

# YEMEN TRAGEDY:

## BACKGROUND BRIEF

Air and drone strikes, on-the-ground combat, special forces planning and control, military exercises, and missions to train and assist foreign forces -- the U.S. military conducts active operations in 85 countries around the globe, while maintaining nearly 800 military bases. According to the book "**America Invades: How We've Invaded Or Been Militarily Involved With Almost Every Country on Earth**," the United States has in its history invaded or fought in 84 of the 193 countries recognized by the United Nations. It has been militarily involved with 191 of 193.

When there is no specific threat to the nation, the U.S. the Defense Department, its contractors and clients require a reason to exist. So the definitions of defense, conflict, battle, strategic interests, and tactical necessity have become fluid. Since 9/11 "**Counter Terrorism**" most easily justifies the unilateral use of force in most circumstances.

In Yemen, the site of grievous civilian suffering amid intractable civil war, the fighting now seven years old, has turned into a proxy war. **Iran-backed Houthi rebels**, who overthrew the Yemeni government, are pitted against a multinational coalition led by Saudi Arabia.

The Houthis, named for a religious leader from the Houthi clan and officially known as Ansar Allah, emerged in the late 1980s as a vehicle for religious and cultural revivalism among **Zaydi Shiites** in northern Yemen. The Zaydis are a minority in the Sunni Muslim-majority country but predominant in the northern highlands along the Saudi border.

Yemen has long struggled with religious and cultural differences between its north and south and the legacy of European colonialism. The modern Yemeni state was formed in 1990 with the unification of the U.S.- and **Saudi-backed Yemeni Arab Republic**, in the north, and the USSR-backed **People's Democratic Republic of Yemen (PDRY)**, in the south. **Ali Abdullah Saleh**, a military officer who had ruled North Yemen since 1978, assumed leadership of the new country.

In the late 1980s, the Saleh regime fostered jihad in what was then North Yemen by repatriating thousands of Yemeni nationals who had fought the Soviets in Afghanistan. Saleh dispatched these **mujahadeen** to fight the Soviet-backed Marxist government of South Yemen in a successful bid for unification, and subsequently, to crush southern secessionists. The returning Yemenis were joined by other Arab veterans of the Afghan war, foremost among them **Osama bin Laden**, who advocated a central role for Yemen in global jihad.

Southern separatists seceded for several months and reemerged in 2007 as the Southern Movement, which has continued to press for greater autonomy within Yemen. In 2000, **Al-Qaeda in Yemen**, a group that would later become **Al-Qaeda in the Arabian Peninsula (AQAP)**, conducted an attack on the USS Cole, in the Yemeni port of Aden. Since then, the United States has provided Yemen more than \$850 million in military aid.

**AQAP** and the related Ansar al-Sharia insurgent group captured territory in the south and east. The Houthi movement, whose base is among the Zaydi Shiites of northern Yemen, rose up against Saleh's government six times between 2004 and 2010.

As the popular protests of the 2011 **Arab Spring** spread to Yemen Hundreds of thousands of Yemenis demonstrated to demand democratic change and an end to the 33-year rule of President Ali Abdullah Saleh. Security and military forces loyal to Saleh used brutal violence in repeated attempts to crush the pro-democracy movement. Human Rights groups persistently charged that Saleh ran a corrupt and autocratic government. While Yemeni security forces focused on putting down protests in urban areas, **AQAP** made gains in outlying regions.

Political and military rivals jockeyed to oust Saleh. Under escalating domestic and international pressure, he stepped aside in 2012 after receiving assurances of immunity from prosecution. His vice president, **Abd Rabbu Mansour Hadi**, assumed office as interim president in a transition brokered by the **Gulf Cooperation Council (GCC)**, a regional organization based in Saudi Arabia, and backed by The



United States. As part of the GCC's timetable for a transition, the UN-sponsored **National Dialogue Conference (NDC)** convened 565 delegates in 2013 to formulate a new constitution agreeable to Yemen's many factions. But the **NDC** ended with delegates unable to resolve disputes over the distribution of power.

Under pressure from the International Monetary Fund, which had extended to Yemen a \$550 million loan premised on promises of economic reforms, Hadi's government lifted fuel subsidies in 2014.

Houthis captured much of Sanaa by late 2014. Reneging on a UN peace deal, they consolidated control of the capital and continued their southward advance. Hadi's government resigned under pressure in January 2015 and Hadi later fled to Saudi Arabia.

Saudi forces launched a military campaign—primarily fought from the air—to roll back the Houthis and restore the Hadi administration to Sanaa.

In March 2015 **Barack Obama** established a "Joint Planning Cell" with Saudi Arabia authorizing US forces to provide logistical and intelligence support to the Saudis in Yemen, the U.S. and its allies have supported the Saudi intervention in Yemen through arms sales and technical assistance - selecting targets and aerial refueling, or with direct involvement - like Tomahawk missiles, fired at Houthi controlled radar sites by the USS Nitze in October 2016.

When Saudi F-15 warplanes took off from an air base in southern Saudi Arabia for a bombing run over Yemen, it was not just a plane and bombs that were American. American mechanics serviced the jet and carried out repairs on the ground. American technicians upgraded the targeting software and other classified technology, which Saudis were not allowed to touch. The pilot was likely to have been trained by the United States Air Force. At a flight operations room in the capital, Riyadh, Saudi commanders sat near American military officials who provided intelligence and tactical advice.

Military units loyal to Saleh aligned themselves with the Houthis, contributing to their battlefield success. Other militias mobilized against the Houthi-Saleh forces, aligning with those in the military who had remained loyal to the Hadi government. Southern separatists ramped up their calls for secession.

Hadi's government has accused **Hezbollah**, Iran's Lebanese ally, of aiding the Houthis. Saudi Arabia's perception that the Houthis are an Iranian proxy rather than an indigenous movement has driven Riyadh's military intervention. But many regional specialists say that Iran's influence is likely limited, especially since Iranians and Houthis adhere to different schools of Shiite Islam. Still, Iran and the Houthis share geopolitical interests: Tehran seeks to challenge Saudi and U.S. dominance in the region, and the Houthis oppose Hadi's U.S.- and Saudi-backed government. Saudi Arabia cobbled together a coalition of Sunni-majority Arab states: **Bahrain, Egypt, Jordan, Kuwait, Morocco, Qatar, Sudan, and the United Arab Emirates (UAE)**. By 2018, the coalition had expanded to include soldiers from Eritrea and Pakistan.

After Saudi Arabia, the **UAE** has played the most significant military role in the coalition, contributing some ten thousand ground troops, mostly in Yemen's south. In 2015 the **UAE** contracted **Academi** (formerly known as **Blackwater**, a private military company) to deploy 450 Colombian, Panamanian, Salvadoran and Chilean mercenaries to Yemen. The **UAE** came into conflict with

its allies in 2019, when it backed the separatist **Southern Transitional Government (STC)**, which captured Aden. That November, Hadi and the **STC** president signed the Riyadh Agreement, which affirms that the factions will share power equally in a postwar Yemeni government. The separatists reneged on the deal for several months in 2020, but eventually they joined a unity government with equal representation of northerners and southerners. The formation of a government signaled some progress in bridging Yemen's internal divisions, but its authority was immediately challenged when a plane carrying the cabinet was targeted in a drone attack blamed on the Houthis; all of the ministers were unscathed.

In August 2019, a United Nations report said the **US, UK and France** may be complicit in committing war crimes in Yemen by selling weapons and providing support to the Saudi led coalition which is using the deliberate starvation of civilians as a tactic of warfare. The conflict has displaced more than one million people and given rise to cholera outbreaks, medicine shortages, and famine. Still, the United States is Saudi Arabia's largest arms supplier.

**President Biden**, has said he will end support for its military offensive, including the sale of weapons, and signaled a shift to diplomacy by appointing a special envoy to Yemen. However, the policy change is not expected to affect U.S. counterterrorism efforts in Yemen, "We're going to continue to support and help Saudi Arabia defend its sovereignty and its territorial integrity and its people," the president said. Biden made no mention of the recently released documents that link **Saudi Prince Mohammed bin Salman's** involvement in the killing of Journalist Jamal Khashoggi when he spoke to the Saudi King, signaling continued support for the Monarchy.

The head of U.S. Central Command, **General Kenneth McKenzie**, downplayed any damage to the "*long-term relationship*" with Riyadh.

**"Nothing that we did, nothing that has been said or done means we're not going to continue to engage Saudi and our other coalition partners. Our focus there is going to be to do things that will help them defend themselves more effectively and efficiently,"**

Trump's State Department warned that Yemen's instability weakened long-running counterterrorism efforts, which has relied heavily on air strikes. The Obama administration conducted an estimated 185 strikes over eight years, while the Trump administration launched nearly 200 in its four years. These air strikes killed several high-level **AQAP** members, including former leader Nasser al-Wuhayshi and top official **Jamal al-Badawi**, who was allegedly involved in the USS Cole bombing. More than 500 US airstrikes have been locally claimed in Yemen since 2009, resulting in several hundred locally documented civilian deaths.

**With a poverty rate of more than 50%, Yemen was the Arab world's poorest**

country even before the conflict. A recent United Nations report found that over half of Yemen's thirty million people will experience crisis-level food insecurity by mid-2021. Disease has run rampant; suspected cholera cases reached some 700,000 in 2019. The country has also been hit by COVID-19. Many countries have cut back on critical aid to Yemen. The United Nations received less than half the donations requested for Yemen in 2020, raising fears of famine in a country where 80% of the population relies on humanitarian assistance.

Since 2015, the war has displaced more than three million people. (More than one million are internally displaced.) The situation has worsened under the four-year-long land, sea, and air blockade imposed by coalition forces, obstructing vital supplies of food and medicine. In October 2019: **The Armed Conflict Location & Event Data Project recorded more than 100,000 reported fatalities in Yemen since 2015, including over 12,000 civilians killed in direct attacks.**

Both Houthi and coalition forces have violated international humanitarian law by attacking civilian targets. This includes the coalition's destruction of a hospital run by the international relief organization **Doctors Without Borders** in 2015. Torture, arbitrary arrests, and forced disappearances are among the other violations perpetrated by both sides.

**WAR - WHAT IS IT GOOD FOR? ABSOLUTELY NOTHING!  
SAY IT AGAIN!**

**A GREENFUSE RADICAL RE-MIX**

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