

DISPATCH

IS INTENTIONAL STARVATION THE FUTURE OF WAR?

By Jane Ferguson

July 11, 2018



There is no shortage of food arriving to Yemen's ports, but the war between the Houthi rebels and the Saudi-led coalition has put millions at risk of starvation. Photograph by Jane Ferguson

The malnutrition ward of the Al-Sabaeen hospital, in Yemen's capital, Sana'a, is a quiet place even when it is busy. Parents speak in murmurs and children are too weak to cry. In a room off a pink-painted hallway, a mother named Salami Ahmed sat cross-legged on a bed, resting her ten-month-old daughter Mateea on her knee. Each of the baby girl's ribs pushed out from underneath a fine layer of skin. The child's eyes stared wide from her gaunt face. Ahmed told me that her husband was a cobbler, and business was bad. "Some days he comes home with four hundred rials, another day five hundred or a thousand rials," she said, amounts of local currency worth one and a half to four dollars. "Some days nothing if he has no work. We only buy sugar and tea. Before the war, we could buy other things but now no more. We were already poor and when the war broke out we became even poorer."

In the room down the hallway, Mohammed Hatem stood over his baby, Shahab Adil, who is also ten months old. Shahab also suffered from malnutrition. Her body appeared much too small for her age. "It's happening everywhere in Yemen," Hatem told me. "Food prices were already high before the war, and since it started they went sky high." Back

in his village, several hours' drive away, there were many more cases of malnutrition, he said. Few villagers can afford to take a taxi to the capital for treatment. For many, the cost of fuel puts even short bus rides beyond reach.

The U.S.- and Saudi-backed war here has increased the price of food, cooking gas, and other fuel, but it is the disappearance of millions of jobs that has brought more than eight million people to the brink of starvation and turned Yemen into the worst humanitarian crisis in the world. There is sufficient food arriving in ports here, but endemic unemployment means that almost two-thirds of the population struggle to buy the food their families need. In this way, hunger here is entirely man-made: no drought or blight has caused it.

In 2015, alarmed by the growing power of a Shia armed group known as the Houthis in its southern neighbor, Saudi Arabia formed a coalition of Arab states and launched a military offensive in Yemen to defeat the rebels. The Saudis believed that the Houthis were getting direct military support from the kingdom's regional archrival, Iran, and its Lebanese proxy, Hezbollah. The offensive quickly pushed the Houthis out of some southern areas, but then faltered; the rebels still control much of the country, including the capital.

A blockade of the rebel-held area is intermittently enforced by the Saudis, with all shipments of food and other imported goods subject to U.N. or coalition approval and inspections, driving up prices. Saudi-led aerial bombing has destroyed infrastructure and businesses, and has devastated the economy inside rebel-held areas. The Saudi-led coalition, which controls Yemen's airspace, has enforced an almost complete media blackout by preventing reporters and human-rights researchers from taking U.N. relief flights into Houthi-controlled areas for much of the last two years. In June, I reached the capital by entering the coalition-controlled part of Yemen and then, travelling by road, crossed the front line disguised as a Yemeni woman in local dress and a face veil.

On June 13th, while I was in Houthi-controlled territory, the Saudi-led coalition launched a military offensive in the port city of Hodeidah. The attack demonstrated the far-reaching humanitarian consequences of economic disruption caused by the war. Yemen typically imports more than eighty per cent of its food, and no other port in the rebel-held parts of the country comes close to being able to handle the amount of cargo that Hodeidah can. The port is also an important strategic prize. Losing Hodeidah would cut the Houthis off from the outside world, most likely marking the beginning of the end for their movement. It is also a crucial source of income for the rebels, as the Houthi-controlled government collects docking and offloading fees. Were the Saudis to capture Hodeidah, it would put them in a much stronger position over the Houthis in peace negotiations.

The Saudis have ignored pleas from every humanitarian organization operating in Yemen to halt the offensive in Hodeidah. The groups warn that disrupting the port's operations will spark food-price increases and famine in areas under Houthi control. "I would say if it's closed for a matter of two weeks you will start seeing an impact on the streets," Frank McManus, the country director for the New York-based International Rescue Committee, told me. Saudi officials did not respond to a request for comment.

Human-rights groups question the legality of the Hodeidah offensive, as well as the Saudi-led blockade and aerial bombing campaign, on the grounds that they have created widespread hunger. The Geneva Conventions prohibit the destruction of "objects indispensable to the survival of the civilian population." Alex de Waal, the author of the book "Mass Starvation," which analyzes recent man-made famines, argued that economic war is being waged in Yemen. "The focus on food supplies over all and humanitarian action is actually missing the bigger point," de Waal told me. "It's an economic war with famine as a consequence."

Under international law, waging economic warfare is more of a gray area than the use of overt siege-and-starvation tactics. Stopping activities that are essential for people to feed themselves, such as closing off businesses and work opportunities, is not explicitly covered. "That is a weakness in the law," said de Waal, who is also the executive director of the World Peace Foundation. "The coalition air strikes are not killing civilians in large numbers but they might be destroying the market and that kills many, many more people."

The world's most recent man-made famine was in South Sudan, last year. There, the use of food as a weapon was clearer, with civilians affiliated with certain tribes driven from their homes—and food sources—by soldiers and rebels determined to terrify them into never coming back. In the epicenter of the famine, starving South Sudanese families told stories of mass murder and rape. Entire communities fled into nearby swamps and thousands starved to death or drowned. Gunmen burned markets to the ground, stole food, and killed civilians who were sneaking out of the swamps to find food.

In Syria, the images of starving children in rebel-controlled Eastern Ghouta, at the end of last year, were the latest evidence of the Assad regime's use of siege-and-starvation tactics. With the support of Russia and Iran, the Syrian government has starved civilian enclaves as a way to pressure them to surrender. In Yemen, none of the warring parties seem to be systematically withholding food from civilians. Instead, the war is making it impossible for most civilians to earn the money they need buy food—and exposing a loophole in international law. There is no national-food-availability crisis in Yemen, but a massive economic one.

The situation in Yemen goes to the heart of the major legal dispute regarding economic warfare: intent. Military and political figures can claim that they never intended to starve a population, and argue that hunger is an unintended side-effect of war for which they do not bear legal responsibility.

Despite this, some human-rights lawyers argue that a case can be made against the kinds of economic warfare being waged in Yemen. All of the parties are aware of the human impact of their tactics; continued refusal to modify them, despite warning of a famine, could leave some culpable. "If you move from negligence to recklessness and you continue with recklessness in the knowledge of the impact it's having on the civilian population, eventually a judge will be able to see intent on your part," Wayne Jordash, the head of Global Rights Compliance, a Hague-based human-rights group that monitors violations of the laws of war, told me.

The issue of legal culpability could extend to Washington, D.C. The Obama and Trump Administrations have provided support for the Saudi-led coalition since it intervened in Yemen. Since 2015, U.S. forces have refuelled coalition jets between bombing raids and provided intelligence assistance and logistical support. Washington has also sold Saudi Arabia and their ally the United Arab Emirates billions of dollars' worth of weapons.

As weddings, markets, and civilian homes have been bombed, and the U.N. has verified that more than six thousand civilians have died, a growing bipartisan campaign to end U.S. military involvement in Yemen has grown in Congress. In a rare bipartisan push in the Senate, a resolution that would have ended all U.S. military support for the war in Yemen was narrowly defeated in March.

Human-rights groups say that if intent can be proved, some types of Saudi-led air strikes may be found to have violated the Geneva Conventions, because they make it difficult for Yemenis to access food. Along the Western coastline of rebel-held areas, Saudi-led air strikes often target fishing boats that pilots apparently—and, most likely, falsely—believe could be smuggling weapons to the Houthis from Iran. More than two hundred boats have been destroyed, and fishing communities suffer high levels of malnutrition and starvation.

Saada, the Houthis' ancestral home and stronghold in the country's northwest, has been pummelled by air strikes. Refugees from that area, who moved into makeshift camps near the border with Saudi Arabia after the strikes, told me that coalition forces then bombed their settlements. A man named Jabr Ali Al Ghaferi said that his wife was hit with shrapnel and died a few days later. "The air strikes targeted the gate and the bridge which connected the camp to the market," he said.

Martha Mundy, a retired professor of anthropology from the London School of Economics, has, along with Yemeni colleagues, analyzed the location of air strikes throughout the war. She said their records show that civilian areas and food supplies are being intentionally targeted. "If one looks at certain areas where they say the Houthis are strong, particularly Saada, then it can be said that they are trying to disrupt rural life—and that really verges on scorched

earth,” Mundy told me. “In Saada, they hit the popular, rural weekly markets time and again. It’s very systematic targeting of that.”

The Houthis add to the humanitarian challenges by making it difficult for aid agencies to work in the areas that they control. Mistrust of foreign aid organizations, particularly Western ones, has strained relationships. Aid workers who asked not to be named said that the Houthis have imposed increased restrictions on their operations in recent months. To enter Houthi-controlled areas, workers need special visas from Houthi officials, which are becoming increasingly difficult to obtain. After they arrive, they need permission to leave the capital and travel to refugee camps. “Every day they have different requirements,” a staff member of one international aid group complained.

Aid agencies also complain about how the Houthis allow aid to be distributed. At least one major aid organization had to cancel a project after the Houthis said that they did not believe it was necessary and declined to grant permits. A second major aid organization said that the Houthis tried to gain control over the distribution of food and decide themselves who gets what.

The Saudis are increasingly aware of the public-relations nightmare that their war in Yemen has become, as images of starving Yemeni children make it into the international press. The kingdom has hired U.S.- and U.K.-based public-relations firms to mount a campaign pointing out that the Saudis and their partners have promised to provide billions of dollars of aid to the Yemeni people once they have been “liberated” from the Houthis.

Jordash, the human-rights lawyer, said that even if aid is provided in one part of Yemen, it does not absolve the parties of violating international humanitarian law in other parts of the country. “If they are providing aid to a different civilian population they cannot say, ‘Hey, we are clearly doing our best and you cannot infer intent in scenario A because we are providing aid in scenario B,’” he said.

Whether or not the Hodeidah offensive disrupts food supplies, the hunger that grips Yemenis will continue to claim victims, particularly children. When she first arrived in Sana’a’s main hospital last month, a one-year-old named Retaj Hussein was fed medication through a nasal tube. Starvation had caused her eyes to sink and skin to wrinkle, making the infant appear elderly. Too weak to cry, she grimaced and moaned. A few days later, she was off the drip and being fed high-nutrient milk. Her father’s face and vest were splattered in white paint—he had been fortunate enough to find some work as a laborer. Before I could speak with him, he raced out of the ward after hearing that a blood bank downstairs might pay him to donate blood. His battle to find money for food continued.

De Waal argued that man-made famines will become increasingly common aspects of modern conflict, and said that defining war crimes related to food and hunger more clearly will become increasingly urgent. Hunger and preventable diseases have always killed many more people than bombs and bullets, he said, but if they are a direct result of military strategy, they should not be considered the product of chance. The war in Yemen and other wars being waged today are forcing a new legal debate about whether the lives of many people killed in conflict are lost or taken. “It is possible that they could weasel out from legal responsibility,” de Waal said, referring to commanders in such a conflict. “But there should be no escape from moral responsibility.”

More: [Yemen](#) [United States](#) [Middle East](#) [Saudi Arabia](#) [Iran](#) [Hezbollah](#) [Lebanon](#)

The New Yorker, 11 de julio de 2018

<https://www.newyorker.com/news/news-desk/is-yemen-intentional-starvation-the-future-of-war>