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Yemen, Factor #19: Foreign Aid

A Modern Day Siege

The 21st century inception of the centuries-old conflict between the Sunni and Shiite sects of Islam rages on in Yemen, the Middle Eastern nation located in the southwestern corner of the Arabian Peninsula, bordered to the north by Saudi Arabia, to the east by Oman, and to the south and west by the Arabian and Red Seas. In September of 2014, the pro-Shia Houthi movement attacked Yemen's capital Sana'a. The government fled, and the rebels pledged to install a reformed government, tolerant of the Shiite minority in Yemen. Thus began the civil war. Saudi Arabia, a Sunni nation, accused Iran, its predominantly Shiite political rival, of supplying the rebels with weapons and money and formed a coalition of itself and eight other Sunni majority Arab nations with the goal of reinstating the internationally recognized government of Yemen. The coalition received money, weapons, and war intelligence from France, the United States, and United Kingdom ("Yemen Crisis," 2021), as well as an eventual 2,700 U.S. troops (Congressional Research Service, 2021, p. 30). Though the historical context from which the war erupted is long-established, the violence and destruction of humanity of the Yemeni civil war are uniquely modern and horrifying. Coalition troops battle Houthi fighters in the streets of Yemen's cities and the hills of its sweltering deserts, bombing raids cripple dams and farms across international borders, and drone strikes lay waste to civilians in Yemen, Saudi Arabia, and the United Arab Emirates (Human Rights Watch, 2021). Despite the rampant violence, the war is at a stalemate. Neither side is decisively winning; the Houthis control the North, including the capital, and the coalition controls the South, including key ports ("Yemeni family," 2022).

Humanitarian organizations have easily identified the victims of the civil war, though: civilians. The conflict has crippled the food supply chain and exacerbated the extreme poverty that plagued Yemen even before battles began in 2015 ("Yemen," 2021), bringing food insecurity, malnutrition, and starvation to the homes of millions of Yemenis. To make matters worse, Saudi Arabia maintains a strangling air and sea blockade of imports into Yemen. The coalition uses this blockade as a siege tactic; Yemenis are left to starve within the nearly inescapable sea and militarized borders of their country - and more are starving each day. In January 2021, after war had ravaged Yemen for 6 years, the United Nations humanitarian office deemed the catastrophe in Yemen "the world's worst humanitarian crisis" with "more than 13 million in danger of starving to death" ("Yemen remains," 2021), despite receiving the largest share of aid organizations' funds and efforts ("Yemen can't wait," 2022). Food insecurity resulting from civil war in Yemen is an issue of vast complexity, dangerous threat, and convoluted politics. Humanitarian organizations offer the expertise to help, though: their drivers know how to reach starving families, their vouchers are accepted at grocery stores worldwide, and their bags of flour can feed somebody in a crisis. If the United States, as a coalition sponsor and supporter, were to renew funding for aid organizations and influence Saudi Arabia to lift the blockade, the death toll, hunger, and malnutrition in Yemen would begin to improve. In the meantime, Yemeni citizens must seek out aid organizations. Charity food kitchens and aid centers will help stretch hungry Yemenis' odds of survival, but they have to meet first.

Food production in Yemen, centralized in the highlands, consists typically of cereals, including wheat, sorghum, millet, and barley, tropical commodities, such as coffee, and fruits, including pomegranates, citrus, and figs (Yemen FSIS Development Programme, 2018). Despite Yemen's relatively small size, its tropical geography allows for two separate biomes that allow great diversity in crop production. Mild, warm temperatures and rainy highlands dominate the Western Plateau, while the rest of the country consists of tropical deserts. These deserts are some of the most extreme environments on Earth, with little rainfall and soaring temperatures. Each year in Yemen, a first rainy season lasts from February to April, followed by a dry season, then a second rainy season brings the southwestern monsoon

from June to September. The monsoons only rain significantly on the highlands. In the desert, the second rainy season brings cloud cover but little rain (“Climate,” n.d.).

The typical Yemeni is hungry, malnourished, and a tragic victim of the violence waged in 7 years of civil war. The day to day life of school, work, going out to eat or watch a movie every once in a while, and encountering stress due to a speeding ticket or rent payment almost does not exist in Yemen. Life there is a daily fight for survival. 50 year old Mariam reports, “most of the time, we only eat once a day. I don’t have fuel or firewood, so we burn plastic bottles and rubbish when we have something to cook” (“Yemen can’t wait,” 2022). Mariam is one of the 4 million internally displaced Yemenis who escaped their homes fearing the bombs, drones, and bullets that murdered their neighbors and family members might strike them next (global report, p. 254, 2021). She and her family lived in poverty in Sana’a until they were forced to flee after combat broke out in 2015. Over 16 million more Yemenis like Mariam, 54% of the population, are malnourished and unable to get enough food without taking drastic measures or humanitarian aid (reliefweb, p. 8, 2022). By December of 2020, hunger, lack of healthcare, and failed infrastructure had killed more Yemenis than combat. The total death toll at that point was 233,000 (“Yemen crisis,” 2021). The number has continued to grow, starvation outpacing violence, with children at highest risk. UNICEF revealed a few months later, in 2021, that 400,000 children under five were at imminent risk of death (world report, 2022).

Extreme poverty, displacement, and hunger run so rampant that most Yemenis have had to sacrifice education and short term security to get food. Two million children are out of school (Human Rights Watch, 2021), either to save money or because their school was destroyed by an explosion. Parents forage for recycled scrap to sell so they can make up for the mere “sack and half of wheat, two cans of (cooking) oil, a bag of salt, a bag of sugar, and a bag of lentils” given to their family of 8 every two months by cash-strapped aid organizations (“Yemeni family,” 2022). Almost 2 out of every 5 Yemeni families go into debt with the corner grocery store or pharmacy just to buy “bread, flour, sugar, rice, legumes, and cooking oil” and basic medicine (“Nearly 40,” 2021). This 2 out of every 5 does not include Yemenis who have even fewer, more desperate options; there are more Yemenis even less fortunate than these.

During conflict, when air strikes and infantry make it too dangerous to spend extended periods of time outside, Yemenis’ biggest hope for surviving starvation is charity. Aid organizations like the United Nations’ World Food Programme (WFP), the world’s largest humanitarian aid organization focused on solving hunger, set up tents as outposts and food pantries in Yemen. They do help. Amani, a hungry and two-year-old Yemeni child, received food and a check for malnutrition after her older brother carried her to a WFP feeding center (“Children,” 2022). Had the pair never risked the trip, they would have never received the food and medical attention that Amani required. Elsewhere, in a remote village, villagers are left without any outside access to food besides monthly WFP food basket drop offs. Abdullatif, a village resident, reports that once a month’s food baskets run out, “there are nights when we starve. All of us... When this happens, we have to eat leaves. The tree grows in our village and many of the people here eat the leaves due to a lack of food” (Symington, 2021). Though bare, the combination of WFP rations and tree leaves keep Abdullatif, his family, and his community alive. Through a combination of the kind of local sourcing for survival and reception of charity aid that Abdullatif and his village employ, Yemenis can persevere through hunger, the most dangerous effect of the civil war.

In September of 2022, the Yemenis face a much more positive outlook: a conflictless war. A truce maintained since April 2022 between the Coalition and the Houthi forces has reduced the violence that terrorized the nation (“Yemen truce,” 2022), but the economic and hunger crises have seen little improvement. For example, Yemen depends on imports for 90% of its food supply, and depends on Ukraine and Russia for 2/5ths of its wheat imports. In such an import-reliant system, the ongoing war between Ukraine and Russia has had debilitating consequences for food security in Yemen

(“Democratizing,” 2022). Furthermore, the last renewal of the truce, in August, expires on October 2nd (“Yemen truce,” 2022). Global negotiators and Yemenis seeking a continued peace have until that date to continue the agreement between the warring factions. Despite determined international support to renew the truce past its October 2nd expiration date, Yemenis should make preparations for streets again wrought by civil war. The United Nations, as well as a collective worldwide organizations (“44 national”), are hoping that outcome is avoided and ensuring peace to the best of their ability, but there is no guarantee.

Though fuel is still unattainably expensive, inhibiting travel, it is safe to gather within communities. This is the greatest hope for individual Yemenis to improve their quality of life. In the absence of air strikes and battalions roaming the streets, neighbors can coordinate their efforts. They can pool fuel, letting one or two vehicles take a trip on behalf of a dozen or more people, pool food, ensuring that fewer children slip into acute malnutrition, and pool information. Amidst power blackouts and communication breakdowns, information is vital. Individual citizens are less able to obtain details of the changes in the truce and economy that happen at broad, overhead levels than people outside the conflict zones may realize. With the safety to meet as communities, Yemenis can gain a greater understanding of the situation. Information also pertains to obtaining aid. As of September 29th, “23.4 million Yemenis were dependent on humanitarian assistance,” according to a Reliefweb press release (“44 national,” 2022). While the WFP, UNICEF, Reliefweb, and other organizations can set up their medical check and food distribution centers, they can’t reach the front doors of everyone who lives in Yemen. Coordinated efforts between families and neighbors would ensure that the tens of millions of Yemenis who require assistance are receiving it.

An October renewal of the truce would be an important one: if agreed to, Yemeni children would, at large, return to school. Lack of access to education for children has contributed to Yemen’s classification as the site of the world’s worst humanitarian for over seven years. One first-grade teacher that Reliefweb spoke to explained the significance of a peaceful October return to school: “During these six months [of the continuous truce], my pupils have begun to change their perception of seeing a plane fly overhead. To not be terrified, confused and uncomfortable. I hope they will not have to change their perception back to what it was before.”

Perhaps the greatest opportunity for individual Yemenis to achieve better food security is local food production. Home and neighborhood gardens are robust, individualized, and, most importantly, trusted and supported by the vast majority of Yemenis. A 2021 survey from Arabia Brain Trust reported that 90% of the country’s citizens were interested in local food production, and 45% were already doing it (“Democratizing,” 2022). This provides significant promise for the prospect of small scale and personal food cultivation. If a little less than a half of the surveyed population were already turning to gardens and community farms to supplement their food supply in 2021, and nine out of ten Yemenis believed this strategy could better their quality of life, then there exists an opportunity created, endorsed, and practiced by the resilient population for wide scale, lasting aid. Yemenis have established a strategy for a resilient, truce period agriculture system: local food production. If an external organization wishes to support the population of Yemen beyond a short term strategy of funds and baskets, this is the way to do so. To make sure that the truce’s benefits for the Yemeni population continue, it is more critical than ever to fulfill aid organizations’ requests for donation. It is also crucial to withhold support for Saudi Arabia and the other coalition powers’ militaries.

WFP Executive Director David Beasley, from a March 11th, 2021 UN Security Council session on food security and maintaining international peace and stability, reminds the world that each of the 400,000 starving children and 16 million malnourished Yemenis “are real people. We are heading straight toward the biggest famine in modern history. It is hell on earth in many places in Yemen right now,” he revealed. Beasley visited one of the best children’s hospitals in the country, in Sana’a, where “almost all

of the children [he] met were sick, skin and bones, and dying with entirely preventable or treatable illnesses” (Beasley, 2021). Furthermore, hospitals must turn away dying Yemenis that walk in off the street. 20% of Yemen has no doctor and only half of Yemen’s medical facilities are able to adequately treat sickness and injury (“Yemen crisis,” 2021), so hospitals and healthcare workers are completely overwhelmed with patients. The hospital in Sana’a that David Beasley visited only has 25 beds. The children the hospital has no room for are left to “go home and die” (Beasley, 2021).

As the war in Yemen continues, its citizens become less and less able to purchase food: wages fall and food prices skyrocket. The WFP conducted data simulations to estimate conditions in Yemen under different hypotheticals. Two scenarios the WFP considered were, number one, a 2022 Yemen in which war never broke out in 2014 and human development continued uninhibited besides existing 2014 conditions, and, number two, a Yemen in which the war concludes in 2022. With no conflict, the percentage of Yemenis living in extreme poverty, defined as receiving less than US \$1.90 a day, would have decreased from 18.8% in 2014 to 15.4% in 2022. If the war ends this year, the present best possible outcome, it is predicted 64.8% of Yemenis will live in extreme poverty. That equals approximately the population of New York state left to survive each day on less than a fourth of the minimum wage that workers in the U.S. are paid hourly, in the best case scenario. Similarly grave, infant deaths during birth, malnourished children, and GDP per capita will have all worsened compared to conflictless conditions (Moyer, Bohl, Hanna, Mapes, and Rafa, p. 9). Additionally, as more and more Yemenis earn less and less money, the buying power of that money plummets, especially with regards to food. The most insurmountable food prices exist in the south of Yemen. For much of 2019, the minimum food required for survival cost about 5,000 Yemeni Rial per person per month, equivalent today to U.S. \$19.98. It increased steadily until January 2021, when the cost of food spiked 119% to over 16,000 Yemeni Rial per person per month (U.N. World Food Programme, *Yemen food*, 2022, p. 10). That converts to over U.S. \$63 per person per month for the bare minimum of subsistence in a country where almost 2 out of every 3 workers are making U.S. \$58 per month. A single worker cannot support themselves on their wages, let alone their children.

Wages and price are not the only barriers to food access in Yemen. Across the country, farmers struggle to get food to market. Mercilessly imposing its blockade, Saudi Arabia has intentionally strangled fuel imports since January 2021. As a result, Yemen imported 69% less fuel into Red Sea ports in 2021 than it did in 2019. The most fuel imported into the country in one month in 2021 was 89,000 tons, whereas the least imported in one month in 2019 was 119,000 tons (U.N. World Food Programme, *Yemen food*, 2022, p. 5). Without fuel, Saudi Arabia’s blockade has deprived Yemen of the electricity it needs to run even its most crucial public services, like hospitals. Beasley, 2021, recounts walking into a hospital to find the lights were out and the building was without electricity. The majority of hospitals “only have electricity in their intensive care units because fuel reserves are so low,” he explained (Beasley, 2021). The fuel shortage has also halted the transportation that aid organizations use to get food to starving children and medicine to wounded civilians (“The Saudi Blockade,” 2021). Farmers, too, struggle to find trucks that can transport their wheat and vegetables to consumers, so farmers lose money and consumers lose nutrition and food access. Saudi Arabia’s blockade of Yemeni imports remains the largest barrier to feeding Yemenis as well as the greatest inhibitor of humanitarian aid.

On top of throttling food distribution in Yemen, the coalition has destroyed food production with bombings since the Saudi air campaign against Yemen began in 2015. In 2020, The Conflict and Environment Observatory identified over 1,600 incidents of coalition military activity that “directly impacted the agricultural sector” (Conflict and Environment Observatory, 2020). The report further explained that in 845 of those incidents, farms were the intended target of an infrastructure attack. That means there were 845 missions in which coalition war planes flew to a farm in Yemen and completed an assigned mission to drop cluster bombs or other land wasting weapons on its fields (Conflict and

Environment Observatory, 2020). The coalition is starving civilians, employing siege tactics, and destroying vital resources to decimate the Yemeni population as a military strategy.

Both violence and hunger have worsened in the recent developments of the Yemeni civil war. Conflict has been on the rise in the country since July 2021, which will likely displace more Yemeni civilians in addition to the current 4 million, the WFP's February to May 2022 Outlook, p. 14, reports. Furthermore, the "economic crisis," as the WFP describes the all-encompassing poverty and depreciation in the south of Yemen, "is poised to continue to limit employment opportunities, affect purchasing power and restrict people's access to food" (U.N. World Food Programme, *Hunger*, 2022, p. 14).

As 2021 concluded, the WFP alerted the world that their capability to get flour, pulses, oil, sugar, salt, grocery vouchers, and cash to the general population, specialized nutritional assistance to children and pregnant and nursing mothers, and emergency deliveries to school students ("Yemen," 2021) was decreasing. The World Food Programme relies on donations, most significantly from world governments, to continue assistance across all their crisis responses. In December 2021, the WFP reported that due to a "lack of funding from donors," they would have to "reduce food rations for 8 million people in Yemen" in January 2022 ("U.N. shrinks," 2021). Their January 2022 Yemen Food Security Update confirms this change was made, at the detriment of millions of starving, desperate people (U.N. World Food Programme, *Yemen food*, 2022 p. 9).

World leaders remain conflicted on the best course of action to alleviate suffering in Yemen. Some service members and international affairs experts advise that diplomacy is the most urgent cause and should receive the most support (Daniel & Merlin, 2022). Conversely, the UN Sustainable Development Group established in March of 2021 the ideology it believes should guide the decision making: "more money for the aid operation is the fastest, most efficient way to support famine prevention right now... Peace is the ultimate prize, but the most pressing problem in Yemen today is famine" ("Yemen can't wait," 2022). Ensuring that aid organizations may continue to combat the blockade and reach starving Yemenis should be priority number 1. Until a longer term solution arrives, it will remain vital. The greatest consideration in the long term solution has to be the Saudi blockade. Doing so before resolving the conflict will serve as humanitarian aid, as it will enable aid organizations to easier reach people in need. Additionally, it will also make diplomacy more viable. The Houthis have resolutely established that removing the blockade is a non-negotiable term before discussions of any ceasefire may take place (Congressional Research Service, 2021, p. 46). If the blockade remains, it will continue to drain aid organizations' funds until donors are even less eager to support the aid efforts. Then, nothing will prevent it from destroying the population already suffering the worst humanitarian crisis on Earth.

The blockade serves no purpose beyond starving the civilian population of Yemen. Rigorous inspections established by the United Nations need to help in ensuring that ships bringing goods into Yemen are not smuggling weapons, as confirmed by U.S. Special Envoy Tim Lenderking, who says "that the mechanism 'works quite well'" ("The Saudi Blockade," 2021). Saudi Arabia has also demonstrated additional desire to starve Yemenis: the "coalition has forced Sana'a International Airport to remain closed since August 2016, which has severely restricted the flow of food, fuel, and medicine to civilians, in violation of international humanitarian law," reports the Human Rights Watch, 2021.

Some U.S. Representatives have already taken first steps towards reducing the role of the United States as an indirect contributor to the blockade. American support to Saudi Arabia includes maintenance support and spare parts for war aircraft, which enables the coalition to protect the Saudi blockade. It is entirely possible that the U.S. provides more aid that directly enables the blockade, but the people and their representatives have no way to know. Presidential administrations have thus far sidestepped or denied requests by journalists and congresspeople to provide clarity on what support the U.S. provides the coalition ("Biden Administration," 2021).

Those important first steps towards influencing Saudi Arabia to lift its blockade currently exist only as a proposed amendment to H.R. 4373, a bill submitted to the Senate. In its current state, it rearranges funds and other support that U.S. Foreign Operations and the Department of State offer governments worldwide. On July 28th, 2021, the House voted to adopt the bill, almost perfectly split down party lines: 217 of 219 Democrats voted in support and 119 of 221 Republicans voted in opposition to pass the bill. The 12 Republican Representatives that did not vote with the rest of their party abstained from voting (“Roll call 241,” 2021).

Amendment No. 5 to Section D of H.R. 4373, authored by Congresswoman Debbie Dingell (D-MI 12th District) would transfer another \$1,000,000 within the Department of State Administrative Account to “highlight opposition to U.S. political or diplomatic support for the Saudi blockade of Yemen.” In support of her amendment, Dingell argued to her colleagues in a July 2021 Congressional debate that “while the Biden administration announced earlier this year that it would limit U.S. involvement in the conflict, it has never been authorized by Congress, and more needs to be done. This begins by pushing for an end to the Saudi blockade of Yemen, which has exacerbated what continues to be the world's worst humanitarian crisis” (*167 Cong. Rec.*, 2021). Congresswoman Dingell has quantified the first step for the United States to take to do so at \$1,000,000. At this point, it is imperative to maintain the momentum she and her colleagues have garnered thus far with the amendment; it must become a non-negotiable attachment to H.R. 4373 as it enters discussion and modification in the Senate.

The United States must also provide funds to the World Food Programme. It acts too directly as a contributor to the violence to allow any lack of support for humanitarian aid. In December of 2021, the U.S. Senate authorized a sale of missiles and missile launchers worth \$650 million to Saudi Arabia. President Biden’s completion of this sale of weapons to Saudi Arabia evoked bipartisan opposition in Congress. Lawmakers across parties introduced a bill to halt the missile sale, which was eventually voted against in the Senate in December 2021. Two politically opposed senators, Independent Sen. Bernie Sanders who caucuses with Democrats and Republican Sen. Rand Paul, each voiced their opposition to the missile sale in support of the bill. Sen. Sanders warned that selling missiles to Saudi Arabia “does nothing but further this conflict and pour more gasoline on already raging fire,” and Sen. Paul claimed the U.S. is failing to act on the “humanitarian disaster caused by the Saudi blockade of Yemen” (“US Congress,” 2021). This agreement across party lines proves that bipartisan support for lifting the blockade, as petitioned by Rep. Dingell’s amendment, is possible. In the meantime, however, the United States should direct the money it made from the sale into getting food to the Yemenis whose homes, farms, schools, and lives may be decimated by the American missiles.

Conveniently, the \$650 million the United States made from the sale would more than cover the \$632.7 million that the WFP said in December 2021 was necessary to continue general food assistance until June of 2022 (U.N. World Food Programme, *WFP Yemen country*, 2021). Considering the organization had to cut off 8 million recipients from live-saving food aid a month after the U.S. Senate voted to proceed with the missile sale, it is critical that the WFP’s fund requests be met by donors such as the United States. By making such a donation, the U.S. would also demonstrate basic commitment to protect non-combatants who suffer from the war. The same House Appropriations Committee that introduced H.R. 4373 must immediately capitalize on the expressed bipartisan support for aid of Yemeni citizens and introduce an amendment to upcoming legislature in Congress to provide \$650 million to the World Food Programme for food assistance in Yemen.

The proposed Amendment No. 25 of Section D to H.R. 4373 and opportunity to fund 6 months of life saving aid offer a beginning. The United States cannot let it pass. The tens of millions of Yemen’s civilians that cannot afford food, have no electricity and little fuel to burn, or are running out of humanitarian aid depend on it. As more and more Yemenis starve and their children fall sick with

malnourishment, unable to access life saving healthcare in war-ravaged hospitals, the humanitarian crisis in Yemen becomes more and more dire. The supporters of the coalition, principally the United States, must value humanity over political alliances. The damage that adopting the amendment and spending \$650 million may cause to U.S.-Saudi Arabia relations is far less important than ending mass death and suffering. The United States owes it to every Yemeni to employ these two forms of humanitarian aid.

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