

# Yemen: The Impossible Way Out of the War - Innumerable sufferings

Wednesday 17 June 2020, by [LACKNER Helen](#) (Date first published: 28 May 2020).

**In the early months of 2020, the already disastrous situation in Yemen worsened further, far from the eyes of the world, which was almost exclusively concerned with the Covid-19 pandemic. The huthi military offensive, the proclamation of autonomy for the South and devastating floods added to the population's innumerable sufferings. And the protagonists cannot find a way out.**

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The first months of 2020 have been a period of significant worsening of the already disastrous situation in Yemen, which has remained largely unnoticed by a world almost exclusively concerned with aspects of the Covid-19 pandemic such as multiple government mismanagement, its death toll and economic side effects. Yemeni developments have included the intensification of earlier trends: further deterioration of the humanitarian situation, reduced involvement of Saudi Arabia and the UAE, collapse of the Riyadh agreement, and the breakdown in the implementation of the Hodeida Agreement. To this already awful list must be added the major Huthi offensive in the north-east, devastating floods, the rapid spreading of Covid-19 throughout the country, and the "self-rule" declaration by the Southern Transitional Council (STC). Given previous experience, it would be unwise to suggest that things cannot get any worse, in the very month when the country should be celebrating thirty years of unity.

## How to get out of the Saudi quagmire?

At the end of 2019, Saudi Arabia appeared determined to get out of the Yemeni quagmire, after close to 5 years of increasingly fruitless military involvement. Air strikes were reducing dramatically, and the Riyadh Agreement between the separatist Southern Transitional Council (STC) and President Hadi's internationally recognised government was intended to restore cooperation within the anti-Huthi coalition. People expected further decrease of military action, hopefully leading to an agreement with the Huthis, following months of negotiations which started after last September's missile attacks on Saudi Arabia's major oil producing and processing facilities. Although claimed by the Huthis, evidence of their launch pointed closer to Iran, but this shattering event for the Saudi regime was the trigger to seriously attempt to end its involvement in the Yemen war.

In early 2020, the Huthis undermined this plan with a military offensive in the north-east of the

country. They first took Nehm, a front only 60 km east of Sana'a which had remained static for four years and then proceeded to take most of Jawf governorate thus coming close to cutting off access to the main road linking Yemen with Saudi Arabia, as well as threatening the oil and gas fields of Marib, while leaving the city itself and its now vast population almost as an isolated island within Huthi territory. The Saudis therefore intensified air strikes and fighting on the ground is ongoing.

Regardless, on 9 April, the Saudis demonstrated their determination to close this chapter by announcing a unilateral two week cease-fire, timed to facilitate its extension throughout Ramadan on religious grounds. The Huthis countered by proposing an ambitious overall draft peace agreement between themselves and Saudi Arabia. As drafted, this agreement marginalises the Hadi government and would force recognition that the Huthi movement and Saudi Arabia are the protagonists of this conflict, leaving the issue of future internal Yemeni politics to later discussions within Yemen. With continued hostilities on the ground, air strikes continued throughout. By the end of the third week of "cease-fire," i.e., mid-May, there had been 145 raids [1] with 577 air strikes. In brief, the Huthis have made significant advances and broken the four-year stalemate on the northern front, leaving the Saudis without response to their peace openings. The Huthis have the initiative, which raises the question both of their ultimate objectives and their willingness to "let the Saudis off the hook." Details of recent progress in the Saudi-Huthi talks have not emerged in public.

### **More problems for the Saudis in the South**

In the south, in early 2020 prospects already looked grim for the Riyadh Agreement signed in November to reconcile the STC and the Hadi government after the former had forcibly expelled the latter from Aden last August. This coincided with United Arab Emirate (UAE) formal withdrawal with their hardware, though the Emiratis left behind various STC-aligned militias they had trained, equipped, and paid. Officially supporting the Riyadh Agreement, with Crown Prince Mohammed bin Zayed attending its signature, the UAE current position is unclear. It has given air backing to the STC in some confrontations in the country since last summer, and the STC "self-rule" announcement on 25 April [2] was made by its self-styled leader Aydarous al Zubaidi from Abu Dhabi. Sustaining the ambiguity, Minister of State Anwar Gargash has made the only official Emirati response to date to the proclamation. While not explicitly condemning the STC, he tweeted that the Riyadh agreement should be implemented and that no single party should take unilateral action.

According to the Riyadh Agreement, the coalition takes responsibility for the situation in the south and supervises its implementation which, following UAE withdrawal, leaves the Saudis in charge. They have been unable to enforce the military redeployment clauses designed to reduce STC military presence in Aden and return some government forces there. Tension between the two sides has worsened throughout and warfare finally broke out in Abyan on 11 May. A temporary halt in the indecisive fighting during Eid is still in force as the STC leader Aydarous al Zubaidi is involved in negotiations in Riyadh as the invitation of the Saudi authorities who are concerned at this additional problem to their exit strategy from Yemen.

As I have discussed elsewhere [3], the STC had many other reasons for taking action: increasing popular anger in Aden at the lack of basic electricity and water services, the worsening financial situation which leaves even its militias, let alone the majority of state employees, largely unpaid, widespread unemployment, the humanitarian crisis exacerbated by a shortage of funds, the emergence of Covid-19 and, to top it all, the devastating floods in Aden on 21 April. Their stronghold Aden now witnesses almost daily demonstrations against both the STC and the Hadi Government. The wisdom of the STC leadership's response raises many questions as it has, if anything, worsened rather than improved the situation.

Within Yemen, the declaration revealed the limitations of STC geographic control [4]: all eastern governorates as well as Socotra have disassociated themselves from the proclamation, leaving only those closest to Aden, its main strongholds, in support. Within days' fighting, as yet indecisive, broke out in Socotra, one the areas which has been contested between STC and government alignment for the past three years. Internationally, the proclamation was universally condemned by Arab states, the United Nations Security Council, the UN Special Envoy, the EU and major world states, all emphasising the negative impact this would have on all the country's numerous problems.

### **Hodeida and the UNMHA**

As if these problems were not enough, another earlier "achievement" has been unravelling in the last two months. The UN Special Envoy's, now more than two years, tenure has not been characterised by success. The December 2018 Stockholm Agreement [5], was widely publicised as a major advance and a first step towards a broader and complete peace agreement. The only element which was implemented, through the United Nations Mission to support the Hodeida Agreement (UNMHA [6]) stumbled through 2019 with limited progress, the main one being a significant reduction in fighting in and around Hodeida, and preventing a potentially disastrous coalition offensive on the city and its port. The joint redeployment committee barely operated: in March a Huthi sniper fatally shot a government monitor leading to government withdrawal from the committee, and thus its effective interruption. In view of the current Covid-19 medical emergency, attempts to revive it are unlikely to rapidly reach a satisfactory resumption. So at this point, it is fair to say that this operation is at a standstill, though the UN will presumably attempt to get it going again when conditions permit. Fighting elsewhere in the governorate continues at a steady low level.

### **No end to the Humanitarian nightmare**

Issues between the Huthis and the UN humanitarian interventions emerged in 2019, as the extent of Huthi control over the humanitarian sector became public, both concerning selection of beneficiaries and the amount of funds diverted to the benefit of Huthi officials and institutions. This prevented the UN from producing its annual needs assessment for 2020 or a Humanitarian Response Plan. The UN has asserted that it needs USD 3.4 billion for the year without providing any details or holding the usual pledging conference. As of 25 May total funding received was USD 680 million [7], more than half of which came from Germany, the UK, Saudi Arabia and the European Union. At the April monthly UNSC meeting on Yemen, the UN Undersecretary for Humanitarian Affairs failed to mention either the detailed needs assessment or the plan, merely announcing that many humanitarian and health projects would be closing within weeks for lack of funding and that the UN needed more [8] than USD 900 million to operate until July, primarily for World Food Programme food distribution. The April pledging conference due to be hosted by Saudi Arabia has now been rescheduled for 2 June, almost halfway through the year; given the pressures on the world economy of the Covid crisis, large pledges are unlikely.

Since then it has become clear that Yemen is one of the countries where famine is likely to kill millions as a side effect of the Covid-19 pandemic, as world food production and exports slump, international humanitarian funding drops through the floor, and communications are disrupted. These factors can only spell further disaster in a country where only about 2800 medical facilities are partly functioning, in a system which was already completely inadequate prior to the war. While the UN is claiming that preparations are being made to address the new virus emergency, they also explain that this includes diverting mechanisms to deal with the cholera epidemic. It is worth remembering that cholera affected nearly a million people in 2019; in the first four months of this

year, there were more than 110 000 cases. Dengue, malaria, chikungunya and other diseases are also at epidemic level.

## **Justified Covid 19 panic**

The first declared case of Covid-19 announced on 9 April was in Shihr in Hadramaut and the patient has recovered. Since then international statistics recorded a mere 233 cases by 25 May, certainly an underestimate. Everyone expects the situation to get much worse and the death toll to be extremely high, given the physical weakness of the population, following years of malnutrition and inadequate medical services, let alone the absence of specialist treatment facilities.

The UN allocation of USD 40 million for Covid-related activities is clearly insufficient. A private sector effort, initiated by the Hayel Saeed Anam Foundation [\[9\]](#), is bringing together international companies to purchase and distribute basic protective equipment throughout Yemen. As the crisis emerges, Yemenis are torn between disbelief and panic. The reactions of authorities throughout the country bode ill for the coming months, as they include mutual recrimination, racism, xenophobia, widespread misinformation and erratic “knee jerk” decisions. In the last two weeks the number of cases and deaths has rocketed while “authorities” have responded in diverging but equally inappropriate ways causing further fear and panic. Hundreds have died in Aden of mysterious diseases whose symptoms are those of Covid, and hospitals refuse patients and have even closed. According to MSF, about 80 people are buried daily there. In Sana’a city the authorities give no figures on deaths or cases, and prevent information being released. Despite this reports have emerged of more than 2500 cases and at least 320 deaths in the first three weeks of May. All authorities have ordered lockdowns for 4 days over Eid, though nothing is done to enforce them.

As if all these disasters weren’t enough, devastating floods hit the country in late April, affecting the main cities of Sana’a, Aden and Mareb, among others without discrimination. They cut basic water and electricity services for millions and affected directly more than 150,000 people. Although the death toll itself was modest, people lost their possessions and whatever limited food stocks they might have managed to get together for a particularly tough Ramadan.

On 22 May, Yemen marked 30 years since the peaceful unification of the Yemen Arab Republic and the People’s Democratic Republic of Yemen into the Republic of Yemen. This should be an occasion to rejoice. As most Yemenis were born after 1990, they have no recollection of the earlier period or of the dreams of unification. Throughout the country people looked forward to freedom of movement, a multi-party democratic state, prosperity combining the social services of the socialist regime with the flourishing economy of a private sector, a personal status law giving women equal rights, qat consumption on holidays, security, stability, and plenty more. They have been bitterly disappointed. In today’s dark era, the younger generation should be reminded of the hope and optimism of those years and learn the lessons from a period which was so promising.

**Helen Lackner**

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**P.S.**

- “The Impossible Way Out of the War”. Orient XXI. 28 May 2020:

<https://orientxxi.info/magazine/Yemen-The-Impossible-Way-Out-of-the-War>

- Helen Lackner is an independent researcher, she has worked and lived in Yemen for over fifteen years, five of them in the RDPY between 1977 and 1982. She has just published Yemen in Crisis, Autocracy, Neo-Liberalism and the Disintegration of a State (Saqi, 2017). Her articles on Orient XXI: <https://orientxxi.info/en/Helen-Lackner>

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## Footnotes

[1] [https://mailchi.mp/51e1340054a1/april\\_may-2020-yemen-data-project-saudi-ceasefire-update-week3-655015?e=fc53a0b63c](https://mailchi.mp/51e1340054a1/april_may-2020-yemen-data-project-saudi-ceasefire-update-week3-655015?e=fc53a0b63c)

[2] <https://en.stcaden.com/news/9149>

[3] [https://www.ecfr.eu/article/commentary\\_the\\_yemen\\_conflict\\_southern\\_separatism\\_in\\_action](https://www.ecfr.eu/article/commentary_the_yemen_conflict_southern_separatism_in_action)

[4] [https://www.ecfr.eu/article/commentary\\_yemen\\_why\\_the\\_riyadh\\_agreement\\_is\\_collapsing](https://www.ecfr.eu/article/commentary_yemen_why_the_riyadh_agreement_is_collapsing)

[5] <https://orientxxi.info/magazine/yemen-failed-attempts-to-restore-peace,3586>

[6] <https://www.opendemocracy.net/en/north-africa-west-asia/yemens-hopes-and-expectations-part-1-the-stockholm-agreement/>

[7] <https://fts.unocha.org/countries/248/donors/2020>

[8] <https://reliefweb.int/report/yemen/under-secretary-general-humanitarian-affairs-and-emergency-relief-coordinator-mr-mark-6>

[9] <https://www.reuters.com/article/us-health-coronavirus-yemen/companies-give-yemen-tens-of-thousands-of-coronavirus-test-kits-to-ease-shortage-idUSKCN22332S>