



CIGI PAPERS

NO. 97 — MARCH 2016

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# SPOTLIGHT ON YEMEN'S FORGOTTEN WAR AND HUMANITARIAN DISASTER

## PREVENTING THE NEXT SYRIAN REFUGEE CRISIS

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**SPOTLIGHT ON YEMEN'S FORGOTTEN WAR AND HUMANITARIAN DISASTER:  
PREVENTING THE NEXT SYRIAN REFUGEE CRISIS**

**Jacqueline Lopour**



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## ABOUT THE GLOBAL SECURITY & POLITICS PROGRAM

The Global Security & Politics Program at CIGI focuses on a range of issues in global security, conflict management and international governance — a landscape that continues to change dramatically. Such changes are widely evident in the growing rivalry between China and the United States in the Asia-Pacific and the emergence of new economic powers in the region, such as Indonesia; the divergent ways Canada, Russia and the United States perceive Arctic security as melting ice opens up the Northwest Passage; continuing debates about the humanitarian imperative as the world confronts new crises in Africa and the Middle East; and new areas of concern such as cyber warfare and the security of the Internet.

With experts from academia, national agencies, international institutions and the private sector, the Global Security & Politics Program supports research in the following areas: Arctic governance; Asia and the Pacific; fixing climate governance; governance of conflict management, with a focus on Africa; global politics and foreign policy; and Internet governance.

## ABOUT THE AUTHOR



**Jacqueline Lopour** is a research associate in CIGI's Global Security & Politics Program. At CIGI, her research interests include exploring major security challenges in the Middle East, South Asia and Central Asia. Prior to joining CIGI, Jacqueline spent 10 years as a political and leadership analyst at the Central Intelligence Agency in Washington, DC. She provided numerous written and verbal briefings to top US government officials and participated in meetings with various international leaders and government representatives. Her main areas of focus were political developments in South Asia and the Middle East. She has lived in and travelled extensively throughout the region — to include living in Saudi Arabia and following Yemen during the events of the Arab Spring. Jacqueline holds a B.A. with Honours in English Literature and History from the University of California, Los Angeles. She has appeared as a commentator on CBC News and her work has been published by Reuters and other international news outlets.

## ACRONYMS

AQAP	Al-Qaeda in the Arabian Peninsula
IDPs	internally displaced persons
IOM	International Organization for Migration
ISIS	Islamic State of Iraq and al-Sham
MSF	Médecins Sans Frontières
NDC	National Dialogue Conference
RRMRP	<i>Regional Refugee and Migrant Response Plan</i>
UNHCR	UN Refugee Agency
UNOCHA	Office for the Coordination of Humanitarian Affairs
UNSC	UN Security Council
WFP	World Food Programme
WHO	World Health Organization

## EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

Yemen's humanitarian situation is arguably the worst humanitarian crisis in the world and the world is looking the other way. The United Nations reports that Yemen has more people — 21.2 million — in need of humanitarian aid than any other country including Syria. Yemen is in the midst of a civil war and reports of human rights violations are frequent. Millions are on the brink of famine, the country's health system has collapsed and thousands of civilians have been killed or injured by fighting.

The number of refugees is steadily rising and Yemen is seriously in risk of becoming the next Syrian refugee crisis. Over 173,180 people have already left the country. Over 82,300 have fled the short distance to Somalia, Sudan, Djibouti and other countries in the Horn of Africa. Ironically, these countries have been struggling with their own crises and have generated hundreds of thousands of refugees of their own. Those fleeing Yemen are interested in seeking asylum in Europe and the West. Yemeni refugees are in close proximity to established migration routes that travel through Africa, across the Mediterranean and into Europe. In Yemen, over 2.5 million civilians have been displaced after a year of civil war, suggesting a potential refugee pool of millions as the crisis carries on.

With Yemen, the past is poised to repeat itself unless the world takes notice. Serious worldwide discussions on how to mitigate the current refugee problem did not take place until refugees began pouring across Europe's borders. If this occurs with Yemen, Europe — as has been the case with

the current crisis — will undoubtedly look to the rest of the world, including the United States and Canada, to share in this new refugee burden. Surges in refugee numbers will compound domestic concerns about security, extremism, radicalization and humanitarian obligations, while also exacerbating bilateral and multilateral tensions.

International attention and aid funding is desperately needed and could be critical to helping forestall a Yemeni refugee crisis before it begins. However, the crisis in Yemen has been largely under-reported and overshadowed by other conflicts such as Syria. International donors in 2015 provided only half of the estimated US\$1.6 billion dollars that the United Nations requested for Yemen (UN Office for the Coordination Humanitarian Affairs [UNOCHA] 2015f), and the window for preventative action is closing. The global community has spent billions reacting to the Syrian refugee crisis. Unless donors act now to address the severity of Yemen's humanitarian crisis, the cost — both human and financial — will soar much higher.

An independent, impartial inquiry into alleged human rights violations by all parties in the conflict provides another opportunity to address Yemen's humanitarian catastrophe. International support for UN-initiated peace talks — to include pressure on Saudi Arabia and Iran, who are both active players in the Yemen conflict — is equally essential to mitigating Yemen's humanitarian disaster, ending the conflict, and ensuring that Yemen's displaced citizens can ultimately return home.

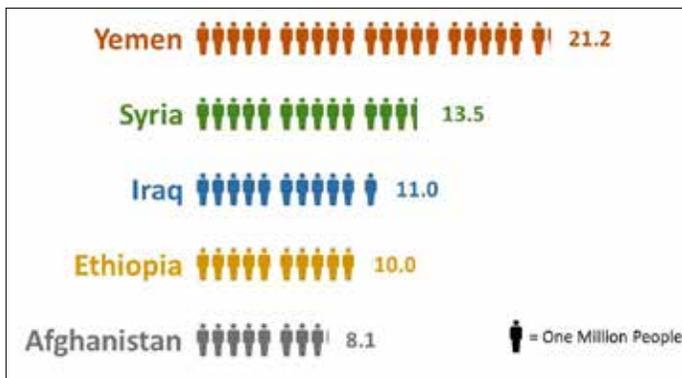
## INTRODUCTION

Humanitarian crises across the world are the worst since World War II, and the situation is only going to get worse. According to the UN Refugee Agency (UNHCR), almost 60 million people worldwide have been forcibly displaced from their homes — that is approximately one in every 123 people on the planet (UNHCR 2016a). The problem is growing, as the number of those displaced is over 60 percent greater than the previous decade. As a result, UN Secretary-General Ban Ki-moon has announced the first-ever World Humanitarian Summit to be held May 23-24, 2016.

The world's attention is focused on the Syrian refugee crisis, which has displaced 11 million people. But in doing so, the global community has lost sight of an equally severe humanitarian and displacement crisis — the situation in Yemen. Yemen now has more people in need of aid than any other country in the world, according to the UNOCHA *Global Humanitarian Overview 2016*. An estimated 21.2 million people in Yemen — 82 percent of the population — requires humanitarian aid, and this number is steadily growing (UNOCHA 2016a).

In August 2015, Peter Maurer, head of the International Committee of the Red Cross, declared that “Yemen after

**Figure 1: Global Humanitarian Crisis:  
Total People in Need (in millions)**



Data Source: UNOCHA 2016a.

five months [of civil war] looks like Syria after five years” (BBC News 2015). Fawaz Gerges of the London School of Economics warned that the conflict in Yemen could lead to “a greater humanitarian crisis than that of Syria, in terms of refugees and mass starvation” (cited in Tharoor 2015).

The current conflict in Yemen escalated in March 2015, although the country has been wracked by instability and violence for years. In early 2015, the Houthis, a Zaydi Shia rebel group purportedly supported by Iran, overran the Yemeni capital of Sana’a and other strategic sites. Yemeni President Abd Rabbuh Mansur Hadi fled into exile, and Yemen spiralled into civil war. On March 26, 2015, Saudi Arabia — joined by a coalition of other Sunni governments — came to the support of the Yemeni government and began air strikes against the Houthi rebels. The fighting has caused thousands of casualties and levelled homes, hospitals, schools and markets.

Renewed attention to the crisis in Yemen is desperately needed. Some aid and news outlets refer to it as “The Forgotten War,” and Amnesty International warns that “the world has turned its back on a growing crisis” (Amnesty International 2015a; Gatehouse 2015). Yemen, because of the depth of its humanitarian catastrophe, is poised to provide the next wave of refugees, absent a major humanitarian intervention. The international community is already struggling with how to address the current migrant crisis. Europe has been overwhelmed by over one million migrants, causing political turmoil. The European Union, Germany, Turkey, Lebanon, Jordan and other countries have spent billions to care for the Syrian refugees who have flooded their borders. In January 2016, French Prime Minister Manuel Valls argued that the European Union had reached its threshold, and warned that “our societies will be totally destabilized” and that the migrant crisis has placed Europe in grave danger (BBC News 2016a).

The figures and statistics in this paper are current as of March 1, 2016 unless otherwise specified, but analysis of

trends over the past year suggests that the situation will steadily worsen — despite pockets of improvement during temporary cessation of hostilities — without a permanent, longstanding ceasefire or dramatic humanitarian intervention.

## YEMEN’S COMPLEX HISTORY OF CONFLICT AND INSTABILITY

Yemen’s instability stems from a long history of political strife, poverty and violence. Prior to 1990, Yemen consisted of two separate countries, North Yemen and South Yemen; both had experienced civil wars and conflict. In 1962, a coup against North Yemen’s monarchy launched the country into an eight-year civil war that involved Egypt, Saudi Arabia, Jordan, the Soviet Union and the United Kingdom. South Yemen gained its independence from the British Empire in 1967, and North and South Yemen fought short but violent conflicts in 1972 and 1979. South Yemen also experienced its own short but deadly civil war in 1986.

North and South Yemen ultimately unified in 1990 under then-President of North Yemen Ali Abdullah Saleh. Many southern Yemenis felt disenfranchised by the unified government, and another civil war broke out in 1994. Pro-union forces ultimately triumphed, but a simmering southern autonomy movement continues to this day. Until he was ousted in 2012 after the Arab Spring, President Saleh ruled for 33 years, navigating Yemen’s many competing tribal, political, religious and military centres of power. He once famously described governing Yemen as “dancing on the heads of snakes” (Clark 2010), and he solidified his position by keeping an iron grip on the military, brutally cracking down on dissidents, and installing family members and loyalists in key government and military roles. Nonetheless, the central government has never exercised full control over Yemen’s rural areas in either the north or the south.

### Birth of the Houthi Rebellion

The Houthi group has its origins in a moderate theological movement that was founded in the 1990s, and intended to promote a revival of Zaydi Shia Islam in northern Yemen. Zaydi Shia imams and kings ruled in North Yemen for over 1,000 years, until the monarchy was overthrown in 1962; Zaydi Shia still make up approximately 35 to 40 percent of Yemeni Muslims. The Houthi rebellion began in 2004 when a group of family members clashed with the Yemeni government in an attempt to prevent the arrest of Hussein Badreddin al-Houthi, a local religious and political leader and former member of Parliament. Al-Houthi was killed in the fighting, and his followers took up his name as their own. The Houthis claim their goals are to end religious and political discrimination against the Zaydi Shia and protest the Yemeni government’s relationship with the United

States. The Yemeni government accuses the Houthis of trying to establish a revival imamate — a Zaydi version of a Sunni caliphate.

In 2009, the conflict between the Houthis and the government intensified when the Yemeni government launched a large military offensive. Saudi Arabia joined the conflict and conducted airstrikes against the Houthis after Houthi fighters crossed into Saudi territory and killed three Saudi soldiers. All parties eventually reached a ceasefire in 2010. In 2011, the Houthis saw the Arab Spring unrest as an opportunity to expand influence and seize greater territory, eventually gaining control over two (very nearly three) governorates (provinces) in the north. Throughout 2013 and 2014, the Houthis continued to clash with the Yemeni government, despite also participating in internationally supported political talks that would have provided the group with a role in the government and a say in drafting the new constitution.

The Houthis succeeded in taking over the Yemeni capital of Sana'a in September 2014, but subsequently withdrew after a UN-brokered deal that forced Yemeni President Hadi to name a new, more inclusive government. The Houthis later rejected the new "unity government," claiming it still did not give the group or Yemen's Zaydi Shia population enough influence. The Houthis retook Sana'a in January 2015, forcing President Hadi to flee, and by March 2015 the group had gained control over large swaths of western Yemen, the most populous region of the country.

On March 26, 2015, the Government of Yemen's main ally Saudi Arabia — in a coalition with Bahrain, Qatar, Kuwait, United Arab Emirates, Egypt, Jordan, Morocco, Senegal and Sudan — began an air campaign against the Houthi rebels. Yemen was widely considered to be in the midst of a civil war. The Saudis feared the rise of a strong Shia influence in their own backyard, especially as it dealt with protests at home by its own oppressed Shia population. Saudi Arabia also views Houthi rebels as potential proxy forces of rival Iran (Gardner 2015), a claim that the Houthis and Iranian government have denied. Many international observers, media outlets and leaders have supported Saudi Arabia's concerns, and there are multiple reports that Iran has provided financial and military support to the Houthis. However, the full extent of Iranian support and influence over the Houthis remains unclear (Adelkhah 2015; Bayoumy and Ghobari 2016; Epatko 2015; Hafezi et al. 2014; Tharoor 2015).

Many international observers describe the Yemen conflict as a sectarian "proxy war" between Saudi Arabia and Iran (Epatko 2015; Gardner 2015; Hafezi et al. 2014; Tharoor 2015), although this almost certainly oversimplifies the issue and downplays the extent of Yemen's internal divisions. Nonetheless, Saudi Arabia and Iran's involvement in Yemen plays into a larger struggle between the two countries for influence in the Muslim world. Saudi

Arabia and Iran have engaged in a cold war for decades, but the conflicts in Syria and Yemen are the closest they have come to open confrontation. Iran, in January 2016, even accused Saudi Arabia of deliberately bombing its embassy in Yemen, although eyewitnesses say the building was not damaged by strikes (Bayoumy and Ghobari 2016). Riyadh fears that the Iran nuclear deal will allow Iran to emerge as a force in the global economy and bolster Tehran's regional ambitions. Both countries blame the other for the escalation in tensions. For example, Iran's foreign minister in a *New York Times* editorial accused Saudi Arabia of "promoting regional instability through waging war in Yemen" (Zarif 2016). Saudi Arabia, in turn, began a drive in the Gulf Cooperation Council, Arab League and Organisation of Islamic Cooperation that denounced Iran for "meddling in the affairs of Arab nations" and demanded that it stop its activities in the region (Agence France-Press 2016; Ali Khan 2016).

### The Arab Spring Arrives in Yemen

As the conflict with the Houthis intensified, the Yemeni government also experienced significant political turmoil in the wake of the Arab Spring. By 2011, popular discontent with former Yemeni President Saleh's prolonged rule boiled over into widespread protests, mirroring the protests in several other Arab countries. Yemen's neighbours — Saudi Arabia and the other Gulf countries — grew concerned about spillover and subsequently helped broker a political agreement that ushered Saleh from power in 2012 and handed over control to his deputy, then-Vice President Hadi.

In 2013, as part of the political deal that helped bring him into power, Hadi launched the National Dialogue Conference (NDC). The NDC forum was intended to create a unity government that incorporated Yemen's many disparate groups and tribal elements, including the Houthi rebels. Meanwhile, former President Saleh, instead of supporting his deputy, remained extremely powerful. He reached out to former allies and enemies — including the Houthis — in an effort to undermine President Hadi (Gardner 2015). Even now, Saleh retains considerable influence over segments of Yemen's security forces and has mobilized his troops to fight alongside the Houthis against the internationally recognized Government of Yemen and Saudi-led coalition.

### The Threat of Terrorism

Armed terrorist groups, particularly al-Qaeda in the Arabian Peninsula (AQAP) and the Islamic State of Iraq and al-Sham (ISIS), pose another major threat to Yemen's stability. The ongoing conflict creates a security vacuum in which these groups can expand their sphere of influence and gather and train recruits. AQAP is one of the world's most dangerous terrorist groups and focuses on both external and internal attacks. In 2011, the group seized

control of Abyan Governorate, declaring it an “Islamic Emirate”; it took government forces a year to root them out. AQAP also has conducted at least two attempted airline attacks — the so-called “underwear bomber” plot in 2009 and the cargo planes plot in 2010 — as well as the January 2015 attack in France against *Charlie Hebdo* magazine, which killed 12 people. Domestically, the group has claimed responsibility for a number of sensationalist and deadly attacks, including a suicide bomber in 2012 who killed over 120 soldiers and wounded 350. ISIS is also emerging as a force in Yemen, and has conducted a campaign of attacks on security and civilian targets. In March 2015, the group was responsible for the deadliest attack in Yemen’s history, a bombing of two mosques that killed 142 people and wounded more than 350. Both ISIS and al-Qaeda have attacked the Yemeni government (and its Saudi-led coalition allies), but their conservative Sunni ideology also places them in stark opposition to the Houthis and their Iranian backers. Nonetheless, the battle lines in Yemen are murky, and at least one report alleges sporadic incidents of al-Qaeda extremists and pro-government troops fighting side-by-side against their common Houthi enemy (BBC News 2016c).

## YEMEN’S HUMANITARIAN DISASTER

Yemen’s humanitarian crisis is multi-faceted, and the outlook is grim. Since March 2015, fighting between the government and the Houthi rebels has killed over 6,200 people, injured 29,600 individuals, and devastated the country’s infrastructure (UNOCHA 2016c). Yemen is wracked by high levels of food insecurity, and much of the population lacks basic health care, clean water and adequate sanitation services. Yemen’s economy has crashed, its infrastructure is damaged and traditional livelihoods such as agriculture have been decimated.

### Civilian Casualties and Displacement

Attacks against civilians and their neighbourhoods are widespread. Violence has impacted 20 of Yemen’s 22 governorates, and thousands of homes, schools, hospitals, markets, roads and bridges; other civilian structures have been damaged, destroyed, or taken over by militants (Human Rights Watch 2015a; UNOCHA 2015a; UNOCHA 2015c; UNOCHA 2015c). Both the Houthi rebels and Saudi-led coalition are responsible for indiscriminate attacks on heavily populated areas, according to reports by the United Nations, international human rights organizations and media outlets (Amnesty International 2015b; BBC News 2016b; Human Rights Watch 2015a; Human Rights Watch 2015b; UN Security Council [UNSC] 2016). The Saudi-led coalition has levelled countless private residences and civic buildings, including a rehabilitation centre for the blind (Oakford 2016; Human Rights Watch 2016). Houthi forces have shelled civilian neighbourhoods and denied residents access to food, water, fuel, medicine

and international aid in what may constitute “war crimes” (Human Rights Watch 2015b; UN News Centre 2015).

One airstrike in 2015 hit a wedding in Taiz Governorate, killing over 130 civilians, including women and children (Colville 2015). Another attack killed over 20 children as they lined up to collect drinking water (AlAhmad 2016). Such reports are common; children have been killed while playing soccer in the street or eating at home with families (Human Rights Watch 2015b). Local children have grown so accustomed to attacks that they play a game where they chant “1, 2, 3, Airstrike!” and hurl themselves on the ground, according to reports by an international aid worker (Kleijer 2015). In addition, various UN agencies have reported increasing numbers of children being conscripted as child soldiers (UNICEF 2015; UNOCHA 2015a; UNOCHA 2015c).

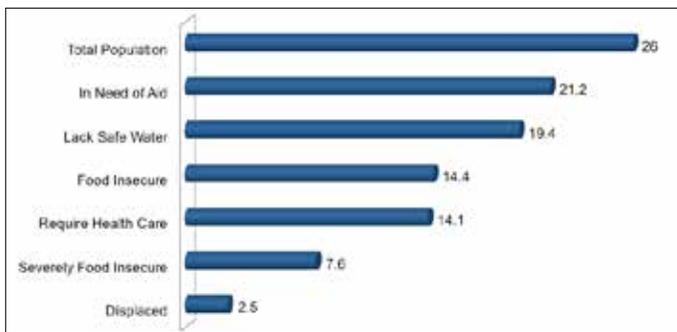
A disturbing number of reports of war crimes is emerging. In January 2016, a UN panel of experts provided the UNSC with a report detailing grave violations of humanitarian law by all parties in the conflict. The panel documented the Saudi-led coalition’s “widespread and systematic” targeting of civilians, including at least 119 sorties that targeted civilian or civilian objects, they reported use of cluster munitions in populated areas, and at least “three alleged cases of civilians fleeing residential bombings and being chased and shot at by helicopters” (UNSC 2016). Pro-Houthi/Saleh forces, according to the panel, also have systemically targeted civilians, used them as human shields, attacked internally displaced persons (IDPs) and refugees, and denied civilians access to food, water and medicine. In regard to the latter, as well as the Saudi-led coalition’s commercial blockade of the country, the panel concluded that “the denial of humanitarian assistance is constitutive of a war crime regardless of whether it occurs in an international or non-international armed conflict” (ibid.).

The conflict has displaced 2.5 million people — over a tenth of Yemen’s population — with figures continuing to rise (UNOCHA 2015f). The rise in IDPs has been exponential, soaring 650 percent from December 2014 (334,000). Yemen’s IDPs have no guarantee of safety, as many flee violence near their homes only to find themselves stranded in another area still rife with conflict. By the end of 2015, over 173,180 people had fled the country altogether, seeking better conditions elsewhere (UNHCR 2016c).

### Food and Fuel Crisis

The conflict has brought millions in Yemen to the brink of famine, according to the World Food Programme (WFP) (2016). At least 14.4 million people are food insecure, and 7.6 million people are *severely* food insecure (UNOCHA 2015a). Yemen also has one of the highest rates of child malnutrition in the world (ibid.).

**Figure 2: Yemen's Humanitarian Catastrophe**  
People in need (in millions)



Data Source: UNOCHA 2016d.

Food scarcity has resulted in steadily rising prices that are beyond the means of the average Yemeni consumer. According to UNOCHA, the average cost of a food basket containing one person's daily caloric needs in November 2015 was 170 percent higher than before the crisis (UNOCHA 2015e). Wheat, for example, is one of the country's main food staples and was on average over 53 percent more expensive in November 2015 (UNOCHA 2015f). Ongoing instability has also made food prices extremely volatile, making it difficult for families to adjust or plan. For example, the price of wheat in Taiz has fluctuated from between 20 percent higher to 104 percent higher than pre-crisis levels within a matter of weeks (Famine Early Warning Systems Network 2015).

A number of factors have exacerbated Yemen's food crisis, including a traditional dependence on food imports, indiscriminate strikes on markets and roads, and the Saudi-led coalition's naval blockade. Even before the conflict, Yemen relied on imports for 90 percent of its food needs (UNOCHA 2015c). In April 2015, the Saudi-led coalition began a de facto blockade of Yemeni ports after the United Nations imposed an arms embargo against the Houthi rebels. This move brought commercial shipments to a virtual standstill, severely depleting Yemen's food, fuel and medical supplies (Nichols 2015; Salisbury and Kerr 2015; UNOCHA 2015a). Air and artillery strikes by all parties reportedly have targeted local markets, trucks with food, roads and gas stations, limiting the ability to distribute what few supplies are available (UNOCHA 2015a; UN News Centre 2015; UNOCHA 2015f). Throughout 2015, sieges in governorates such as Aden, Al Dhali, Lahj and Taiz have also prevented food and humanitarian aid items from reaching affected populations (UN News Centre 2015).

Yemen's food shortage is closely related to the country's fuel shortages. Yemen relies on imports for 70 percent of its fuel needs, and prices have skyrocketed throughout 2015 as imports have decreased (UNOCHA 2015c). The WFP, in September 2015, reported that fuel on average had jumped 250 percent from pre-crisis levels; in Taiz, the price of diesel at one point was over 500 percent higher than before the

## Running out of Water

Even before the conflict, Yemen was one of the most water stressed countries in the world, and international hydrology experts warn that Yemen could be the first modern country to run out of usable water. Some estimates suggest this could occur within a decade (Heffez 2013; Whitehead 2015). One of the reasons for Yemen's water shortage is that the population is withdrawing renewable water resources (such as groundwater and surface water) at a far faster pace than they can be replenished (Al-Asbahi 2005; Fergusson 2015; Heffez 2013). However, this is a modern problem. Yemen in ancient times was famed for its agricultural fertility and water efficiency (Heffez 2013), leading the ancient Romans to dub it "Arabia Felix" which means "happy" or "fertile" Arabia.

Yemeni farmers have forgone traditional water conservation and irrigation methods in favour of deep irrigation wells that draw from a finite groundwater supply — a practice known as "groundwater mining." Yemen's agricultural sector uses 90 percent of the country's water resources, and its irrigation systems and urban pipe networks are notoriously inefficient, losing up to 60 percent of water through leaks or wasteful irrigation practices (Al-Asbahi 2005; Heffez 2013, Whitehead 2015).

The situation is further exacerbated by widespread cultivation of qat, a cash-crop and mild narcotic stimulant that is widely chewed by most of the population. Qat is extremely profitable for farmers, but is also extremely water intensive to grow. Some studies suggest that 40 percent of all of Yemen's freshwater is used to grow qat, and that one-third of all Yemenis are regular users (Fergusson 2015; Heffez 2013).

conflict (WFP 2015). Imports that make it past the naval blockade are sometimes stranded at the ports when there is not enough fuel to remove shipments from cargo ships or transport them to needy populations (UNOCHA 2015f). Access to cooking oil is limited and sporadic, and often there is not enough fuel to mill cereals. Many households are unfamiliar with how to cook or prepare whole grains and sometimes end up feeding it to livestock instead (Famine Early Warning Systems Network 2015; UNOCHA 2015f).

## Health Care Crisis

Yemen's health care crisis is equally as grim as its food crisis. The World Health Organization (WHO) concluded in December 2015 that the country's "health system has collapsed" and reached "catastrophic levels" (WHO 2015).

Approximately 14.1 million Yemenis require improved health services, with the injured, chronically ill, elderly, pregnant women and malnourished children most impacted (UNOCHA 2015g; WHO 2015). Yemen relies on imports for 100 percent of its medicine, and the same restrictions that have limited food and fuel imports have also severely drained the medical supplies (UNOCHA 2015c; UNOCHA 2015c; UNOCHA 2015e).

Air strikes and ongoing violence have destroyed numerous health care facilities, and many health care workers have fled the violence (Médecins Sans Frontières [MSF] 2015b). At least three clinics run by MSF have been destroyed by air strikes or missiles (Al Jazeera 2016; BBC News 2016b). Hospitals that remain open are crippled by fuel shortages, electricity blackouts and lack of oxygen or anesthetics for surgery; some do not even have running water (AlAhmad 2016; Cousins 2015; WHO 2015; UNOCHA 2015c; MSF 2015b). Hospitals are extremely overcrowded, and there are reports of patients who travel to clinics only to find themselves stranded outside until beds become available (UNOCHA 2015g). Many ambulances have been attacked or hijacked, and often Yemenis cannot reach medical facilities because of ongoing fighting, destroyed/blockaded roads, or because they do not have enough fuel for transportation (Cousins 2015; MSF 2015a; MSF 2015b; UNOCHA 2015a).

Yemen's health care crisis is exacerbated by a lack of clean water and inadequate sanitation facilities. The fuel shortage prevents water pumps and water trucks from providing potable water for drinking, cooking, cleaning and sewage treatment. As a result, a significant portion of the population is forced to use untreated water, which increases the risk of communicable diseases such as diarrhea, cholera, dengue fever, malaria and other illnesses (Oxfam 2015). An estimated 19.4 million people — 73 percent of the population — are affected (UNOCHA 2015a).

## Damage to Society and the Economy

The ongoing conflict has caused significant damage to Yemen's physical infrastructure, civil institutions and Yemeni livelihoods. One in four businesses has closed, and 70 percent have been forced to lay off half of their workforce (UNOCHA 2016b). Airstrikes and violent clashes have destroyed key physical infrastructure such as roads, bridges and ports. Strikes against the Al-Hudaydah and Aden ports are particularly significant, as together they had handled over 90 percent of Yemen's imports (UNOCHA 2015c). The Port of Al-Hudaydah was struck in August 2015, and four of the five cranes used to offload cargo from container vessels were damaged in the attack, significantly diminishing the port's ability to process imports (Famine Early Warning Systems Network 2016; UNOCHA 2015c). One in four Yemeni schools has been shut down; many are damaged, commandeered by

combatants, or are being used to host IDPs (UNOCHA 2015c). Saudi-led coalition air strikes have also taken out portions of the country's power grid, causing prolonged outages (Snyder 2015).

Many traditional Yemeni livelihoods have been decimated by the conflict. Before the crisis escalated, agriculture employed over 50 percent of the Yemeni workforce (UNOCHA 2015c). The conflict has damaged key agricultural infrastructure, and fuel shortages have prevented farmers from using irrigation pumps and crop machinery (UNOCHA 2015e). Oil and gas production — which the Yemeni government almost completely depended on for revenue — has been all but suspended, and international oil companies have pulled out (PennEnergy 2015; UNOCHA 2016b; World Bank 2015). The United Nations reports that the conflict, blockade and presence of foreign navy vessels have decimated the fishing industry. At least 65 percent of Yemeni fishermen have lost their livelihood, as well as those employed in packing, storage, and transportation of fish products (UNOCHA 2015e).

Air strikes have damaged a number of significant cultural and historical sites. Strikes have caused irreparable damage to the medieval Old City of Sana'a, a colourful neighbourhood of over 6,000 multi-storied buildings all built before the eleventh century. Strikes have also damaged the Great Dam of Marib — an eighth century BC archeological marvel. Both are UNESCO World Heritage sites (Porter 2015).

## THE NEXT REFUGEE CRISIS?

The number of refugees fleeing Yemen is increasing dramatically as the conflict wears on and Yemen is in serious risk of becoming the world's next Syrian refugee crisis. In its *Global Humanitarian Overview 2016*, UNOCHA assessed that "Yemen is a flashpoint for migration worldwide" (UNOCHA 2016a). According to UNHCR (2016b), over 173,180 people had fled Yemen by February 2016, an increase of 73,000 over the past five months. Many migrants are from the most vulnerable segments of the population: unaccompanied children, the elderly, the disabled, or the sick (Khelifi 2016; UNHCR 2015b). Refugee estimates are undoubtedly on the low end, as they only account for those willing to register with the United Nations. Thousands of refugees refuse to do so, fearing they could lose their freedom or be forcibly returned to Yemen (UNHCR 2015b). Yemen's 2.5 million IDPs often flee one conflict area only to find themselves stranded in another, suggesting a potential pool of millions who may ultimately decide to leave Yemen altogether. Many refugees have so far remained within the region, but interest in travelling onward to the West is high. The proximity of refugees from Yemen to established migration routes suggests it is only a matter of time before they begin to travel toward Europe. The United Nations warns that the potential for refugee flows from Yemen toward Europe "cannot be ignored,"

and urges immediate and comprehensive assistance to prevent onward movement of refugees (ibid.).

### From the Frying Pan into the Fire

Many Yemeni refugees have fled to the Horn of Africa — Djibouti, Eritrea, Ethiopia and Somalia. At the closest point, Djibouti is only 32 kilometres from Yemen, but the boat ride is extremely hazardous and many migrants face the same sort of dangers that Syrian refugees face when crossing the Mediterranean. The journey from Yemen takes more than 20 hours, and boats are usually overcrowded, rickety and at risk of capsizing (Fakih 2015). In fact, the name for the strait between Yemen and Djibouti, the Bab-el-Mandeb, translates to “Gate of Tears,” a name purportedly derived from legends warning about the dangers of navigating its waters.

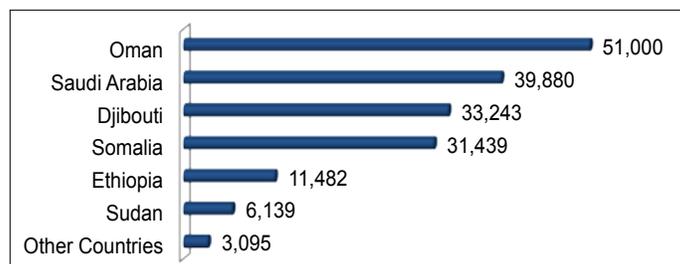


Yemen's proximity to the Horn of Africa.

Countries in the Horn of Africa have largely been welcoming of refugees. However, these countries face their own development challenges, such as severe droughts, food crises, high unemployment and violent conflicts. Host country resources are enormously stretched, and they often struggle to deal with the refugees that they already have. Ironically, these countries — particularly Somalia, Eritrea and Sudan — have had a number of their own citizens leave and become refugees. Before the conflict escalated, Yemen hosted approximately 246,000 refugees from the region, primarily from Somalia (UNHCR 2015a). Now, flows have been reversed, and Somalia has become one of the primary destinations for refugees from Yemen, along with Djibouti, Ethiopia and Sudan.

Refugees at the Obock and Markazi refugee camps in Djibouti face extremely difficult conditions: overcrowded facilities, inadequate shelter, poverty, unemployment, no electricity, expensive or insufficient food, risk of sexual assault, extreme weather conditions, and wild animals and pests invading their living spaces (UNHCR 2015b; Wood 2015). Those who refuse to register with international aid organizations often face the worst conditions, living on the fringe of society with no documentation, health care, education, or employment options. Many refugees fail to find the opportunities they so desperately sought,

**Figure 3: Destination of Refugees from Yemen (people in millions)**



Data Source: UNHCR 2016b.

and consequently view their stay in the Horn of Africa as temporary. In interviews, refugees say they hope to travel onward to the West or other countries (UNHCR 2015b; Wood 2015). One UNHCR (2015b) assessment conducted of Yemenis in Ethiopia revealed “a widespread interest and knowledge of smuggling routes, and asylum procedures in Europe.”

Large numbers of Yemeni refugees also flee north to other Gulf countries, mainly Saudi Arabia and Oman, which together host approximately 90,000 Yemenis (UNHCR 2016c). So far, the Gulf countries largely have been accepting of Yemeni refugees. Saudi Arabia grants six-month visas, and overstays are generally tolerated (UNHCR 2015b). However, traditional attitudes in Saudi Arabia often reflect cultural prejudices against third country national workers, and stories of mistreatment, abuse and exploitation are frequent. In addition, new arrivals to Saudi Arabia and Oman are facing increasing restrictions (UNHCR 2015b), suggesting open attitudes may change as the number of refugees rises. New refugees may need to look elsewhere for asylum.

### Nearby Established Migration Routes to Europe

As their numbers grow, future refugees from Yemen will be able to reach Europe using well-travelled migration routes through Africa. Such routes run across Sudan and the Sahara, up into Libya, and then across the Mediterranean (Kuschminder, de Bresser and Siegel 2015; Laub 2015). Tens of thousands of Eritrean refugees have used this route — the United Nations estimates that as of November 2015 there were nearly 100,000 Eritrean refugees or asylum seekers in the European Union, and Eritreans in 2014 made up the second largest bloc of migrants to Europe, after Syrians (Frontext 2016; Laub 2015). The route from Libya across the Mediterranean — known as the Central Mediterranean Route — was used by over 350,000 migrants from the Horn of Africa and western Africa between 2013 and 2015 (Frontext 2016). This route is considered the most dangerous route across the Mediterranean, accounting for 77 percent of deaths in 2015 (Fraser 2016). In just one accident, over 800 migrants died when their ship ran

aground in April 2015 (Bonomolo and Kirchgaessner 2015). Nonetheless, migrant flows continue, providing a very established pathway that refugees from Yemen may tap into.

Only a few thousand Yemenis have used this route so far, but it is likely to grow in popularity as the number of success stories increases. Abiy Worku of the Norwegian Refugee Council noted, “once people hear these stories — a group of people who have made it — that will be encouragement for others. It can happen any day. If this news arrives back home people will start taking that route” (cited in Mojalli and Dyke 2015). A study by the Migration Policy Institute in Washington, DC, described how social media plays a huge factor in increasing migration trends: “Some individuals who had previously resisted leaving may feel emboldened by news of their compatriots having successfully arrived in Europe...Social media enables these ‘success’ stories to spread instantaneously, along with tips on how to navigate the journey” (Banulescu-Bogdan and Fratzke 2015).

The number of Yemeni refugees is increasing at a rate similar to that seen in the Syria conflict. If the world’s lack of attention allows this trajectory to reach Syria-like levels, Europe will undoubtedly look to the rest of the world — including Canada and the United States — to share in this new refugee burden. A new flux of refugees will only compound domestic concerns about security, extremism, radicalization and humanitarian obligations. Also, surges in refugee numbers almost certainly will exacerbate tensions within the European Union and international community, adding to existing disagreements about how to deal with the influx of Syrian and Iraqi refugees.

## SUPPORT URGENTLY NEEDED, BEFORE IT’S TOO LATE

### Severe Funding Shortfalls

Increased awareness and attention to the conflict in Yemen is critical in addressing the humanitarian crisis before it erupts into the world’s next full-blown refugee crisis. Syria’s refugee crisis provides an excellent example. Syria, after one year of civil war — roughly the same time frame that Yemen is at now — had generated 100,000 refugees. Five years later, this ballooned to 4.7 million registered refugees (UNHCR 2016b). The trajectory for Yemen could be much the same. The UNHCR has urged immediate and comprehensive humanitarian measures in Yemen, deeming them critical to forestalling a potential refugee crisis (UNHCR 2015b). The opportunity to address the next potential refugee crisis is now, before it starts.

At the crux of the issue is that the United Nations, and other humanitarian partners operating in Yemen, are severely underfunded. The revised 2015 Yemen Humanitarian Response Plan determined that the United Nations and

its partners required US\$1.6 billion to address critical and immediate humanitarian services, half of which was earmarked for food security and agricultural aid (UNOCHA 2015b). However, donors, by the end of 2015, had only met just over half — US\$834 million — of this target (UNOCHA 2015f). This left severe gaps in aid organizations’ ability to provide food, medical protection, water, sanitation, shelter, education and other critical services (UNOCHA 2015f; 2015). The United Arab Emirates and Saudi Arabia, despite scathing criticism of human rights records, are the largest donors to Yemen, together providing over 42 percent of all humanitarian aid given to Yemen last year (Financial Tracking Service 2016c). The problem is only growing worse; the recently released 2016 *Yemen Humanitarian Response Plan* increased the amount of humanitarian aid needed to US\$1.8 billion, most of which is targeted toward life-saving or protection activities that cannot be delayed without “immediate risk to lives” (UNOCHA 2016d).

## Supporting Refugee Host Countries

Neighbouring countries — especially those in the Horn of Africa — also have limited resources to help absorb refugees from Yemen. To address this concern, UNHCR, the International Organization for Migration (IOM), and eight other humanitarian organizations combined respective country plans of Djibouti, Ethiopia, Somalia and Sudan into a single *Regional Refugee and Migrant Response Plan* (RRMRP). The RRMRP identifies a need of over US\$94 million to provide services to populations in throughout 2016 (UNHCR 2015b). International support and funding for this effort could help improve living conditions and quality of life to the point where refugees are able to live with dignity and build lives within the region.

## Pay Now or Pay Later

The amount of humanitarian aid requested by the United Nations is quite low when compared to international security, defence, immigration or humanitarian budgets. Germany estimates that housing new asylum seekers will cost the country approximately €15 billion in 2016 (Thomas 2015). The European Union has committed almost €10 billion in funding for 2016 to address the current refugee crisis (Stearns 2015). Turkey allegedly has spent US\$7.6 billion caring for Syrian refugees (Reuters 2015). The United States alone could have funded 97 percent of Yemen’s humanitarian needs in 2015, if it had matched the amount (US\$1.56 billion) it individually provided to the Syrian humanitarian crisis in 2015 (Financial Tracking Service 2016b). A proactive approach that appropriately weighs the severity of Yemen’s humanitarian crisis — before it spirals into a refugee crisis — will be far more cost effective in the long run.

**Figure 4: Comparing Aid Levels between the Yemen and Syria Crises**



Data Source: Financial Tracking Service 2016a.

## Reaching a Political Solution

The international community has several other policy options and opportunities to help reduce violence against civilians and improve flows of humanitarian aid.

An independent, international inquiry into alleged human rights violations by all parties would help dispel criticism that the international community ignores violations by the Saudi-led coalition and focuses only on those by the Houthis (Amnesty International 2015a; Black 2016; Herrmann 2015; Norton 2016). This inquiry would:

- help the international community better enforce accountability and determine consequences for violators, such as additional sanctions, other diplomatic approaches, or even prosecution; and
- provide Western governments — in particular the United States, the United Kingdom, the European Union and Canada — with credible, impartial information they can use when responding to domestic criticism regarding arms sales and military cooperation with Saudi Arabia and other coalition allies, as well as provide leverage when pressuring the coalition to cease attacks against civilians and civilian objects.

Continuing UN-brokered peace talks is crucial to mitigating Yemen's humanitarian disaster, forging peace, and ensuring that the displaced can, ultimately, return home. The first round of talks in December 2015 broke down after ceasefire violations, but the United Nations reports that they made significant progress and expressed optimism for future talks. The international community has several policy options it can use to promote success in future negotiations:

- Both sides, in December 2015, agreed to “allow safe, rapid and unhindered access for humanitarian supplies,” which allowed humanitarian actors to

deliver aid, conduct needs assessments, and monitor projects (Al Jazeera 2015; UN 2015). International attention on Yemen is critical to ensuring sustained pressure on all parties to abide by this pledge.

- The second round of peace talks has been repeatedly delayed, probably in part due to heightened Saudi-Iran tensions in January 2016 (Bayoumy and Ghobari 2016). Western arms agreements with Saudi Arabia and Iran's emerging position on the global market provide points of leverage that can be used to pressure both countries to avoid inflammatory rhetoric about the other's activities in Yemen and to publicly offer support for peace talks.
- The international community should ensure that no parties — including Saudi Arabia and Iran — conflate negotiations in Yemen with peace talks on Syria, so that Yemen does not become a bargaining chip used by both sides.
- The international community must have realistic expectations about what a final political resolution in Yemen may look like. Yemen's history of stark internal divisions means that a cohesive, strongly-centralized Yemeni government may prove unrealistic and/or untenable (Day 2015). Setting too-high expectations at the outset could doom negotiations before they even begin.

## CONCLUSION

The humanitarian situation in Yemen is catastrophic and deteriorating by the day — and much of the world is looking the other way. The number of refugees is steadily rising, and they will inevitably start making their way to Europe and the West. As has been the case with the Syrian refugee crisis, an influx of hundreds of thousands of refugees almost certainly will exacerbate international and domestic tensions. The international community has an urgent, timely opportunity to address the next major humanitarian and refugee crisis before it starts, but aid and refugee organizations are sorely underfunded and under-resourced. An influx of troops and weapons is not the answer. International support for an impartial inquiry into human rights violations and sustained support for UN-sponsored peace talks is critical. However, unless the international community pressures all parties in the conflict — including Saudi Arabia and Iran — into playing a constructive role in negotiations and facilitating the movement of humanitarian aid — violence will continue and the humanitarian disaster will escalate.

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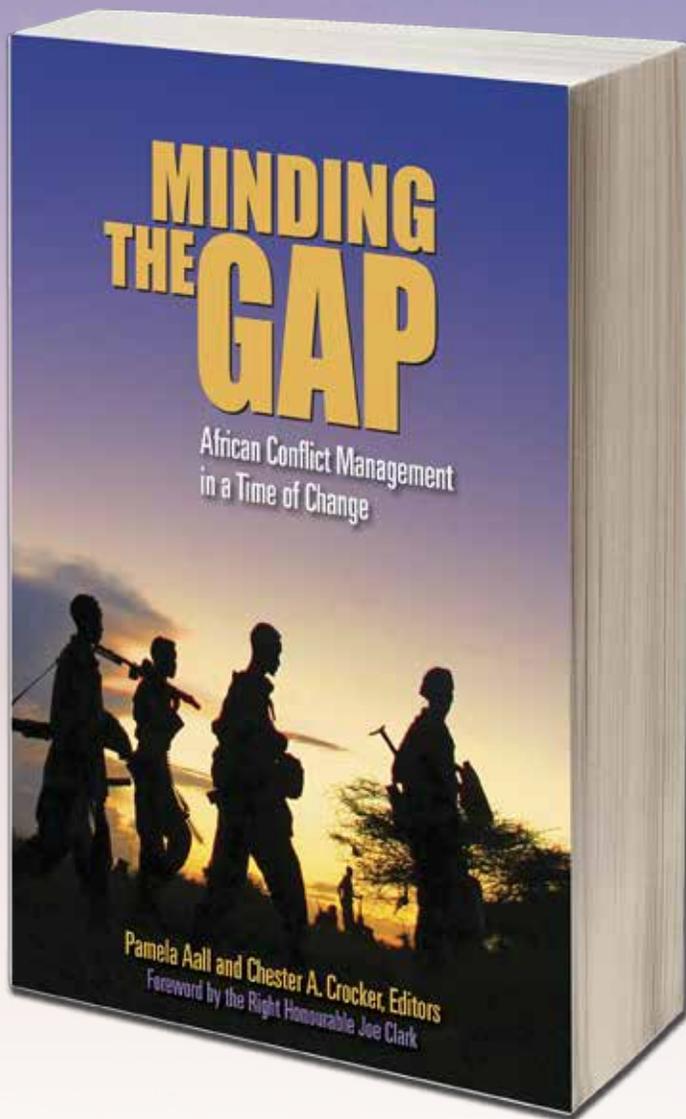
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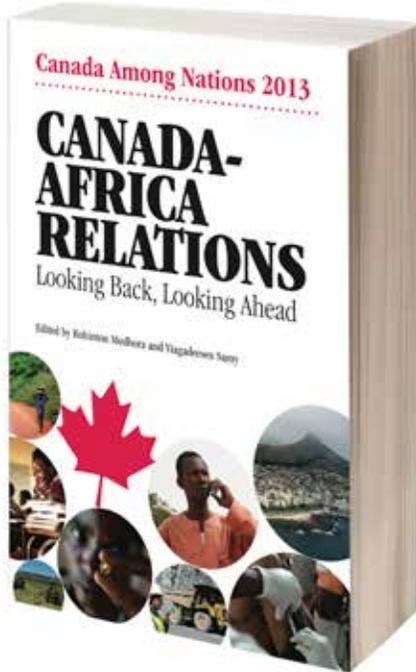
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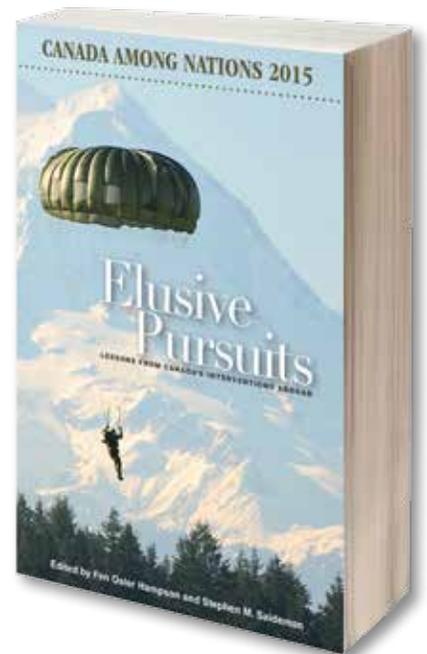
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