide long overdue assistance and relief in what is one of the largest humanitarian crises of our age. As the country remains highly divided along tribal, ethnic, sectarian and ideological faultlines, with the tribal structures being the most important, the route to sustained stability requires negotiations from a multitude of factions. In this context, the US administration will likely agree with the Saudis to continue with military pressure; but it is not clear that military pressure in this multi-layered conflict can convince the Houthis and Saleh to negotiate in a multilateral context to foster a Yemeni state with

sufficient legitimacy. To restore the balance of power in the country, a regional settlement that includes Iran and Russia on the side of the Houthis, and the US and the GCC on the other side, is one way to give enough self-assurance to regional actors to the effect that peace is possible. However, since the country is on a wartime footing, and those benefitting from war are in command on both sides, the inclusion of Iran and Russia would give the Houthis and Saleh some confidence that their voices will not be stifled, and allow them to relinquish their strategic advantage. For Iran, Yemen is an important Arab country in the Arabian Peninsula, with significant geostrategic importance. However, for Iranians, it is not a vital security interest but rather a millstone to weigh down the Saudis and the United States indefinitely. The Iranians may therefore not be unwilling to negotiate.

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