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# **BROKERING YEMEN'S HUMANITARIAN CRISIS: TURNING BLOOD TO PROFIT AND POWER**

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*International Affairs Forum*

*In September 2014, Shiite Houthi rebels from northern Yemen invaded the capital, Sana'a, kicking off the latest major installment in their ten-year on-and-off struggle against the Sunni government. By February 2015, they successfully ousted President Hadi, but they were quickly faced with airstrikes using American weapons at the hands of a Saudi-led coalition of nine Middle Eastern and African states. With the Iranian backing, the Houthi rebels continue to battle Saudi Arabia's coalition throughout Yemen at the expense of civilian lives. Already suffering from widespread impoverishment, Yemen's civilians have been plunged into the world's worst humanitarian crisis as Saudi Arabia, Iran, the Houthi rebels, and the United States fight for profit, favorable policies, and regional hegemony and stability. This paper will explore the effects of external forces on Yemen, examining how the driving factors of profit and power among Saudi Arabia, Iran, and the US have worsened the humanitarian crisis and the quality of life of Yemeni civilians.*

With few basic resources to support the needs of its entire population, Yemen has long been categorized as the poorest country of the Middle East. Since the outbreak of civil war in 2015, its long-term humanitarian issues have evolved into a deepening crisis that representatives of numerous human rights organizations and the UN argue has become the worst humanitarian crisis in the world today. The conflict has quickly evolved into a proxy war, enticing intervention from Saudi Arabia and its nine-member coalition to back the Hadi government, while Iran provides support to the rebel Houthis.

Despite the millions of civilians living in the midst of bombing campaigns and ground attacks, the United States continues to support the Saudi cause through the transfer of advanced weaponry. Together, external forces use the nation as a battleground to eke out victory in their struggle for regional hegemony, security, and influence. This paper will examine the relationships and desires of external forces in the Yemeni conflict to uncover how the humanitarian crisis has been worsened by Saudi Arabia and Iran's desire for power and security,

and the American push for profit and favorable policies. To do this, we will first examine the interests of the key players in the conflict, and then analyze how these factors have worsened the humanitarian crisis, concluding with several policy recommendations to encourage conflict resolution and humanitarian assistance.

### **Saudi Arabian Interests: Preserving Power**

Saudi Arabia possesses one main interest in the conflict: the desire to preserve its influence and national security by countering Iran's quest for regional hegemony. Long established as the major regional power of the Gulf, Saudi Arabia's fears of Iran's growing power in the region have encouraged its rulers to assume an aggressive stance on the Arabian Peninsula.

For Saudi Arabia, preserving its regional influence is essential to maintaining its strength relative to other Gulf nations, allowing it to decide the future of the region by retaining Sunni neighbors and preventing Iran from installing Shiite governments that could threaten Saudi Arabia's place at the top.

### ***Countering Iran and Gaining Hegemony in the Gulf Region***

Afraid of Iran's newfound assertiveness<sup>1</sup>, Saudi Arabia for years has worked to counter the spread of Shiism in the Gulf region. Following the numerous Arab Spring uprisings in 2011 throughout North Africa and the Middle East, Saudi Arabia took quick action to intervene in the governmental transitions of numerous states with the goal of countering Iran's growing influence, while enforcing state and social divisions in neighboring Yemen to keep it weak.

These uprisings, in combination with softening US-Iran relations under the Iran Nuclear Deal in 2015 and the potential establishment of a Shiite government in Yemen, led Saudi Arabia to launch Operation Decisive Storm, a clear effort to preserve its hegemonic status in the Middle East. Saudi Arabia's coalition began airstrikes against the Houthi rebels and their Iranian backers in Yemen to prevent a Shiite takeover, and to send a clear message to Iran to stay out of the Arabian Peninsula. As long as Iran continues its attempts to exert its influence in the Middle East, Saudi Arabia will continue its efforts to counter Iran, locking the two in a battle for the regional upper hand and influence over the future of an entire country and region.

Ultimately Saudi Arabia's interests in Yemen's conflict and the overall Arabian Peninsula imply a fear that any new Shiite leadership in neighboring countries could result in additional Sunni vs. Shia conflicts. Saudi Arabia is determined to protect its national security, and new antagonists in the

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<sup>1</sup> Abu Amin, "Crisis in Yemen and Countering Violence," *Counter Terrorist Trends and Analyses*, 7, no. 7 (2015): 19.

Peninsula could threaten the security of its borders and increase the potential for additional cross-border attacks, as Iran has done via Yemen.

### **Iranian Interests: Obtaining Power**

Iran has two key interests in its fight against Saudi Arabia in Yemen. These include: 1) the attainment of regional influence via the installation of another Shiite government, and 2) a nearby base of operations it could use to weaken its rival.

Iran finally received a taste of power in the Gulf after its nuclear deal with the US under the Obama Administration, and quickly looked to gain more. If it is able to prevail over Saudi Arabia in the Yemeni conflict, it could potentially install a friendly regime to use as a puppet in the Arabian Peninsula. This would allow Iran to further assert its influence, while obtaining a base of operations closer to Saudi Arabia that it could use to weaken its major rival by continuing cross-border, close-range attacks on Riyadh.

### ***Attaining Regional Influence in the Gulf Region***

Since the Iran Nuclear Deal, Saudi Arabia has become warier of Iran's creeping influence in the region, and for good reason. After the Arab Spring, Iran's expansionism grew from its desire to obtain greater power in the Gulf region than Saudi Arabia. As such, Iran has provided both financial and military support to the Houthis in Yemen with the goal of installing a friendly Shiite government that could help it in its regional aspirations against Saudi Arabia's Sunni monarchy. Iran's intent has not gone unnoticed: in early 2018, Yemen's representative at the UN stated that Iran's capitalization on the conflict is a "clear example of political brinksmanship"<sup>2</sup> meant to help it gain ground in the Middle East.

Iran's relatively small investment in the Yemeni civil war has paid off in excess—forcing Saudi Arabia to invest millions per week in its counterattacks on behalf of Yemen's government to push back the Houthi threat, during a period in which its oil export profits have been declining. Iran has successfully manipulated the conflict to force Saudi Arabia's participation in a fight it will not win<sup>3</sup>, all while slowly draining the monarchy of its resources and weakening its attempts to quell the rise of Al-Qaeda in the Arabian Peninsula (AQAP) in the south. By providing support to a group in Yemen that was already invested in

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<sup>2</sup> "Parties in Yemen Must Return to Negotiations or Risk Escalating World's Worst Humanitarian Crisis, Senior Officials Tell Security Council," April 17, 2018, <https://www.un.org/press/en/2018/sc13301.doc.htm>.

<sup>3</sup> Peter Salisbury, "Building Peace in Yemen From the Ground Up: How to End the Conflict," *Foreign Affairs*, February 28, 2018, <https://www.foreignaffairs.com/articles/middle-east/2018-02-28/building-peace-yemen-ground>.

the fight, Iran has not had to contribute its own military personnel, thus gaining a greater return on its investment, while Saudi Arabia's investments threaten to destabilize it.

### ***Building a Base of Operations against Saudi Arabi***

Saudi Arabia's prominence as the Sunni leader of the Middle East has required Iran to be more strategic in its attempts to assert its influence, simply due to the sheer power and financial capacity of the Saudi Kingdom. By taking advantage of Yemen's instability and influencing the installation of a friendly Shiite government in Yemen, Iran could acquire a base of operations that just so happens to share a border with its rival, Saudi Arabia.<sup>4</sup> This would give Iran the opportunity to continue launching its missile attacks on Riyadh from just across the border indefinitely.

With a foothold in the Arabian Peninsula, Iran could get closer than ever to Saudi Arabia, using a non-Sunni regime to destabilize Saudi Arabia and threaten its national security. Combined with the anti-Saudi AQAP, these two fronts could tear at the very fabric of Saudi Arabia's regime.

### **US Interests: Money and Influence**

The US has become invested in Yemen's conflict for two key reasons: 1) Profit and potential job creation, and 2) the opportunity to establish a favorable political outcome in the Arabian Peninsula. To obtain both, the US has preserved an amenable relationship with Saudi Arabia—seemingly at all costs—though there have been key differences in the tone of US-Saudi relationship under the Obama and Trump administrations.

Overall, the promise of American defense contractors to generate more revenue and the potential to establish a friendly regime in a region that boasts a long list of US "enemies" are enticing enough to encourage the US to pledge its support to the Saudi coalition in Yemen.

### ***Sale of Weapons to Saudi Arabia***

Despite their differing relationships with the Saudi Kingdom, both the Obama and Trump administrations have struck deals with the monarchy to provide artillery, military training, and large equipment. While in office, President Obama's administration pushed both the US Departments of Defense and State to provide the Saudi coalition in Yemen with missiles and aerial refueling

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<sup>4</sup> Martin Reardon, "Saudi Arabia, Iran and the 'Great Game' in Yemen," *Aljazeera*, March 26, 2015, <https://www.aljazeera.com/indepth/opinion/2014/09/saudi-arabia-iran-great-game-ye-201492984846324440.html>.

assistance<sup>5</sup> despite the coalition's inaccuracies and indiscriminate attacks on cities that often culminated in the deaths of numerous civilians. Yet, toward the end of his presidency in 2016, Obama suspended weapons sales to Saudi Arabia<sup>6</sup> in an attempt to limit the effects of US weapons on civilians. However, upon entering office, the Trump administration quickly dismantled the sales freeze, striking deals with Saudi Arabia: one in May 2017 worth \$110 billion<sup>7</sup> and another in March 2018 that provides \$670 million worth of Raytheon-branded anti-tank missiles.<sup>8</sup> With the promise of profit, President Trump has worked diligently to eliminate the controls and restrictions the prior administration had put into place.

Trump's policy has boiled down to one thing: the potential of any action to boost the US economy, regardless of its destabilizing effects around the world. According to a White House statement, the Trump administration possesses a "commitment to peace through strength"<sup>9</sup>—though the "strength" of weapons has not instilled peace in Yemen, instead contributing to its continued deterioration. These actions have contributed not only to the disintegration of government, but also to the complete social upheaval of a nation and indiscriminate violence against civilians.

### ***"Job Creation" and the Influence of Defense Contractors***

Under the Trump administration, weapons sales to Saudi Arabia have often been touted as opportunities to create US jobs despite Lockheed Martin's indication that these deals would actually assist Vision 2030 in Saudi Arabia, creating skilled Saudi jobs.<sup>10</sup>

The US defense industry, containing 1.7 million employees,<sup>11</sup> only employs just over 0.5 percent of the American population. It is marginal at best to invest so much into a fairly small sector of the US workforce—unless these deals were actually executed to assist defense contractors, while using job creation claims in Ohio, Florida, Pennsylvania, and Michigan to feign an investment in

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5 Andrew Exum, "What's Really at Stake for America in Yemen's Conflict," *The Atlantic*, April 14, 2017, <https://www.theatlantic.com/international/archive/2017/04/yemen-trump-aqap/522957/>.

6 Rick Noack, "Saudi Arabia's arms deals are buying the West's silence over Yemen, activists allege," *The Washington Post*, November 9, 2017.

7 Javier E. David, "US-Saudi Arabia seal weapons deal worth nearly \$110 billion immediately, \$250 billion over 10 years," *CNBC*, May 20, 2017, <https://www.cnbc.com/2017/05/20/us-saudi-arabia-seal-weapons-deal-worth-nearly-110-billion-as-trump-begins-visit.html>.

8 Helene Cooper, "State Dept. Approves \$670 Million Arms Deal With Saudi Arabia," *New York Times*, March 22, 2018.

9 Jeff Abramson, "New Policies Promote Arms, Drone Exports," May 2018, <https://www.armscontrol.org/act/2018-05/news/new-policies-promote-arms-drone-exports>.

10 David, "US-Saudi Arabia seal weapons deal worth nearly \$110 billion immediately, \$250 billion over 10 years."

11 Abramson, "New Policies Promote Arms, Drone Exports."

the American swing state voters who earned Trump his victory,<sup>12</sup> potentially currying their favor in the future.

Over the course of his presidency, numerous defense contractors have profited from Trump’s interest in securing arms sales with Saudi Arabia—especially Lockheed Martin and Raytheon. Ultimately, both corporations, whose weapons are used by Saudi Arabia indiscriminately in Yemen, will benefit from a dramatic increase in profit in the coming years.<sup>13</sup> Interestingly, as seen in the table below, both companies made significant contributions to Trump’s 2016 electoral campaign. Though he was not the only candidate to receive their aid, it does not take away from the fact that his administration may have fallen victim to favoritism, protecting those who provided financial support to his political aspirations—and may do so in the future. Below, data from OpenSecrets (2018) shows how the defense industry in sum donated \$1,356,923 to Trump’s 2016 electoral campaign—a significant amount no doubt intended to influence his behaviors once in office. Throughout both administrations, defense contractors have clearly maintained their influence on the Executive Office.

**Table 1. Defense Contractors’ influence on the executive office**

<b>Defense contractor donations to Donald Trump, 2016 election</b>	
<i>Defense Contractor</i>	<i>Donation Amount (USD)</i>
Lockheed Martin	\$43,109
Raytheon	\$33,588
Total Defense Industry	\$1,356,923

Source: Data adapted from OpenSecrets, “Lockheed Martin: Profile for 2016 Election Cycle,” 2018; “Raytheon Co: Profile for 2016 Election Cycle,” 2018; “Top Industries: federal election data for Donald Trump, 2016 cycle,” 2018; accessed May 29, 2018

**Preserving Relationships with Saudi Arabia**

Despite Saudi Arabia’s known role in the 9/11 attacks, steps have been taken to consistently maintain a relationship that allows US input in the politics of the Arabian Peninsula and the greater Middle Eastern region. After all, the US and Saudi Arabia are after the same goal: to prevent Iran from gaining a foothold in the Arabian Peninsula and amassing power in the Gulf region.

12 Ben Freeman, Willian D. Hartung, “How the Saudis Wooed Donald Trump,” May 10, 2018, <https://www.thenation.com/article/how-the-saudis-wooded-donald-trump/>.

13 Jeff Daniels, “Defense manufacturers cashing in on Trump’s global arms push,” *CNBC*, January 24, 2018, <https://www.cnn.com/2018/01/24/trump-as-us-arms-pitchman.html>

Despite this, the different approaches of Presidents Obama and Trump to Saudi Arabia make it important to explore their opposing relationships with the Saudi monarchy, as they illustrate a complexity in the US-Saudi Arabia relationship that goes beyond just profit into a political game of chess.

Under President Obama, the US maintained a hesitant relationship with Saudi Arabia, though it consistently supplied the Kingdom with weapons and military training thanks to its continued importance in containing Iran's aggression and stifling the AQAP threat. Despite providing support for the Saudi coalition, Obama pushed for restraint in Yemen at the end of 2016<sup>14</sup> as the actions of Saudi forces began to foster anti-US sentiment amongst civilians and the destabilizing effects of its airstrikes only served to make AQAP stronger. Furthermore, Obama began to criticize Saudi Arabia both publicly and privately for inciting "sectarian hatred"<sup>15</sup> and attempting to manipulate the US into entering the fight. These feelings represented the beginning of Obama's reluctance to continue arms sales to Saudi Arabia, citing humanitarian concerns. Yet while new deals were off the table, he maintained the relationship by completing sales already in the pipeline, which did little to prevent the Saudi coalition from killing civilians.

Regardless of his wariness, during his time as president, Obama approved a greater number of arms sales than any other president before him.<sup>16</sup> Ultimately, US foreign policy under Obama was still beholden to Saudi Arabia and its interests, despite his personal concerns when faced with a mounting number of civilian casualties as the Saudi coalition continued its assault on the Houthis.

The tonal shift in the relationship between the US and Saudi Arabia once President Trump arrived in the White House was dramatic, with the new president building a much friendlier rapport than that of his predecessor.<sup>17</sup> Following the 2016 election, Riyadh was selected as the destination of Trump's first international presidential trip in March 2017. Attempting to build a stronger connection than the one they had held with President Obama, the Saudis played to Trump's ego, displaying banners with his photo along the streets and on the side of his hotel<sup>18</sup> —a steady stream of flattery to which Trump quickly succumbed. As a result, the trip culminated in Trump's first official arms deal with the nation, worth \$110 billion.

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14 Zachary Laub, "Yemen in Crisis," 2016, <https://www.cfr.org/backgrounder/yemen-crisis>

15 Patrick Cockburn, "How Barack Obama turned his back on Saudi Arabia and its Sunni allies," Independent, March 12, 2016, <https://www.independent.co.uk/news/world/middle-east/barack-obama-saudi-arabia-us-foreign-policy-syria-jihadism-isis-a6927646.html>.

16 Nicolas Niarchos, "How the U.S. Is Making the War in Yemen Worse," January 22, 2018, <https://www.newyorker.com/magazine/2018/01/22/how-the-us-is-making-the-war-in-yemen-worse>.

17 Cooper, "State Dept. Approves \$670 Million Arms Deal with Saudi Arabia."

18 Freeman & Hartung, "How the Saudis Wooed Donald Trump."

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Prior to this trip, Saudi lobbyists had already been hard at work in the US winning Trump's favor, in January 2017 booking rooms in a Trump hotel and spending over \$250,000 during their stay.<sup>19</sup> The lobbyists built roots with the Trump administration, and over the course of Trump's term have become deeply influential in his views on foreign policy. Saudi Arabia's lobbyism has become extensive, spending in excess of a million dollars each month to target the administration with propaganda regarding the Yemeni war, intended to influence America's Middle Eastern policies.<sup>20</sup> With its princely treatment of Trump, Saudi Arabia has established a bond of trust that has allowed it to manipulate US foreign policy to continue to favor Saudi Arabia in the Gulf region and provide support for the coalition's fight in Yemen.

### ***Prevent Iran from Gaining Ground***

To the US State Department, the arms deals with Saudi Arabia provide support to a nation that represents stability and economic growth in the region, but will retain the military balance in the fight.<sup>21</sup> Despite that claim, the infusion of millions to billions of dollars' worth of weaponry fundamentally changes the conflict's dynamics, especially when Iran has not invested nearly as much in the Houthi cause as Saudi Arabia has in its coalition's attacks. This investment from the US to Saudi Arabia signals its intent to prevent Iran from gaining ground in the Gulf region—particularly in an adjacent country that would give it a better ability to target Riyadh—regardless of the imbalance it introduces to the war. After all, should Iran win the battle, it would most likely install a friendly regime.

In late 2017, the US dedication to Saudi Arabia was exposed when it was revealed that a team of US Green Berets was deployed in the towns of Yemen near the border of Saudi Arabia with the intent to destroy Houthi missiles, which have been used to launch attacks on Riyadh.<sup>22</sup> This deployment has significantly expanded the role of the US in Yemen against the Iranian-aligned Houthis, and shows Trump's determination to assist Saudi Arabia in protecting its national security and maintaining its power.

### **How the Desires of External Forces Have Worsened the Crisis**

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19 Nicolas Niarchos, "How the U.S. Is Making the War in Yemen Worse."

20 Freeman & Hartung, "How the Saudis Wooed Donald Trump."

21 Alastair Jamieson, "U.S. sells 6,700 missiles to Saudi Arabia as part of \$1 billion deal," *NBC News*, March 23, 2018, <https://www.nbcnews.com/news/world/u-s-sells-6-700-missiles-saudi-arabia-part-1-n859406>

22 Helene Cooper, Thomas Gibbons-Neff, Eric Schmitt, "Army Special Forces Secretly Help Saudis Combat Threat From Yemen Rebels," *New York Times*, May 3, 2018.

All of these factors add up to one massive issue: the humanitarian crisis in Yemen has worsened rapidly. It is difficult to get an accurate number of the death toll of civilians; the UN cited in 2017 almost 8,000 civilians killed and 42,000 injured in the conflict,<sup>23</sup> while others have claimed there have been over 10,000 conflict-related civilian deaths.<sup>24</sup> Either way, the number grows under steady attacks, and the deterioration of the state and decline in social services has increasingly impacted the population. It has become essential to understand how the three goals—profit, power, and policies—of the external forces have influenced the intensity of the humanitarian crisis in Yemen.

### **Obama Administration**

Under the Obama administration, the US provided Saudi Arabia with weaponry and training to attack the Houthi rebels in Yemen. But as the conflict progressed, the US became concerned with the civilian toll and the lack of human rights throughout much of Yemen. Despite Saudi Arabia's assertion that concerted efforts were being made to avoid civilian-populated areas, the number of civilians killed in the crossfire continues to rise. Additionally, hospitals and the transit services that are essential to alleviating famine remain popular targets,<sup>25</sup> not only killing innocent civilians, but contributing to the food security crisis and the lack of healthcare for Yemenis in need of medical assistance—especially when thousands of civilians are malnourished or regularly injured by conflict-related activities.

Though the Obama administration reigned in any new sales of weaponry to Saudi Arabia toward the tail end of his presidency, the existence of weaponry from prior sales still had a worsening effect on the humanitarian situation. US efforts may have intended to address the root cause of the issue, yet the situation requires a ground-level approach that works directly with civilians and transit and health infrastructure to improve quality of life.

### **Trump Administration**

After the Obama administration, arms controls fell by the wayside. Trump's resumption of weapons deals ushered in an era where humanitarian concerns are undermined by profit and the misguided belief that fueling the conflict is the route to its resolution. Under the Trump administration,<sup>26</sup> the two major

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23 "Yemen conflict: How bad is the humanitarian crisis?" *BBC News*, March 28, 2017, <http://www.bbc.com/news/world-middle-east-34011187>.

24 Jared Malsin, "The Big Problem With President Trump's Record Arms Deal With Saudi Arabia," May 22, 2017, <http://time.com/4787797/donald-trump-yemen-saudi-arabia-arms-deal/>

25 "U.S.-Saudi Relations," May 12, 2017, <https://www.cfr.org/backgrounder/us-saudi-relations>.

26 William Hartung, "Trends in Major U.S. Arms Sales in 2017: A Comparison of the Obama and Trump Administrations," *Security Assistance Monitor*, March 2018, p. 4.

deals in 2017 and 2018 provided the monarchy with billions of dollars' worth of munitions.

According to Hartung (2018), human rights have taken a back seat to arms sales under the Trump administration, reversing the controls that the Obama administration had set on munitions sales. The Trump administration dodges questions concerning the humanitarian situation in Yemen, with US Secretary of Defense James Mattis stating the following when asked how the administration plans to handle the amount of civilian casualties:

We have been working very hard with the new U.N. envoy to end the fight in Yemen. And we believe that Saudi Arabia is part of the solution.<sup>27</sup>

Yet, Saudi Arabia is not part of the solution—it is not even part of the UN Security Council. Instead, it plays a direct role in the perpetuation of conflict. Not only is Mattis unwilling to acknowledge the glaring humanitarian crisis, but he is misrepresenting the role of Saudi Arabia, playing off its escalation of the conflict and the subsequent increase in civilian deaths as an attempt to bring peace to the region. Above all else, the current administration uses the sale of weapons and the strategic partnership it builds with Saudi Arabia to not only influence the policies of the Gulf region, but to keep close the monarchy that helped Trump obtain victory in the 2016 presidential election.

### ***US Arms Sales to Saudi Arabia harm Yemeni Civilians***

America's sale of weapons to Saudi Arabia is part of a two-pronged approach: to earn a profit, and to establish regional stability by preventing Iran's attempt to gain regional hegemony. But by taking advantage of the conflict, the US has instead promoted regional instability. US weapons are used not only with ramifications for civilians, but for the country as a whole, as their destabilizing effects have allowed the Houthis to advance and AQAP to gain greater power in the south.

According to Amnesty International, the transfer of weapons from the US to Saudi Arabia has caused immense damage to civilians,<sup>28</sup> resulting in questionable ethics as Saudi Arabia continues to commit war crimes in Yemen. Both Britain and the US in 2016 and 2017 profited from weapons sales to Saudi Arabia more than ever before, which leads to the question: has Saudi Arabia also bought the West's silence?

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27 Jamieson, "U.S. sells 6,700 missiles to Saudi Arabia as part of \$1 billion deal.

28 "US approves proposed \$1bn arms sale to Saudi Arabia," March 23, 2018, <https://www.aljazeera.com/news/2018/03/approves-proposed-1bn-arms-sale-saudi-arabia-180323090745361.html>.

Saudi Arabia has been able to win US support through the smart placement of pro-Saudi-in-Yemen propaganda fed straight into the Executive Office, building a case that the region can only be secured and remain under pro-US leadership through the acquisition of powerful weapons to rout the Iranian-backed Houthis and the creeping infiltration of AQAP in Yemen. Saudi funding continues to spread not only to defense contractors in the US, but also to lobbyists and Washington think tanks <sup>29</sup>—reputable think tanks that often provide key research to the Executive Office, potentially manipulating this information in favor of funders.

This is where the ethical concerns come into play: All of this influence has culminated in airstrikes led by Saudi Arabia that have struck civilian targets, including hospitals and schools, while creating a dire food security situation.<sup>30</sup> Despite US efforts under the Obama administration to train the Saudi military in effective targeting to decrease casualties, the higher-ups in the Saudi military were less concerned with civilians and more concerned with hitting Houthi forces at any price—leading to little-to-no research into each target.

Linking these occurrences to the US has been simple. For instance, in October 2016, a Raytheon bomb was used to kill 140 mourners at a funeral in Sana'a, outfitted with a guidance system built in Arizona and Texas.<sup>31</sup> Days after an attack on a Northern Yemeni wedding in April 2018, media sources revealed an image of a fragment of the bomb that possessed a serial number attributed to Raytheon, just one month after a deal between the US and Saudi Arabia set to transfer thousands of Raytheon-built missiles.<sup>32</sup> These instances show the indiscriminate nature with which Saudi Arabia uses the weaponry sold to it by the US, implicating the coalition and its benefactor in a web of war crimes and human rights violations. Between March 2015 and January 2016, the UN estimated 2,800 civilian deaths, with 60 percent of them due to airstrikes by the Saudi-led coalition in Saada,<sup>33</sup> a city home to hundreds of thousands of Yemeni civilians and most certainly not an ideal location to use indiscriminate weapons.

As the Saudi coalition continues to attack civilian targets, the infrastructure of the entire country is at stake. Without hospitals, civilians cannot access healthcare for malnutrition, wounds, or illnesses. As cholera continues to infiltrate the drinking water of cities across Yemen, epidemics will become unstoppable without effective medical care.

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29 Freeman & Hartung, "How the Saudis Wooed Donald Trump."

30 Malsin, "The Big Problem With President Trump's Record Arms Deal With Saudi Arabia."

31 Niarchos, "How the U.S. Is Making the War in Yemen Worse."

32 Alex Emmons, "U.S. Moves Forward With Multibillion-Dollar 'Smart Bomb' Sale to Saudi Arabia and UAE Despite Civilians Deaths in Yemen," May 11, 2018, <https://theintercept.com/2018/05/11/american-saudi-arabia-weapons-deal-yemen-uae/>.

33 Laub, "Yemen in Crisis."

Furthermore, the destruction of schools leaves many children unable to complete their education, which will contribute to issues of unemployment and impoverishment after the conflict's end. As roads and bridges are destroyed, the population's ease of movement is severely impacted, and transit that would bring in imported food is disrupted or even halted altogether—contributing to the severe famine crisis that is spreading rapidly across Yemen.

As the coalition attacks cities, it forcefully displaces civilians in droves—the UN stating in 2015 that over 100,000 individuals were displaced in mere months.<sup>34</sup> This has been a large issue in Hodeidah, where Saudi Arabia and Houthi rebels have been battling for control, killing civilians and leaving uninhabitable structures in their wake. Amnesty International (2018) interviewed several civilians in Hodeidah, and one discussed the conditions of the conflict unfolding inside their city—even inside their home:

We were hoping the war would end, but it only got worse. The bombardment became heavier. It became so random. Bullets would land every which way, between homes, just randomly.... Even at night we couldn't get any sleep.<sup>35</sup>

While the US focused on profit, Saudi Arabia used its weapons against Iran and the Houthis to ensure that the balance of regional power continues to tilt in its favor—at the expense of civilians and infrastructure.

### ***Saudi Blockades against the Houthis Starve the Country of Resources***

The humanitarian issues affecting civilians in Yemen have occurred because both the Saudi-led coalition and Houthi forces have increasingly targeted cities in their struggle, resulting in civilian casualties, mass displacement, and the destruction of livelihoods. Throughout Yemen, Houthi forces have targeted populated cities with artillery, while the Saudi coalition engaged in powerful airstrikes from above. Recently, Saudi Arabia went further, in November 2017 initiating a blockade on airports and seaports in response to Houthi missile launches into Riyadh.<sup>36</sup> Eager to secure its power, Saudi Arabia has used

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34 "Yemen: The world must be prepared for rapid collapse into mass displacement crisis – UN expert," April 8, 2015, <https://www.ohchr.org/EN/NewsEvents/Pages/DisplayNews.aspx?NewsID=15808&LangID=E>.

35 "Yemen: Fierce new offensive displaces tens of thousands of civilians from Hodeidah," May 17, 2018, <https://www.amnesty.org/en/latest/news/2018/05/yemen-fierce-new-offensive-displaces-tens-of-thousands-of-civilians-from-hodeidah/>.

36 Nawal Al-Maghafi, "The Catastrophe of Saudi Arabia's Trump-Backed Intervention in Yemen," November 17, 2017, <https://www.newyorker.com/news/news-desk/the-catastrophe-of-saudi-arabias-trump-backed-intervention-in-yemen>.

blockades to try to starve the Houthi forces from different regions, yet this has had ramifications for the civilian population.

Thanks to international pressure, Saudi Arabia limited the blockade in 2017, though it still cut off rebel-controlled areas like Hodeidah, home to a population of 400,000.<sup>37</sup> While it claims these blockades are meant to prevent Iran from providing Houthi rebels with weapons, it has also delayed or prevented humanitarian agencies from accessing civilians. As such, humanitarian aid has been unable to enter the blockaded areas, preventing civilians from receiving food, water, medical supplies, and other life-sustaining items provided by the UN and other international actors. Troublingly, Yemen's internal food sources have always been small, and it has typically imported over 90 percent of its food for years.<sup>38</sup> Without access to the outside world, Yemen cannot provide enough food to sustain the population.

The most recent blockade is not the first. Saudi Arabia has instituted these limitations for more than two years—which has been a direct cause of the food security issues plaguing the entire country. By making medical assistance inaccessible and preventing civilians from accessing clean water, the director of programs at Physicians for Human Rights has proclaimed that Saudi Arabia has “weaponized disease”<sup>39</sup> in Yemen. Overall, Saudi attempts to weaken the Houthi forces and prevent Iran's advancement in the Gulf has worsened the crisis, increasing civilian hardship.

### ***Iranian-backed Houthis Target Yemeni Civilians.***

The US and Saudi Arabia are not the only countries that have had a negative impact on the civilians of Yemen—the Iranian-backed Houthis have also left behind a path of destruction. In 2016, Iran increased its financial investments and the volume of weapons funneled to the Houthis,<sup>40</sup> and over the past few years the Houthi forces have used these supplies to carry out indiscriminate attacks on cities that have resulted in civilian deaths. These attacks, like Saudi Arabia's, force civilians to flee their homes—and those who are able to secure transit on buses typically spend what is considered an exorbitant amount in the Yemeni economy, anywhere from 10,000 to 150,000 riyals, equating to about USD \$30 to \$480.<sup>41</sup> Yet even those who have the money to escape

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<sup>37</sup> Ibid.

<sup>38</sup> “Yemen conflict: How bad is the humanitarian crisis?” *BBC News*, March 28, 2017, <http://www.bbc.com/news/world-middle-east-34011187>.

<sup>39</sup> Jonah Shepp, “The United States Is Complicit in the Destruction of Yemen,” August 8, 2017, <http://nymag.com/daily/intelligencer/2017/08/the-united-states-is-complicit-in-the-destruction-of-yemen.html>.

<sup>40</sup> Ibid.

<sup>41</sup> “Yemen: Fierce new offensive displaces tens of thousands of civilians from Hodeidah,” May 17, 2018, <https://www.amnesty.org/en/latest/news/2018/05/yemen-fierce-new-offensive-displaces-tens-of-thousands-of-civilians-from-hodeidah/>.

do not always make it out of Houthi-occupied territories, as rebel landmines put in place to halt the advancement of the Saudi coalition and government forces destroy the automobiles within which civilians flee. Not only are these landmines and other indiscriminate weapons in violation of international human rights agreements, but they will exist in Yemen for far longer than the war's duration, and will continue to injure or kill Yemeni civilians for years.

The actions of Saudi Arabia, Iran, and the Houthi rebels have put civilians in danger in their pursuit of power. Furthermore, the Houthis have instituted their own types of blockades, confiscating medicine and food from the population<sup>42</sup> and preventing civilians from getting medical attention. The situation in many cities has declined rapidly, and the recent nonstop Houthi assault on the third largest city, Taizz, has resulted in the indiscriminate use of weapons on a massively populated area,<sup>43</sup> resulting in deaths and injuries of Yemeni civilians.

### Policy Recommendations

The inability of the United Nations to bring the parties to a peaceful settlement warrants a closer look at potential policies that will be acceptable to each side, as the exclusion of any aggressor from the peace process increases its risk of failure.<sup>44</sup> The UN's current plan requires Houthi surrender and a return of the Hadi government—the same conditions that launched the conflict, presenting a high probability that it will be spoiled. Instead, a route that considers the role of each side in the conflict will be more valuable to future long-term peace in Yemen.

As such, there are six policy recommendations that aim to restore stability to the region, developed in consideration of the following: the knowledge that all sides will need to make concessions, but the exclusion of any party would result in further conflict; the need to stop the weapons pipeline, which allows the conflict to continue and escalate; and the obligation to begin rebuilding the country's infrastructure to allow the inflow of humanitarian relief. Together, these suggestions could move the conflicting parties closer to a resolution, and, most importantly, pull Yemen from its years-long humanitarian crisis.

#### *1. Begin with a dialogue that includes every aggressor in Yemen.*<sup>45</sup>

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42 "Yemen: All Sides Fuel Humanitarian Crisis," 2018, <https://www.hrw.org/news/2018/01/18/yemen-all-sides-fuel-humanitarian-crisis>.

43 "Saudi Arabia/Yemen: Houthi Missile Attacks Unlawful," April 2, 2018,

44 Salisbury, "Building Peace in Yemen From the Ground Up: How to End the Conflict."

45 Parties in Yemen Must Return to Negotiations or Risk Escalating World's Worst Humanitarian Crisis, Senior Officials Tell Security Council," April 17, 2018, <https://www.un.org/press/en/2018/sc13301.doc.htm>.

Though the UN has already proposed this, it has not actually been carried out. To move toward a solution to the humanitarian crisis, each side needs a seat at the mediation table for the opportunity to present their own views, their desired outcomes, and ultimately come to a favorable compromise together. A meeting of this caliber will require time to arrive at an acceptable solution, but it is the best chance at securing long-term peace.

*2. Halt US arms sales to Saudi Arabia.*

This will be a major step toward gaining Iranian trust in the peace process, as its concern with regional hegemony will hinge on whether or not Saudi Arabia is still acquiring weapons that can be used against Tehran at any moment. Furthermore, the halt of arms sales will have the most significant impact on the humanitarian crisis in Yemen by immediately limiting the number of attacks the Saudi coalition can carry out on cities that remain heavily populated. To do this, it will be essential to question the influence of defense contractors on US policy, and accept that a loss in profit is more favorable than a loss of life. This will likely be one of the most difficult steps toward mediation.

*3. Guarantee Saudi Arabia that Iran is no longer providing weapons to Houthis.<sup>46</sup>*

In the same vein as limitations on US weapons transfers to Saudi Arabia and its coalition, it will be essential for Iran to halt its weapons transfers to the Houthi rebels to ease Saudi Arabian concerns. These weapons have not only been used against Yemeni civilians, but directly against Riyadh as well. With the knowledge that Houthi rebels will be less able to strike Saudi Arabia, the monarchy should be more willing to hear a compromise.

*4. Allow humanitarian aid to pass through the ports.*

This will be a major step toward alleviating the humanitarian crisis. Since food security in Yemen depends on imports, it will be essential to reopen seaports and airports to allow the successful transfer of humanitarian aid to populations in need. Likely, it will be necessary for human rights groups to follow the path of aid to ensure it does not fall into the hands of militias. Furthermore, once these pathways are open, it will be necessary to allow aid groups to enter the country so they can begin working with civilians to provide medical assistance and begin rebuilding vital infrastructure to improve the quality of life in Yemen.

*5. Withdrawal of Houthi rebel troops from major cities in Yemen.*

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<sup>46</sup> "How-and why-to end the war in Yemen," November 30, 2017, <https://www.economist.com/leaders/2017/11/30/how-and-why-to-end-the-war-in-yemen>

To please Saudi Arabia, Houthi rebel troops will need to retreat from the cities they occupy throughout Yemen. This will decrease the influence of Iran throughout the country—since its main goal has been to help the Houthis take over and install a Shiite regime that would provide a base of operations close enough to Saudi Arabia that would allow it to assert its power in the Gulf region.

*6. Build a coalition government that provides Houthis with political representation.*

This means the UN will have to give up trying to restore President Hadi to full power, as none of the other aggressors in the conflict will support his return. Propping up the entire mediation process on his shoulders will only result in failure. Once a more inclusive government has been established, its infrastructure will need to be built up to tend to the needs of the people, which will likely require a coalition government that represents each of the warring factions. No group can be left out of the equation, or there will be greater incentive to spoil the arrangement.

## **Conclusion**

External forces, namely Iran, the US, and Saudi Arabia, have become rapidly involved in the conflict unfolding in Yemen. With Iran backing the Houthi rebels and the US backing the Saudi Arabian coalition of Gulf states, Yemeni civilians have entered a humanitarian crisis worsened by external forces using their country as a means to profit and establish favorable policies, regional power, and national security. While the US has sought the profit and policies end of this spectrum, Saudi Arabia and Iran have used Yemen as a battleground for regional hegemony in the Gulf and the Middle East. Through the use of American-made weapons and Iranian-funded artillery, Saudi Arabia and the Houthi rebels have indiscriminately killed Yemeni civilians all over the country, while collapsing the government's infrastructure and making it near impossible for civilians to obtain food, water, medical assistance, and safe transportation. Overall, the goals of external forces have completely influenced the direction of a civil war in Yemen that was initially meant to earn the Houthis greater political representation and remove the Hadi regime, turning it into a proxy war with varying goals: to return a US- and Saudi-friendly regime to power, to quell the growing regional aspirations of Iran, to profit and support the US government and defense contractors, and to ensure the national security of Saudi Arabia in the Gulf — a far cry from the conflict's initial intent. Ultimately, these desires have come at the expense of Yemeni civilians, and have destabilized the country even further, opening the door for new or increasingly influential aggressors.

Without political mediation soon, it will be difficult to turn the tide of today's worst humanitarian crisis.