

INKSTICK

Controlling Us Arms, Not Aid, to Yemen

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In Hodeidah, a house exploded. Outside, a man lost everything: his wife and three children, aged 12, three, and one and a half, who had been inside. In total, ten innocent people were killed. The intended target, a radio communications tower, still stood nearby. The perpetrators did not seem to even aim for it. The weapons were US-made, and the pilots received US training. In Yemen, this story is far from unique. According to the Yemen Data Project, an estimated 15,000 civilians have been killed in the war.

In the same province, seven-year-old Jamila's parents were forced to watch her die from malnutrition and worms, easily treatable in the capital city of Sanaa but deadly in the countryside of the war-torn country. Soaring food and fuel prices from the Saudi coalition's blockade of Yemen have disproportionately affected those in rural areas, making transporting Jamila to Sanaa impossible. It is not just bombs that are killing people in Yemen; the UN estimated in 2017 that a child under 5 dies from malnutrition every 10 minutes in Yemen.

For a brief period, there was an end to this violence. In April 2022, the UN brokered a ceasefire that lasted six months. Unfortunately, after two renewals, the parties did not agree on another extension by the Oct. 2, 2022 deadline, which means hostilities have begun again. This comes at a time when US relations with Saudi Arabia could be at a breaking point, with the Biden administration and multiple members of Congress debating total separation from Riyadh. But where does this leave Yemen?

CONTROLLING ARMS

If the Biden administration is serious about reducing hostilities in Yemen, the most obvious thing to do is to make it harder for Saudi Arabia to buy US weapons.

IF THE BIDEN ADMINISTRATION IS SERIOUS ABOUT REDUCING HOSTILITIES IN YEMEN, THE MOST OBVIOUS THING TO DO IS TO MAKE IT HARDER FOR SAUDI ARABIA TO BUY US WEAPONS.

Saudi Arabia has been the top purchaser of US weapons for the past decade, all authorized despite their attacks on civilians in Yemen. The argument for selling Saudi Arabia — a well-known abuser of human rights — more weapons is that such sales will provide the United States leverage in the bilateral relationship. But the Departments of State and Defense routinely fail to assess the civilian death toll of these weapons transfers, despite reports that the Saudi-led coalition used US weapons against civilians and civilian infrastructure in their war in Yemen. To make matters worse, the US Air Force has participated in joint exercises with at least 80% of Saudi air squadrons in Yemen, and at least four trainings took place on American soil.

US arms sales to Saudi Arabia have been unrestrained, regardless of their potential consequences. However, the US government has recently claimed that certain weapons are being sold to Saudi Arabia to prevent human rights violations and protect US troops under threat from the Houthi opposition in Yemen's attempts to attack Saudi territory.

It is clear that US arms sales to Saudi Arabia create a moral hazard in Yemen. The more Washington sends, the more innocent civilians Saudi Arabia can kill. This creates a vicious cycle in which Washington becomes increasingly entangled in these human rights abuses, attempting to solve the problems created by weapons sales to the Saudis with more weapons sales to the Saudis. Furthermore, public opinion is in favor of ending these sales. In a recent Eurasia Group Foundation poll, nearly 70% of Americans disagree with sending arms to Saudi Arabia, regardless of party. Thus, there are human rights, security, and domestic political reasons to stop arms sales to Saudi Arabia until a permanent ceasefire is reached in Yemen.

WHAT THE US OWES YEMEN

Beyond preventing future hostilities, the United States owes Yemen tools to relieve their suffering. With over 17.6 million Yemenis needing food assistance — estimated to grow by over a million by December 2022 — and 16 million in critical need of water, sanitation, and hygiene assistance, Washington must follow its change in policy toward Yemen with an increase in aid. To this point, Congress has not allocated the US Agency for International Development (USAID) adequate funding to address this humanitarian crisis. Funding has dramatically increased as of late, with over \$1 billion sent in fiscal year 2022. However, that number is still low compared to the billions of dollars worth of weapons the United States sold to Saudi Arabia and its partners during the same year.

Regardless of USAID's pockets, Washington should help international organizations like the Food and Agriculture Organization of the United Nations, the UN World Food Programme, and UN International Children's Emergency Fund (UNICEF) provide nonfinancial forms of aid like emergency food aid, water aid, and medical aid — all three of which Yemen is in desperate need.

Sanaa relies on imports to feed its people. Since the war has made these imports nearly impossible, underfunded aid organizations are left to fill in the gaps. These organizations provide emergency food rations that include flour, pulses, oil, sugar, salt, or vouchers or cash to purchase the same amount of food. If Washington better funds these organizations and negotiates their aid workers' safety and free passage, aid organizations can help deliver rations to those most in need, reducing the fear that the aid will be looted or misallocated by creating greater transparency and quality of programming.

Water is also an essential need. Without access to safe, clean water, Yemenis are more likely to suffer from water-borne diseases, malnutrition, and death. In fact, the lack of access to clean water in Yemen has already led to the largest outbreak of cholera in history. Meanwhile, the war has left over half of the country's hospitals closed or unable to perform even basic services. Through its various programs, UNICEF currently provides Water, Sanitation, and Hygiene assistance to about 8.8 million — mainly in rural areas. USAID, meanwhile, provides assistance for just 1.5 million.

INCREASING HUMANITARIAN AID IS THE MOST STRAIGHTFORWARD AND UNCONTROVERSIAL THING WASHINGTON CAN DO TO START TAKING SOME RESPONSIBILITY FOR THE DAMAGE IT HAS ALLOWED IN YEMEN.

Near-constant air raids and crumbling medical infrastructure are a recipe for disaster. Jamila's story is far from the only one in which Yemenis were forced to watch their relatives die from malnutrition, disease, or injuries because most hospitals simply do not have the resources or even doctors to perform life-saving procedures. Organizations like Doctors Without Borders have already helped relieve the pressure on the overextended medical infrastructure but their efforts are simply not enough to help the whole country.

Unfortunately, these organizations have hit serious snags in funding. The UN has appealed for \$4.3 billion in funding for Yemen, receiving less than a third of that amount. The organization has already reduced its food rations packages for 8 million people. Without funding, the UN may not have the resources to provide rations at all. Nongovernmental organizations have each helped hundreds of thousands of those in need, but they, too, need better funding to begin making a sizable impact.

Washington, however, will not be left to foot the entire bill. Indeed, Saudi Arabia and the United Arab Emirates have pumped more aid into Yemen than any other country for the last seven years, while simultaneously causing the disaster. This aid can begin to make a larger impact on the country now that the shooting has been put on hold. For aid efforts to work, the United States will also need to work to address the underlying causes of all of this suffering. Washington needs to first push for a stable, lasting peace agreement between Saudi Arabia and the Houthis, which ideally would be part of the Biden administration's national security interests but is not.

The 2022 National Security Strategy, for example, touches on aid to Yemen but fails to offer any actual strategy for what that aid should look like or how it should be distributed. The only mention of Yemen reads:

“More broadly we will combine diplomacy, economic aid, and security assistance to local partners to alleviate suffering, reduce instability, and prevent the export of terrorism or mass migration from Yemen, Syria, and Libya, while working with regional governments to manage the broader impact of these challenges.”

TIME TO RIGHT THE WRONGS IN YEMEN

Given President Joe Biden's advisors, the lack of conversation around Yemen — specifically related to aid — is unsurprising. Beyond stating that the Biden administration wants to cooperate with Saudi Arabia and the United Arab Emirates in general, Yemen is not mentioned whatsoever

in the 2022 National Defense Strategy, either. This all, unfortunately, reaffirms the reality that the Biden administration will not change its Yemen policy, even though doing so would improve US human rights policy.

The Saudi Arabian-led human rights catastrophe in Yemen is the worst manmade disaster in the 21st century. Despite over 50 years of a rocky relationship and entanglements into conflicts, the United States continues to pursue a close security relationship with Saudi Arabia. Should the United States stop selling weapons to Saudi Arabia? The simple answer is yes, but reality is complicated. Should the US military cease joint military exercises after knowing how the Saudi Arabian military is deliberately targeting civilians? Again, the simple answer is yes but experts would say that entangling military relations is difficult. Increasing humanitarian aid to Yemen, therefore, is the most straightforward and uncontroversial thing Washington can do to start taking some responsibility for the damage it has allowed in Yemen.

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