



The Unending War in Yemen: An Examination of the Unnatural Balance of Power Between Saudi Arabia and Iran

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Abstract

Yemen has been a warzone for at least seven years now. The conflict is seemingly a civil war between the government and opposition forces. It also serves as a proxy war that determines the balance of power between Saudi Arabia and Iran in the region. The government in Yemen is aided by the Saudi-led Gulf Cooperation Countries (GCC), where Saudi Arabia (as well as other GCC members) purchases military technologies from the United States, Britain, France, and Germany. On the other hand, the opposition groups – the most prominent one being the Houthis – use Iranian technology in their fight. Considering the sophistication of military technology of the US and other Western countries vis-à-vis Iran, the duration of the war in Yemen stands out as a puzzle which this article attempts to explain using state-level analysis. After reviewing the situation since 2014, this article examines two existing arguments regarding the balance of power between Iran and Saudi-backed warring parties, namely, the hearts and minds argument and the military inadequacy arguments. Demonstrating the limitations of these, this article suggests that the Western powers contribute to the perpetuation of the war as they accrue a stream of revenue from arms production.

Keywords: balance of power, proxy war, arms production, security, war crimes

1. Relevance and Significance: War Crimes in Yemen

The civil war in Yemen is widely considered one of the worst humanitarian crises of today. The UN estimates that 75% of the entire population currently requires more humanitarian assistance than any other single country.¹ The casualties of war are hard to track, which makes it possible for the clashing forces to breach international humanitarian law and cover their actions when accused by the international community.

According to Article 8 of the Rome Statute of the International Criminal Court willful killing or causing of great suffering, extensive destruction of property without military necessity, or intentionally directing attacks at civilian populations are among the list of war crimes.² These crimes are observed and reported in the current Yemeni conflict. The Yemen Data Project³ provides the best estimates available and also divides the targets of air raids (which are the most used military tactic in the conflict) as military, civilian and unknown. From the total air raid numbering 22,879 during the ongoing campaign that has lasted over six years, 7,464 have targeted military, 6,658 have targeted civilian and 8,757 have targeted unknown areas (areas that cannot be distinguished as military or civilian) according to the findings of the Yemen Data Project. This points to serious breaches of the Rome Statute on the part of the Yemeni government.

The most recent report on the war crimes in Yemen, issued by the United Nations, states that “the parties to the conflict continue to show no regard for international law or the lives, dignity, and rights of people in Yemen, while third States have helped to perpetuate the conflict by continuing to supply the parties with weapons”.⁴ Highlighting the unlawful airstrikes, the 2020 Human Rights Watch World Report also accused the warring parties in the region of creating and perpetuating injustices that result in civilian deaths and other inhumane practices

¹ “World Report 2019: Yemen,” *Human Rights Watch*, published January 17, 2019, <https://www.hrw.org/world-report/2019/country-chapters/yemen>.

² “Rome Statute of the International Criminal Court,” *International Criminal Court* (The Hague, 2011), <https://www.icc-cpi.int/resource-library/Documents/RS-Eng.pdf>.

³ “Yemen Data Project,” accessed July 31, 2021, <https://yemendataproject.org/>.

⁴ “Situation of Human Rights in Yemen, Including Violations and Abuses Since September 2014: Report of the Detailed Findings of the Group of Eminent International and Regional Experts on Yemen,” *Human Rights Council* (New York, September 28, 2020), <https://www.ohchr.org/Documents/HRBodies/HRCouncil/GEE-Yemen/2020-09-09-report.pdf>.

including the recruitment of child soldiers, arbitrary detentions and torture, and blockading humanitarian access.⁵

1.1. Political Angle of the Conflict

Thus, there is a significant humanitarian angle to this conflict, as well as political and economic angles. That being said, this paper focuses on the political angle which undertakes a state-level analysis, as it contains the root causes for the ongoing humanitarian conditions in the region. Within the political angle, there are two aspects of this conflict that are important to assess. One aspect is that currently, the conflict is seen to be a proxy war between Iran and Saudi Arabia, whereby a domestic conflict is used by two larger powers as an extension of their political, economic or diplomatic disputes. As Saudi Arabia is defending the government and Iran is aiding the Houthi rebellion against the government,⁶ the settlement of the conflict in Yemen will define the balance of power in the wider region.⁷ According to the 2019 Global Firepower annual review, Iran and Saudi Arabia are seen to have military powers of similar strength.⁸ However, the game-changer comes with the US support of Saudi Arabia. The American-Saudi alliance dates back to the 1930s and strengthened with the end of the Second World War, shaped mostly by the oil exports from Saudi Arabia to the US, and arms imports to Saudi Arabia.⁹ This alliance can be seen as an internal advantage for Saudi Arabia since it relates to its military capabilities. According to the Stockholm International Peace Research Institute (SIPRI) Data for all countries from 1988–2018, as a share of GDP, Saudi Arabia is the third-largest country in military expenditure, following the US and China.¹⁰ Seen explicitly

⁵ “World Report 2020: Yemen,” *Human Rights Watch*, published December 12, 2019, <https://www.hrw.org/world-report/2020/country-chapters/yemen>.

⁶ “Yemen’s Complicated War Explained,” *TRT World*, published August 10, 2018, video, 3:56, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=AkyXDDXzPyw>.

⁷ Ahmed Salah Hashim, “Saudi-Iranian Rivalry and Conflict: Shia Province as Casus Belli?” S. Rajaratnam School of International Studies (RSIS) Commentary No. 022 (Singapore, January 29, 2016): 3, <https://www.files.ethz.ch/isn/196140/CO16022.pdf>; Peter Salisbury, “Yemen and the Saudi–Iranian ‘Cold War’,” *Chatham House: The Royal Institute of International Affairs Research Paper*, published February 2015, 2, https://www.chathamhouse.org/sites/default/files/field/field_document/20150218YemenIranSaudi.pdf.

⁸ “Comparison Results of World Military Strengths,” *Global Fire Power*, accessed July 30, 2021, <https://www.globalfirepower.com/countries-comparison-detail.asp>.

⁹ “The US May Be Aiding War Crimes in Yemen,” *VOX*, published December 12, 2016, video, 7:31, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=CwwP3SiBIC8>; Third Way, “Country Brief: Saudi Arabia and its Role in Yemen” *Third Way Report*, published March 7, 2019, <https://www.jstor.org/stable/resrep20139>.

¹⁰ Pieter D. Wezeman, “Saudi Arabia, Armaments and Conflict in the Middle East” *Stockholm International Peace Research Institute*, published December 14, 2018, <https://www.sipri.org/commentary/topical-background/2018/saudi-arabia-armaments-and-conflict-middle-east>.

from the trend in imports of major arms by Saudi Arabia between 1998–2017, there has been a constant increase in the arms imports since 2015.¹¹

The second aspect to assess is the fragmented opposition forces that mostly operate as irregular militia forces, rather than an established military force bound to a strict chain of command and the government.¹² Having a set of fractured opposition comes with the problems of not having a common goal and having shifting alliances, which births instability and ultimately prevents the possibility of a united front. So, even if Iran is backing a part of the opposition forces (the Houthi rebellion), there is not one united force against the government, which can be seen as an external advantage for Saudi Arabia, as it relates to Saudi Arabia's adversaries' capabilities to respond.

This part of the article explains the puzzle in Saudi Arabia's failure to end a war that has caused huge humanitarian atrocities in Yemen, despite both its external and internal advantages vis-à-vis Iran and the opposition forces, most notably, the Houthis. After clarifying the current situation in Yemen in terms of the warring parties, the government, opposition forces, Iran, Saudi Arabia and the United States, I first explain the two arguments widely present in the literature: the hearts and minds argument and the ineffectiveness of the Saudi army argument. The explanations highlight how these two arguments' aid an understanding of the dynamics at play in the conflict. However, as I examine both of their limitations in the later section, I develop a rather original, complementary third strand of argument which takes into consideration the economic interests of the US in its involvement in the proxy war.

2. Background and Recent Developments in the Region

Although the conflict in Yemen has been present for a long time, including during the Cold War years, the division in Yemeni society widened and deepened with the wave of uprisings throughout the Middle East in 2011.¹³ Following the social unrest in Yemen, the then-President Sadullah Saleh was forced to resign in 2011, and there was initially a peaceful

¹¹ Wezeman.

¹² "Who's Who in Yemen's Opposition?" *Al Jazeera News*, published March 10, 2011, <https://www.aljazeera.com/news/2011/3/10/whos-who-in-yemens-opposition>.

¹³ "Middle East: Yemen - The World Factbook," *Central Intelligence Agency*, last modified July 27, 2021, <https://www.cia.gov/the-world-factbook/countries/yemen>.

transition of power orchestrated by the Gulf Cooperation Council (hereafter, GCC or Saudi-led coalition) in 2012, which made Abdrabbuh Mansour Hadi the legitimate President.¹⁴ However, in the political, social and economic turmoil, several distinct opposition groups started to grow against the legitimate government. The crisis was exacerbated when, viewing the situation as a window of opportunity, the Al-Qaeda and ISIS forces separately sought to hold territory and expand in the region.¹⁵ One of the groups opposing the government is the Houthi Shia Rebels, currently led by Mohammed Ali al-Houthi.¹⁶ The Yemeni government and the Houthi rebels have been officially at war since 2015, and the conflict has caused more than half of the population to live in conditions of near starvation.¹⁷ Since 2015, the Houthi forces' activities have been countered by the GCC members comprising of Egypt, Jordan, Bahrain, Sudan, Qatar, Kuwait, United Arab Emirates, Morocco and Senegal,¹⁸ although today, the coalition forces in Yemen are made up of only four countries namely, the Kingdom of Saudi Arabia, the United Arab Emirates, Sudan, and Bahrain.¹⁹ Most importantly, the US is contributing enormously to the cause of Saudi Arabia, maintaining their alliance. In addition to the Houthis, there is the separatist movement coming from the south, the Southern Movement, which is backed mostly by the United Arab Emirates.²⁰

A significant turning point came in September 2015 when the Houthis took over the capital, Sanaa, a few months after the White House released the Statement of US National Security Council (NSC) Spokesperson Bernadette Meehan on the situation in Yemen and announced the US support of the legitimate Yemeni government. In the same statement, Mr. Hadi, condemned the Houthi actions that perpetuated instability in the region.²¹ From this point

¹⁴ Central Intelligence Agency.

¹⁵ TRT World, "Yemen's Complicated War Explained."

¹⁶ TRT World.

¹⁷ Disclose, "Yemen Papers," *Made in France*, published April 15, 2019, <https://made-in-france.disclose.ngo/en/chapter/yemen-papers>.

¹⁸ Enea Gjoza and Benjamin H. Friedman, "End U.S. Military Support for The Saudi-Led War in Yemen," *Defence Priorities*, (January 2019): 12, <https://www.defensepriorities.org/explainers/end-us-military-support-for-the-saudi-led-war-in-yemen>.; Jon Gambrell, "Here Are the Members of the Saudi-Led Coalition in Yemen and What They're Contributing," *Business Insider*, published March 30, 2015, <https://www.businessinsider.com/members-of-saudi-led-coalition-in-yemen-their-contributions-2015-3>.

¹⁹ Disclose, "Yemen Papers."

²⁰ TRT World, "Yemen's Complicated War Explained."

²¹ "Statement by NSC Spokesperson Bernadette Meehan on the Situation in Yemen," *Office of the Press Secretary - Press Release*, published March 25, 2015, <https://obamawhitehouse.archives.gov/the-press-office/2015/03/25/statement-nsc-spokesperson-bernadette-meehan-situation-yemen>.

on, the US became highly involved in the conflict alongside the GCC through arms sales (mostly of aircrafts) and airstrikes.²² The statement also expressed decisiveness in countering the opposition forces in Yemen with the words: “The international community has spoken clearly through the UN Security Council and in other fora that the violent takeover of Yemen by an armed faction is unacceptable and that a legitimate political transition – long sought by the Yemeni people – can be accomplished only through political negotiations and a consensus agreement among all of the parties”.²³ Despite the decisive tone of the statement, as seen in Figures 1 and 2 (below), the Houthi advancement slowed after 2015, albeit not fully stopping while both the US and the GCC contribution increased.

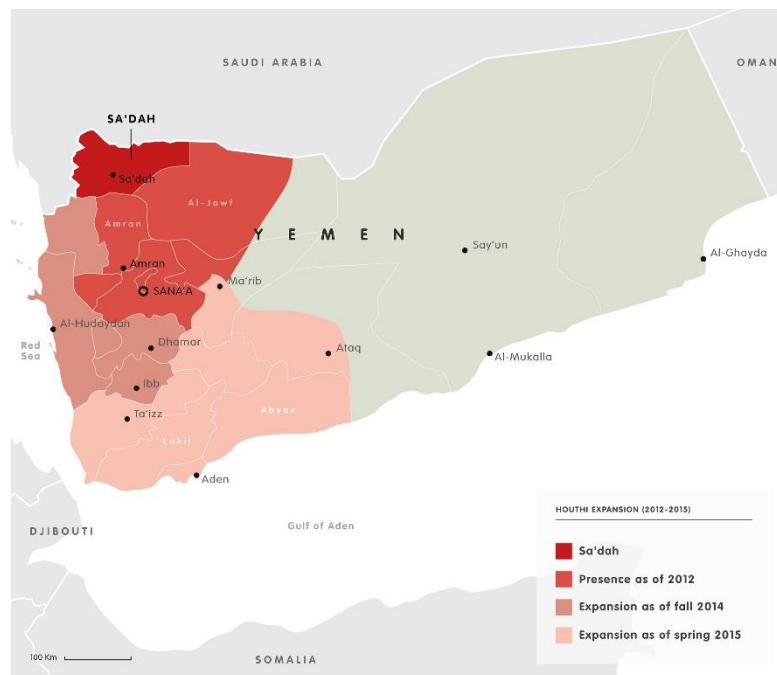


Figure 1: Situation between 2011-2015. Obtained from Baron, 2019 (<https://www.ecfr.eu/mena/yemen#>).

²² “Kingdom of Saudi Arabia - UH-60M Black Hawk Utility Helicopters” *Defense Security Cooperation Agency News Release Transmittal No. 15-66*, , published September 14, 2015, <https://dsca.mil/major-arms-sales/kingdom-saudi-arabia-uh-60m-black-hawk-utility-helicopters>.

²³ “Statement by NSC Spokesperson Bernadette Mehan on the Situation in Yemen”. *Office of the Press Secretary*, <https://obamawhitehouse.archives.gov/the-press-office/2015/03/25/statement-nsc-spokesperson-bernadette-meehan-situation-yemen>.

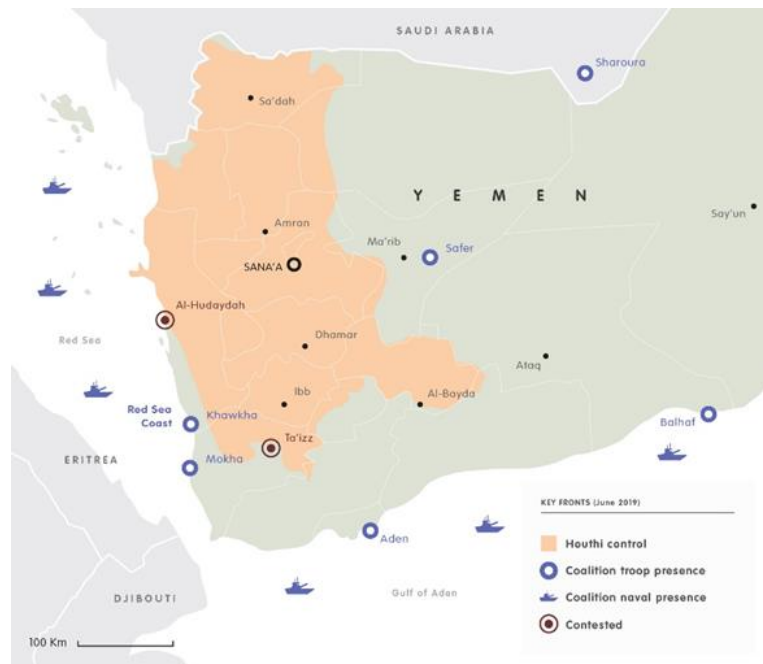


Figure 1: Situation in 2019. Obtained from Baron, 2019 (<https://www.ecfr.eu/mena/yemen#>).

3. Explaining the Balance of Power

Why is it that Saudi Arabia, despite its many and considerable military advantages, failed to put an end to this war? In this section, two theories that have been proposed to answer this question will be assessed. There is no doubt these theories have some truth to them, but it is important to move further and touch upon the root causes, as shown in the following section by the third theory focusing on US economic interests.

3.1. *The Hearts and Minds Argument*

One explanation advanced for the continuing war in Saudi Arabia is the country's failure to win the hearts and minds of the local population, which is crucial for winning the war. The "hearts and minds"²⁴ argument explains individuals' attitudes towards the external state intervening brutally in a country. The violent actions of an external player create feelings of hatred and resentment among local people against the "foreigners", causing them to either form their own opposition groups or to work with an existing opposition group. Due to its interventions, the US has been subject to criticism many times in history, most notably in Korea, Vietnam, and Afghanistan. George Herring explains that "American firepower destroyed

²⁴ 6 Billy Moncure, "Winning Hearts and Minds' - The Long History of a Failed Strategy," *War History Online*, published October 3, 2018, <https://www.warhistoryonline.com/instant-articles/winning-hearts-and-minds.html>.

homes, villages, and crops, and alienated those whose hearts and minds were to be won” as the main reason for failure during the Vietnam War.²⁵

The situation in Yemen today causes civilians to face daily challenges, such as involuntary internal displacement, living in crowded and unsanitary conditions, and most importantly, being caught in the crossfire between drone attacks mostly controlled by the CIA (rather than the Saudis)²⁶ and the counter-attacks by Houthis.²⁷ Although “winning the hearts and minds” is a famous motto of American foreign policy,²⁸ for the current Yemeni case, it does not seem to be a priority of US officials or the Saudi-led coalition that is supported by the US.

Contrary to American foreign policy, it can be argued that another player on the field is more cautious of the hearts and minds of the people they are trying to affect. AQAP, or Al-Qaeda on the Arabian Peninsula, has learned the significance of the impact of local people in a possible victory. Thus, they are working to indoctrinate locals’ minds against ISIS in the region for the sake of the competition between AQAP and ISIS, a separate but related competition in the region which is not the main focus of this paper.²⁹ Thomas Joscelyn, a senior fellow at the Foundation for Defence of Democracies and senior editor of the Long War Journal summarises the situation as; “ISIS and Al Qaeda [have] different [approaches]. ISIS thinks that [it] will brutalize [a population] into submission. Al Qaeda knows that some people are turned off by this brutality.”³⁰ Through social services, the AQAP is “indoctrinating many people in need of vital and primary sources,”³¹ whereas the US-backed GCC is only contributing to the conflict via military power despite the long history of American promotion of human rights through humanitarian assistance.

²⁵ Moncure.

²⁶ Letta Tayler, “Losing Yemeni Hearts and Minds,” *Human Rights Watch*, published May 31, 2012, <https://www.hrw.org/news/2012/05/31/losing-yemeni-hearts-and-minds>.

²⁷ Caleb Weiss, “Saudi Oil Facilities Set Ablaze by Houthi Drone Strikes,” *FDD's Long War Journal*, published September 14, 2019, <https://www.longwarjournal.org/archives/2019/09/saudi-oil-facilities-set-ablaze-by-houthi-drone-strikes.php>.

²⁸ Elizabeth Dickinson, “A Bright Shining Slogan: How ‘Hearts and Minds’ Came to Be,” *Foreign Policy*, published August 22, 2009, <https://foreignpolicy.com/2009/08/22/a-bright-shining-slogan/>.

²⁹ Alessandria Masi, “Al Qaeda Winning Hearts and Minds Over ISIS In Yemen with Social Services,” *International Business Times*, published July 4, 2016, <https://www.ibtimes.com/al-qaeda-winning-hearts-minds-over-isis-yemen-social-services-2346835>.

³⁰ Masi.

³¹ Masi.

Both Al-Qaeda and ISIS are known for their terrorist acts, so their dichotomous race to win hearts and minds is sure to have larger consequences. For example, if and when one of them influences enough people, their unity may enlarge to bring more challenges to the government. In other words, if Al-Qaeda outsmarts ISIS in the region with this strategy, the opposition will be less fragmented, and more people will be channelled to one cause. Hence, for the GCC to be dominant among the various opposition groups, they need to be more aware of the hearts and minds of the locals, whose territory they are operating within.

3.1.1. Main Challenges on the Field

This section considers the humanitarian challenges that occur daily in Yemen, for example the airstrikes, drone attacks and deadly diseases caused by the unsanitary and crowded conditions in which Yemenis are living in.³² These are also among the causes of a mounting hatred towards the Yemeni government, the Saudi-led coalition and Western powers that are seen as complicit in the war. Ironically, airstrikes, drone attacks, and the resultant humanitarian situation necessitate humanitarian assistance, which mostly flows from the West, but does not help to win the hearts and minds of the local people.

First, the airstrikes that Saudi Arabia is undertaking target militias as well as public facilities and civilians.³³ Targeting civilian public spaces in the context of war is a war crime, and it is argued and proved that the Saudi-led air campaign has “failed to respect the principle of proportionality,” and “to take the necessary precautions to minimise civilian harm.”³⁴ According to international law, this implies that the US, UK, and France, as main suppliers of the warplanes and bombs used in the aerial bombardment, are complicit in war crimes.³⁵ This

³² Reuters Staff, “Dengue Fever Finds Breeding Ground in War-Weary Yemen,” *Reuters*, published December 16, 2019, <https://www.reuters.com/article/us-yemen-security-health-dengue/dengue-fever-finds-breeding-ground-in-war-weary-yemen-idUSKBN1YK1AC>.

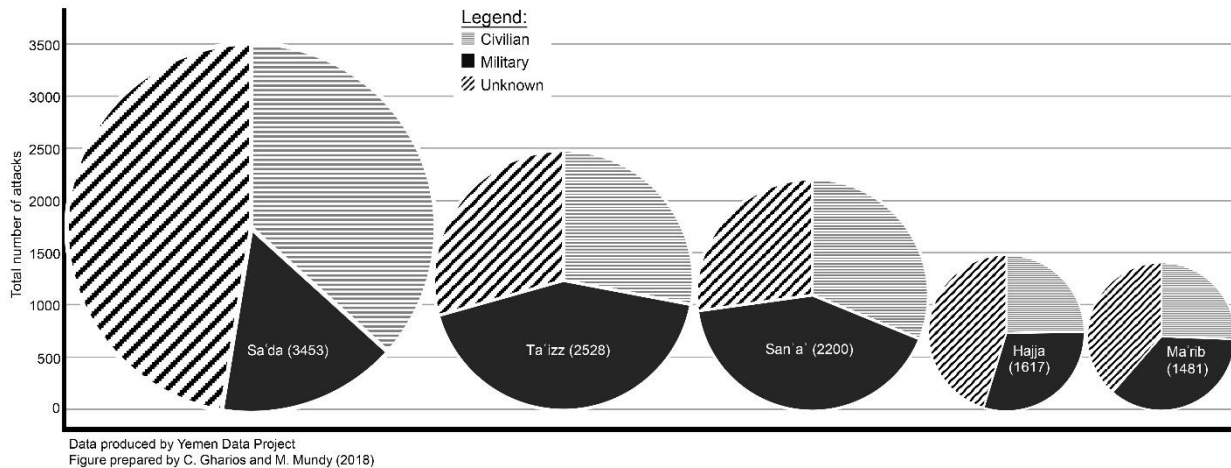
³³ Mohamad Bazzi, “America Is Likely Complicit in War Crimes in Yemen. It’s Time to Hold the US to Account,” *The Guardian*, published October 3, 2019, <https://www.theguardian.com/commentisfree/2019/oct/03/yemen-airstrikes-saudi-arabia-mbs-us>.

³⁴ Human Rights Council, “Situation of Human Rights in Yemen, Including Violations and Abuses Since September 2014: Report of the Detailed Findings of the Group of Eminent International and Regional Experts on Yemen,” (New York, September 3, 2019) 17–19, https://www.ohchr.org/Documents/HRBodies/HRCouncil/GEE-Yemen/A_HRC_42_CRP_1.PDF.

³⁵ Patrick Wintour, “UK, US and France May Be Complicit in Yemen War Crimes – UN Report,” *The Guardian*, published September 3, 2019, <https://www.theguardian.com/world/2019/sep/03/uk-us-and-france-may-be-complicit-in-yemen-war-crimes-un-report>.

should also attract human rights activists as well as other states to call for correcting such actions. However, for the locals, these bombardments have consequences, making them more proactive in getting together to halt the aggression by the GCC countries supported by the West.

Figure 2: Proportion of civilian, military, and unknown targets in governorates of Yemen. March 2015- March 2018

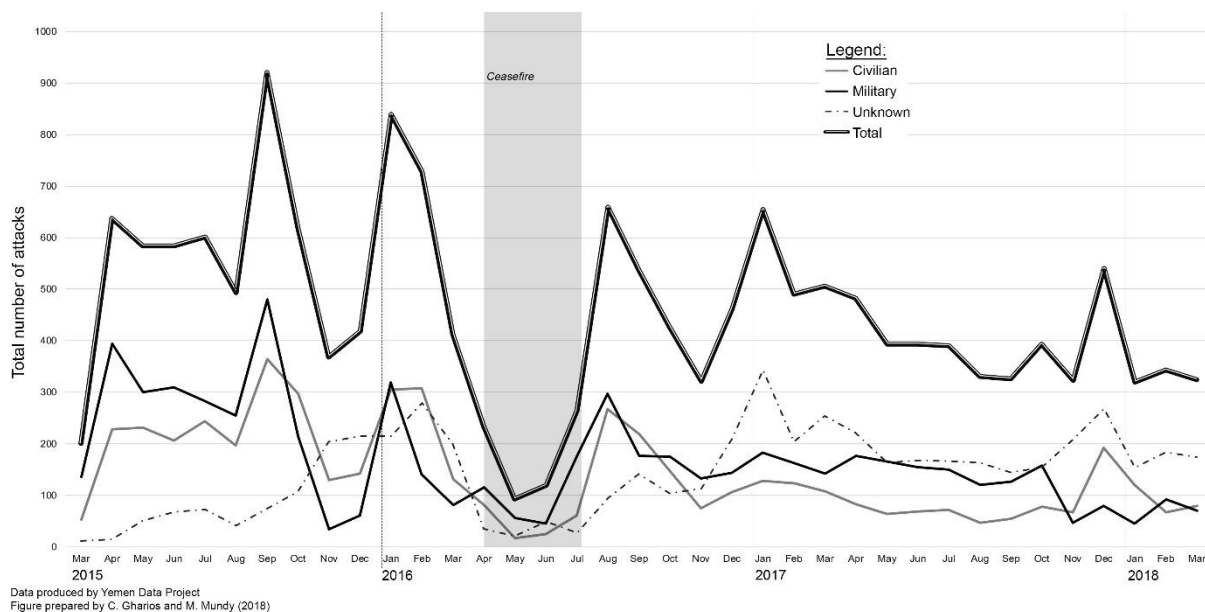


Note 1: Obtained from ³⁶ (<https://sites.tufts.edu/wpf/strategies-of-the-coalition-in-the-yemen-war/>).

Figure 3 shows the proportions of civilian and military zones targeted by the Coalition forces for some of the cities in Yemen. Such proportions reveal misconduct on the part of the Saudi-led GCC, as the civilian zones are targeted more than the military zones in certain cities. In a similar vein, Figure 4 shows the complete timeline of airstrikes. Again, as seen from the very beginning of the war effort, the line for military and civilian zones are parallel, making it evident that there has been no intention to overturn such misconduct.

³⁶ Martha Mundy, "Strategies of the Coalition in the Yemen War," *World Peace Foundation*, published October 9, 2018, <https://sites.tufts.edu/wpf/strategies-of-the-coalition-in-the-yemen-war/>.

Figure 3: Timeline of GCC airstrikes from March 2015- March 2018



Note 2: Obtained from World Peace Foundation, 2018 (<https://sites.tufts.edu/wpf/strategies-of-the-coalition-in-the-yemen-war/>).

In terms of drone strikes, there is a general discussion about the extent to which they are effective in countering unconventional wars.³⁷ While some argue that drones today are the best options for military advancement,³⁸ it is also suggested by many that drones used by the US, as an external actor, encourage locals to side with groups that oppose the US.³⁹ The rationale behind this is that such methods of extermination harm the psychological wellbeing of people and fuel extremism.⁴⁰ In addition to this, there are worries about the legitimacy and ethics of the technology.⁴¹ It is reported that the US has waged an ongoing drone campaign against AQAP in response to the group's attempts to strike American targets in the US and abroad.⁴² In

³⁷ Harrison Akins, "Policy Brief 2:17: 'Lawnmowers in the Sky': The Turbulent Past and Uncertain Future of Drone Warfare," *Howard H. Baker Jr. Center for Public Policy*, accessed November 21, 2019, from <http://bakercenter.utk.edu/wp-content/uploads/2017/03/PolicyBrief2-2017>.

³⁸ C. Christine Fair, "For Now, Drones Are the Best Option," *New York Times*, published January 29, 2013, <https://www.nytimes.com/roomfordebate/2012/09/25/do-drone-attacks-do-more-harm-than-good/for-now-drones-are-the-best-option>.

³⁹ Raf Sanchez, "Yemen Drones Strikes Cause Civilians to 'Fear the US as Much as al-Qaeda'," *The Telegraph*, published October 22, 2013, <https://www.telegraph.co.uk/news/worldnews/middleeast/yemen/10397294/Yemen-drones-strikes-cause-civilians-to-fear-the-US-as-much-as-al-Qaeda.html>.

⁴⁰ Ibrahim Mothana, "More Diplomacy, Fewer Drones," *New York Times*, published September 26, 2012, <https://www.nytimes.com/roomfordebate/2012/09/25/do-drone-attacks-do-more-harm-than-good/more-diplomacy-less-drones>.

⁴¹ Greg Kennedy, "Drones: Legitimacy and Anti-Americanism," *Parameters* 42, No. 4-1 (2013), <https://link.galegroup.com/apps/doc/A335069992/AONE?sid=lms>.

⁴² Adam Baron, "Mapping the Yemen Conflict," *European Council on Foreign Relations*, published October 19, 2015, <https://www.ecfr.eu/mena/yemen#>.

terms of humanitarian consequences and the hearts and minds argument, the effect of drones is explicit. As put by an activist in Yemen, “these drone strikes are stupid policy. Every time they kill Yemeni civilians, they create more hatred of America.”⁴³

Another problem that has attracted relatively little attention is the emergence of the serious mosquito-borne dengue virus, and its spread around the areas that displaced Yemenis occupy.⁴⁴ The implication of the disease on the hearts and minds argument is again, hatred fuelled potentially by the harsh living conditions and loss of loved ones because of the disease and the ongoing war-time conditions. It is reported by the medical staff in the field that the disease is “thriving among crowded populations of people displaced and weakened by war living in unsanitary conditions.”⁴⁵ Makiah al-Aslami, a nurse in Hajjah who is helping to treat acutely malnourished children, said that it is possible to find an entire camp of 600-700 people infected with dengue.⁴⁶

In sum, although there is much to do about the betterment of people suffering from war and war-related problems, the GCC is mainly contributing to the catastrophic situation through more hard power, which in turn, shifts more people towards different groups of opposition where they work and fight against the GCC’s efforts. Air and drone strikes are also potentially consolidating opposition as growing feelings of anger, fear, and revanchism against the US and GCC countries are likely to bring together more people, uniting them under one cause.

3.1.2. Humanitarian Assistance

Whilst aid coming from the West might be thought to win over the hearts and minds of the local population, the air raids of the coalition forces, backed by the US, give a contrary impression to the local people. Humanitarian assistance flows primarily from the EU under Civil Protection and Humanitarian Aid Operations, and the UN under the United Nations Office for the Coordination of Humanitarian Affairs.⁴⁷ These organisations are sometimes seen as

⁴³ “Losing Yemeni Hearts and Minds.”

⁴⁴ Khair Alah A. Alghazali et al., “Dengue Outbreak During Ongoing Civil War, Taiz, Yemen,” *Emerging Infectious Diseases* 25, no. 7 (2019): 5, <https://doi.org/10.3201/eid2507.180046>.

⁴⁵ Reuters Staff, “Dengue Fever Finds Breeding Ground in War-Wearied Yemen.”

⁴⁶ Reuters Staff.

⁴⁷ “Yemen,” *United Nations Office for the Coordination of Humanitarian Affairs*, last modified July 11, 2021, <https://www.unocha.org/yemen>.

representatives of the West, causing local Yemenis to sympathise with other groups. However, even in the reports of these Western aid channels, there are accusations of war crimes against the leaders of the US, the GCC Countries, and the Yemeni government supported by the coalition. This is specifically voiced in the OCHA report as the Humanitarian Coordinator in Yemen, Lise Grande, called the attacks “deeply disturbing” particularly as they occurred against the backdrop of the UN General Assembly, “when world leaders were coming together to advance peace and security.”⁴⁸ In other words, the amount of money donor countries contribute to humanitarian aid, cannot pay for the civilians, children and loved ones killed by the attacks sponsored by the US and the Saudi-led GCC. That is why, the hearts and minds argument for the current case is relevant, although it is unable to give the full explanation of the failure since military technology can be more important than the sheer number of people fighting. Therefore, the following section will attempt to explain the Saudi-led GCC’s failure to end the war by discussing the levels of development of the Saudi army fighting on the field, and the technology that the US exports to the GCC members, mostly to Saudi Arabia for the Yemeni war.

3.2. The Inadequate Army Personnel Argument

Another explanation for the Saudi-led coalition’s failure to end the war is on military terms. It has been argued that the coalition’s use of military tactics is ineffective in ending the war despite the level of technology employed. Heavy air bombardment by the GCC members, especially Saudi Arabia’s Royal Saudi Land Forces Aviation Command has slowed the Houthi expansion, as they maintain a hold in key central and northern provinces.⁴⁹ This section will focus on the army of the Kingdom of Saudi Arabia as the main subject because it has had the biggest contribution to the war effort in Yemen. Therefore, the internal efficiency of the Saudi army will be assessed in an attempt to see if, despite the advanced weaponry, it is the army officials who are unable to use them efficiently. That being said, under military efficiency, the paper will focus on whether the strategy is viable and if military personnel can use the installed technology.

⁴⁸ United Nations Office for the Coordination of Humanitarian Affairs.

⁴⁹ “Mapping the Yemen Conflict.”

A classified report by the French defence ministry, criticising the ineffectiveness of Saudi operations, and determining that the border control operations were a complete failure⁵⁰ was leaked by the journalism website *Disclose*. One interesting detail to note is that the report acknowledges Saudis' lack of mobility and imprecise strikes, which leaves the Saudis vulnerable in the face of the guerrilla attacks of the “nimble” Houthi forces.⁵¹ The report itself is criticised by the leakers because it reveals that the French government provided far more support than publicly acknowledged,⁵² which makes it clear that Western states are covertly supporting the war much more than they claimed.

There is no doubt that in terms of firepower, Saudi Arabia is supported heavily by Western technology. It is reported by the Centre for International Policy that “US firearms offers increased by more than 12% in 2018, to \$759 million from \$662 million in 2017 and the biggest recipient by far was Saudi Arabia, with over \$579 million in deals that included machine guns, semi-automatic sniper rifles, and grenade launchers.”⁵³ It is also known that the majority of US produced firearms went to Saudi Arabia to contribute to the brutal war in Yemen.⁵⁴ Therefore, rather than the technology, the conditions of the army are to blame for the failure to end the war.

3.2.1. Strategy Incorporating the Installed Technology

Despite the advanced weaponry, it seems that one major miscalculation on the part of the Saudi military is not having sufficient land forces on the field. Michael Knights who specialises in the military and security affairs of Iraq, Iran, and the Persian Gulf, explains that there needs to be around 10,000 to 20,000 troops for the military to be effective. However, the Saudi military has so far avoided deploying ground troops. As Knights presumes, the ground

⁵⁰ José Olivares, “Under Trump, U.S. Still Leads World’s Arms Exporters — And Yemenis Are Still Paying the Price,” *The Intercept* (blog), published March 14, 2018, <https://theintercept.com/2018/03/14/us-arms-sales-saudi-arabia-yemen/>.

⁵¹ Alex Emmons, “Secret Report Reveals Saudi Incompetence and Widespread Use of U.S. Weapons in Yemen,” *The Intercept* (blog), published April 15, 2019, <https://theintercept.com/2019/04/15/saudi-weapons-yemen-us-france/>.

⁵² *Disclose*, “Yemen Papers.”

⁵³ William Hartung and Christina Arabia, “Trends in Major U.S. Arms Sales in 2018: The Trump Record - Rhetoric Versus Reality,” *Center for International Policy*, published April 2019, <https://securityassistance.org/publications/trends-in-major-u-s-arms-sales-in-2018-the-trump-record-rhetoric-versus-reality/>.

⁵⁴ Hartung and Arabia.

forces would “suffer from significant weaknesses,” due to tactical deficiencies.⁵⁵ Without deploying more land forces, the consequence is lack of effectiveness, vis-à-vis the Yemeni guerrilla fighters who are knowledgeable about the geography they inhabit. This means that, by using mostly air forces, the Saudi military can more easily target innocent civilians, instead of militants as they are well aware of where and how to hide.

From this front, the reason for failure looks similar to the Vietnam War, in which American soldiers lacked knowledge of the geographical features of the land they were fighting on. Meanwhile, the Viet Kong members, with their knowledge of territory and skills of guerrilla fighting, were able to outsmart the American army by building the Ho Chi Min Trail.⁵⁶ What the Saudi military lacks in their specific situation, is the logistical means and experience with warfare on the ground, in addition to the lack of appropriate training and recruitment.⁵⁷ Together, these factors show that, at least in the region, the Saudi military is ill-equipped for unconventional warfare,⁵⁸ thus, the Houthis and other opposition forces can hope to defeat the Saudi army. No matter how advanced the Saudis are in terms of their air force, it will not suffice to end the war because their power on land will remain weak in the face of the opposition groups, as land forces are of great significance in an unconventional war.

The paper has demonstrated so far that Saudi Arabia can purchase the most advanced artillery and materials, that could end the war, and still fail to do so because their weakness seems to stem from strategic incapability rather than material capability. That is to say that if they were advised by their suppliers, with more appropriate arms and strategies, the Saudi-led

⁵⁵ Ben Brimelow, “Saudi Arabia Has the Best Military Equipment Money Can Buy — But It’s Still Not a Threat to Iran,” *Business Insider*, published December 16, 2017, <https://www.businessinsider.com/saudi-arabia-iran-yemen-military-proxy-war-2017-12>.

⁵⁶ For historical context on the Ho Chi Minh Trail and its importance for the Vietnamese war effort: John Prados, *The Blood Road: The Ho Chi Minh Trail and the Vietnam War* (Wiley Publishing, 1999); Virginia Morris and Clive A. Hills, *Ho Chi Minh’s Blueprint for Revolution: In the Words of Vietnamese Strategists and Operatives* (McFarland, 2018); Merle L. Pribbenow, *Victory in Vietnam: The Official History of the People’s Army of Vietnam, 1954-1975* (Lawrence, Kansas: University Press of Kansas, 2002).

⁵⁷ Brimelow, “Saudi Arabia Has the Best Military Equipment Money Can Buy — But It’s Still Not a Threat to Iran.”

⁵⁸ Conventional war is war between two states and armies, whereas unconventional war refers to warring parties that are not legitimate monopolies of power, that is, non-state actors, and the tactics used in unconventional war are substantially different from those used in conventional wars. For more on the concept of unconventional war: Andrew C. Janos, “Unconventional Warfare: Framework and Analysis,” *World Politics* 15, no. 4 (1963), <https://doi.org/10.2307/2009460>.

war effort could be more successful. Building on this assumption, the next section argues that, in addition to the aforementioned arguments, there is the effect of Western powers' (mostly the US) economic interest on arms sales to the Saudi army.

4. The Western Economic Interest Argument

In this last section, the paper will suggest an original argument that the Western – more specifically, American – economic interests perpetuate the conflict. The arguments above are not enough to solely demonstrate Saudi Arabia's failure to end the war. In my opinion, the missing piece is the Americans' strategy of arms sales that leave Saudis at a disadvantage against the opposition groups and Iran. Based on the US and other Western powers' arms sales, it can be inferred that they are more interested in selling arms than in helping Saudi Arabia to end the war. The catalogue of artillery and materials used by the Saudi military demonstrates the point of my argument, which includes, American F-15s, British EF-2000 Typhoons, and European Tornado fighters, American Apache and Black Hawk, French AS-532 Cougar, American Abrams and French AMX 30 tanks, and at least five types of Western-made artillery guns.⁵⁹ It is explicit that the whole military, its personnel and the broader war effort rely very much on Western products. In other words, the struggle in Yemen could also be a revenue stream perpetuated – and maybe even created – by these Western supplier states, especially the US.

Saudi Arabia's own military industry started to work on technologies as recently as 2017, with the launch of the Saudi Arabian Military Industry (SAMI) wholly owned by the Public Investment Fund.⁶⁰ What is more interesting is that SAMI appointed Andreas Schwer as chief executive, who is also on the management board of Germany's Rheinmetall AG, the "boss of combat systems," and a former employee of Airbus,⁶¹ implying that the state-owned institution is left to Western control rather than a Saudi specialist. Consequently, even after the launching of the institution, Saudi Arabia signed a memorandum of understanding (MoU) with

⁵⁹ Emmons, "Secret Report Reveals Saudi Incompetence and Widespread Use of U.S. Weapons in Yemen," 3.

⁶⁰ "Saudi Arabian Military Industries (SAMI)," *SAMI*, accessed April 6, 2021, <https://www.sami.com.sa/en>.

⁶¹ Katie Paul, "Saudi State-Owned Defence Company SAMI Taps Rheinmetall Executive as CEO," *Reuters*, published October 31, 2017, <https://www.reuters.com/article/saudi-defence-idUSL8N1N62AM>.

defence contractors Boeing, Lockheed Martin, Raytheon and General Dynamics as part of a \$110 billion arms package in 2017.⁶² Perhaps this was a sensible strategy for Saudi Arabia because starting from scratch by trial and error would be too costly. Since it takes money and time to invest in expertise, it is reasonable to believe that Saudi Arabia was dependent on Western technology purchases for much of the conflict in Yemen.

Using the armed forces comparison tool online, the difference in both military personnel and material between the US and Iran is evident, with the US being superior.⁶³ In addition, it is known that Saudi Arabia is not only getting support from the US but also the GCC countries. So, it is surprising that the Saudi Arabian military has been unable to end the conflict in Yemen. One explanation for this is that Western powers, led by the US, are using this conflict as a revenue flow, and thus, are not contributing to decisively ending the war. One way of strategising is possible: By selling less advanced materials to Saudi Arabia, an internal balance is created between the forces of Iran-backed opposition and the Saudi-led GCC. Another strategy to ensure the same result would be by selling advanced materials that are inappropriate for the current conflict. Both strategies are plausible for Western states since Saudi Arabia is one of the countries that buys military products rather than producing its own, indicating that it does not have the proper expertise, and thus, is reliant on what the manufacturing states offer to sell. I argue, however, that the latter is at play, in the following part, focusing on the strategy of selling advanced but inappropriate material by using the American Abrams Tank as an example component of the Saudi army purchases.

4.1. The M1 Abrams Tank – Advanced but Inappropriate

The Abrams Tank is referred to as one of the best battle tanks, and dubbed “the beast” after proving its power in the Gulf War of 1991.⁶⁴ Despite its sophisticated technology of computer-controlled firing systems,⁶⁵ simple Iranian-made anti-tank missiles used by Houthis,

⁶² Paul.

⁶³ “USA vs Iran: Comparison Military Strength,” *Armed Forces*, accessed July 30, 2021, https://armedforces.eu/compare/country_USA_vs_Iran.

⁶⁴ “M1 Abrams Main battle tank”, published 2018, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=2kTmsAAZYkc>.

⁶⁵ “How does a Tank work? (M1A2 Abrams)”, published 2020, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=SdL55HWNPRM>.

repeatedly destroyed the Abrams in Yemen.⁶⁶ Moreover, throughout the post-Cold War era, it has repeatedly been proven in Chechnya, Afghanistan, and Iraq that when tanks are used in unconventional conflicts, they become mobile bombs rather than armour that keeps the soldiers safe.⁶⁷ To make the Abrams Tank more up-to-date, the Americans added the TUSK System (Tank Urban Survival Kit) to strengthen the armour, and in turn, more powerful grenades were produced to damage and blow up the Abrams Tank equipped with the TUSK System.

Consequently, the Saudis are coming up with new deals to buy more Abrams Tanks, to recover or replace the ones that have been destroyed, creating a vicious cycle.⁶⁸ The problem here is that the conflict in Yemen is obviously not a conventional war, which makes the Abrams Tank – regardless of its power – largely irrelevant. The U.S. State Department and Pentagon, regardless of the reasons for losses of their tanks, continue to sell the same product to the Saudis at a high price, two examples being the 2016 deal amounting to \$1.5 billion,⁶⁹ and another being the defence capabilities package that costs nearly \$110 billion, including Abrams Tanks as well as ammunitions, helicopters, and combatant ships.⁷⁰

It should also be noted that now with the added armour and technology, the production of tanks has become increasingly costly, making tanks a more luxurious product. States such as Canada and the Netherlands have decided that they will not purchase more tanks as they are too expensive and do not necessarily have a place on the modern battlefield.⁷¹ Therefore, for tank producers, states such as Saudi Arabia that are still willing to pay for these tanks are valuable

⁶⁶ Tyler Rogoway, “Houthi Rebels Destroy M1 Abrams Tanks with Basic Iranian Guided Missiles,” *Jalopnik*, published August 25, 2015, <https://foxtrotalpha.jalopnik.com/houthi-rebels-destroy-m1-abrams-tanks-with-basic-iran-1726478735>.

⁶⁷ *The Age of Tanks*, directed by Florian Dedio, Barbara Necek, and Anna Kwak-Sialelli (2017; Lagardere Studios Distribution), <https://www.lagardere-studiosdistribution.com/programme/en/4258/age-of-tanks>.

⁶⁸ Marcus Weisberger, “Saudi Losses in Yemen War Exposed by US Tank Deal,” *Defense One*, published August 9, 2016, <https://www.defenseone.com/business/2016/08/us-tank-deal-exposes-saudi-losses-yemen-war/130623/>.

⁶⁹ Defense Security Cooperation Agency, “Kingdom of Saudi Arabia - M1A2S Saudi Abrams Main Battle Tanks and M88A1/A2 Heavy Equipment Combat Utility Life Evacuation System (HERCULES) Armored Recovery Vehicles (ARV),” *Defense Security Cooperation Agency News Release Transmittal No. 16-22*, published August 9, 2016, <https://www.dsca.mil/major-arms-sales/kingdom-saudi-arabia-m1a2s-saudi-abrams-main-battle-tanks-and-m88ala2-heavy>.

⁷⁰ “Fact Sheet: Intended Sales to Saudi Arabia via Foreign Military Sales,” *Defense Security Cooperation Agency*, published May 20, 2017, accessed April 26, 2021, <https://www.dsca.mil/news-media/news-archive/fact-sheet-intended-sales-saudi-arabia-foreign-military-sales>.

⁷¹ *The Age of Tanks*.

customers. They are the customers that should not be lost. The distinction between contributing to ending the war and contributing to the revenue can be made at this point: knowing Abrams Tanks, as well as most other military materials, Americans should make it clear to their counterpart that they might need something else. However, since they continue to sell the same battle tank, they are perpetuating the conflict by manufacturing a balance between the Saudi-led Coalition and the Iranian-backed Houthis.

5. Conclusion

This paper assessed the arguments behind the Saudi-led GCC's failure to end the devastating war in Yemen, even though they have the upper hand against the Iranian-backed Houthis, especially militarily. The arguments discussed, namely, the hearts and minds argument, the inadequate military argument, and the Western economic interests argument are all relevant to a certain extent. This paper presented the first two arguments which are more conventional and deliberated the limits of these explanations. After showing that both arguments are insufficient to explain the failure of the Saudi Arabian army to end the war, this paper proposed a rather unique argument that is critical of Western (mainly American) attitudes against the conflict in Yemen.

Noting the similar experiences of *artificial* divisions between the locals of a certain territory, I argue that the US and other Western states are using the conflict in Yemen as a flow of revenue as they constantly sell their military products – even the ones that Western states have abandoned themselves, such as tanks. The paper mentioned different layers of the conflict: a civil war between the government and opposition forces, a proxy war between Saudi Arabia and Iran, and lastly, a competition of indoctrination between AQAP and ISIS. My argument sheds light especially on the proxy war and helps to infer that while the conflict is perpetuated due to Saudi Arabia's dependence on Western military technology and Western powers' economic interests, dynamics in the two other layers continue to make the overall situation more complicated.

As stated before, the ongoing conflict in Yemen can be looked at from different angles. This paper incorporated the political and economic angles and revealed the implications of

them. Turning back to the humanitarian angle, it is a rather disturbing paradox that the US and other Western states, as well as the Gulf countries, are involved in such aggression in Yemen despite being members of the UN and its numerous conventions relating to the protection of human rights and definition of warfare and war crimes. Nevertheless, with the newly elected President Joe Biden, there seems to be some hope in decreasing the US involvement in the region as he announced “the war in Yemen must end” during his first major foreign policy focused speech.⁷² Still, the policy suggestions of the President’s speech must be followed with action for the betterment of the people of Yemen. Moreover, the situation in the region must be addressed immediately and decisively by the international community, making sure that governments are held responsible for their actions against international law and their accomplices.

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⁷² “Yemen War: Joe Biden Ends Support for Operations in Foreign Policy Reset,” *BBC News*, published February 5, 2021, <https://www.bbc.com/news/world-middle-east-55941588>.

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