

# Aid and Conflict: Pitfalls in Yemen

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## THE ISSUE

*Aid organizations struggle to meet the staggering humanitarian needs in Yemen, but they increasingly understand how aid delivery can complicate or even prolong a humanitarian crisis in the midst of war. Armies, militias, and war profiteers instrumentalize aid to enhance their own interests, either indifferent or hostile to the interests of civilian populations. Aid providers are not always well-situated to understand how their actions affect broader conflicts, but they understand that they do. While they resist privileging peacemaking over urgent relief, they also are eager to ensure their actions do not draw out the war and the suffering that flows from it.*

**N**o two countries have been as generous to Yemen in the last year as Saudi Arabia and the United Arab Emirates, which pledged billions of dollars in aid to the poor and embattled country on the tip of the Arabian Peninsula. At the same time, those two countries are accused of causing much of Yemen's current misery, as their battle against Houthi rebels drives tens of thousands from their homes, obstructs trade, and has caused thousands of civilian casualties.

The current struggle for the control of Yemen is not only a complex humanitarian emergency in the midst of war, but it is a complex humanitarian emergency that is a consequence of war. Yemen's antagonists are battling for control of the country, and they are using whatever tools are at hand in order to advance their interests. In the Yemen context, where scarce food and fuel boost prices and money is in short supply, aid invariably becomes part of the equation of the conflict. It does so in several ways.

First, local political actors battle for the control of resources to distribute, to reward their supporters and to add to

their own coffers. Every humanitarian organization needs an array of local partners. Who those partners are, and what ties they have to combatants, is not always clear. Humanitarians cannot distribute supplies in areas controlled by one of the many forces in Yemen without relying in some way on that force's allies—in part because the forces in control of an area would encumber non-favored entities to ensure that its own networks benefit. Armed networks also charge transit or distribution fees, putting them somewhere between taxes and bribes. Distributing aid not only enriches the networks economically, but it also boosts their political sway by putting their allies in control of resources. Providing relief supplies aids the combatants in another way: the provision of resources from the outside frees up more local resources for fighting.

Second, outside donors can use aid to further political goals with the population. Directing resources to government-controlled areas and denying them to those controlled by the Houthis, for example, essentially besieges Houthi areas and holds the civilian population hostage. Ironically, doing so may further entrench the Houthis by eliminating



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alternative channels for civilians to obtain food, fuel, and water. In addition, showering resources on areas recently liberated from Houthi control may be intended to tempt Yemenis to expel the Houthis rather than meet the areas of greatest humanitarian need.

Yemen presents a series of wicked problems, but one of the most difficult is the best way to distribute aid. When humanitarian and political crises are intertwined, there is no way to neatly separate the two. Humanitarians are committed to providing relief from suffering, yet they

increasingly understand that there are circumstances in which providing that relief may actually prolong the conflict and increase overall suffering. Humanitarians should not see themselves as agents of those working to solve political problems, but they must be aware of and be sensitive to the effects of their actions on the surrounding conflict.

There is no denying the scale and scope of assistance that the Saudi-led coalition (SLC) has promised to Yemen. The Yemen Comprehensive Humanitarian Operations Plan pledges \$1.5 billion in new funding to the UN's 2018 Yemen Humanitarian Response Plan, commits \$30-40 million for port expansion, and an additional \$20-30 million to improve roads.<sup>1</sup> The King Salman Humanitarian Aid and Relief Centre also agreed to provide 900,000 liters of fuel for hospitals throughout Yemen.<sup>2</sup> The United Arab Emirates claims it has donated almost \$4 billion to Yemen over the last three years, and states that the Emirates Red Crescent has provided 35,000 tons of food and supplies since 2017.<sup>3</sup> Kuwait has also made significant pledges this year, totaling \$172.4 million, just slightly behind the U.S. pledge of \$190.1 million.<sup>4</sup>



*A Houthi soldier walks next to humanitarian aid given by the Russian humanitarian relief mission on the outskirts of the capital Sana'a on March 16, 2017.*

Source: Mohammed Huwais/AFP/Getty Images

And yet, despite its scope, the SLC has been sharply criticized for using its assistance to further its war aims. The SLC, for example, has continued to discourage trade through the Houthi-controlled port of Hodeidah, which supplies approximately 70 percent of Yemen's food and medicine.<sup>5</sup> Rerouting through the Emirati-controlled port of Aden not only overburdens a port with limited capacity and moves shipments further from their intended targets, but also subjects shipments to multiple checkpoints controlled by combatants, any of which may seek to extort funds to ensure safe passage. A leading humanitarian agency reported in April 2018 that it encountered no fewer than 70 checkpoints on the 300-mile trip from Aden to Sana'a, transforming a formerly straightforward journey into an odyssey.<sup>6</sup>

The SLC has also helped build up the inland city of Ma'rib, formerly something of a backwater with a long tradition of rebellion in retribution for government neglect. Now, Ma'rib is a boomtown hosting General Ali Mohsen al-Ahmar, a veteran soldier and controversial political figure who has expertly navigated Yemen's shifting political sands and maintains close ties with the SLC.

The SLC coalition is not the only party using aid to further its aims. The Houthis reportedly sought to block assistance from reaching internally displaced persons (IDPs) who fled

Hodeidah prior to the SLC's assault in an attempt to discourage others from following. The goal was to retain a large civilian population in the city as a sort of "human shield" to prevent an SLC assault.<sup>7</sup> The Houthis have also used threats of violence to discourage relief organizations from working in government-controlled areas, and they have sought to hold areas hostage in order to ensure their supporters are rewarded. One aid worker recently reported that the Houthis blocked an assessment team from understanding the dire needs of a larger area unless immediate assistance was given to nearby Houthi allies without any assessment being performed. After a standoff of several days, that aid was delivered.<sup>8</sup>

Humanitarians in Yemen face a number of obstacles. Many are endemic to Yemen itself without being unique to it—poor

infrastructure, uneven local capacity, and widespread corruption—and they all contributed to Yemen's poverty before war broke out. Yet, warfare makes these obstacles larger and more complex. For many years, Yemen has been the poorest country in the Arab world, but the war has plunged many of Yemen's citizens into despair. Today, the United Nations estimates that 22 million Yemenis out of 27 million require assistance, and 8.4 million Yemenis are severely food insecure and at risk of starvation.<sup>9</sup> Compounding the crisis, the UN reported in January 2018 that 1.25 million Yemeni civil servants had not been regularly paid in more than a year, crippling public services and immiserating the families of those employees.<sup>10</sup> As the health care system crumbled, epidemics ravaged the country. Between April 2017 and July 2018, there were over a million suspected cholera cases and more than 2,300 associated deaths.<sup>11</sup>

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*Yemenis drop off boxes of humanitarian aid provided by the Emirati Red Crescent in the coastal town of Mujailis, south of the city of Hodeidah, on June 6, 2018.*

Source: Nabil Hassan/AFP/Getty Images

Increasingly, in the Yemen conflict and other humanitarian emergencies embedded in—and resulting from—conflict, humanitarians discuss the importance of being “conflict sensitive.” The concept of conflict sensitivity appears to have originated with people working on conflict prevention and peacebuilding, who saw the entry of humanitarian aid adversely affecting work they did in conflict zones. While many aspire to resolve conflict and relieve suffering simultaneously, under certain circumstances some argue that they necessarily must be sequenced. Conflict sensitivity articulates the tension that can emerge over which priority should be privileged: the longer-term conflict prevention and peacebuilding side, or the more immediate humanitarian relief side.

In Yemen and elsewhere, there are a number of constraints on implementing conflict-sensitive interventions. One is urgency. NGOs often operate under extreme constraints of time and money. Surrounded by starvation and illness, taking time and resources to analyze the possible second- and third-order effects of efforts to save lives seems unaffordable, unrealistic, or both.<sup>12</sup> In addition, the imperative of worker safety in dangerous environments places a very real and immediate imperative on humanitarians’ accommodation with combatants, at the expense of a more theoretical assessment of long-term impacts of different courses of action.

Second is capacity. Few aid organizations are structured to perform detailed conflict analysis, and they lack the funds and time to be able to bring in those with the

requisite expertise. In some cases, such people may either not exist or be unavailable. After all, poor and conflict-prone countries like Yemen—and authoritarian ones like Syria and Iraq—rarely lend themselves to fostering large communities of foreign experts. International NGOs’ need for rapid deployment, combined with high rates of staff turnover, means that they often struggle to develop and sustain cadres with deep knowledge of the affected countries. It even can be hard to maintain staffs with deep knowledge of the NGO itself.

Local staff represent both an opportunity and a challenge. While they play a critical role in executing humanitarian operations around the world and are a font of local knowledge,

they may also bring their own allegiances and affiliations. Some of these ties may take some time to become visible to aid organizations, if they ever do, but they often are more apparent to communities in the conflict zone itself. It can take significant time for local staff to earn the full trust of international organizations, and NGO staff turnover can lengthen that process.<sup>13</sup>

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A third constraint is donor accountability. Donors understandably insist on stringent reporting and monitoring requirements that make complete sense in capital cities, but they may be either impractical or even counterproductive in the midst of conflict zones. In addition, donors’ political stances can impose unintentional—or sometimes intentional—limits on providing humanitarian assistance.

Yemen is not an isolated case; around the world, complex humanitarian emergencies are becoming more common. Civil wars and the concomitant struggle for money and power plunge already vulnerable populations into calamity,

and the economic and political crises and the humanitarian crisis feed off of each other. Humanitarian operations during the Syrian conflict provide vivid demonstrations of aid's intentional and unintentional political impact. In Syria, researchers found that aid delivery inadvertently disrupted local community relationships, caused local conflicts, and undermined local markets.<sup>14</sup> Partnerships with international organizations and funders so politicized some Syrian civil society organizations as to marginalize their potential role in Syria's political transition. NGO workers in Syria witnessed this but were reluctant to admit to international partners and donors that aid was helping to fuel the war economy for fear of negative repercussions.<sup>15</sup>

Each conflict has its own dynamic, and conflict sensitivity for donors manifests itself differently. While Syria and Yemen are both in civil war, for example, the circumstances are profoundly different. The United Nations stopped estimating the deaths in Syria's conflict after they topped 500,000; while estimates in Yemen range from 10,000 to upwards of 50,000.<sup>16</sup> Yemen's conflict broke out in a country that was far more fragile than Syria, and it has plunged millions of Yemenis who were already vulnerable into crisis. If Syria can be seen as a political crisis with humanitarian consequences, Yemen is a humanitarian crisis with political causes.

Most governments and humanitarian organizations argue that aid must flow unimpeded to Yemen, irrespective of negotiations over Yemen's future. Bolstering the Houthis through such assistance may not be desirable, but it is probably unavoidable. Others, especially regional governments, are sympathetic to the idea that the Houthis need to be weakened in order to force them to compromise over their future in Yemen. Designing aid operations with the express purpose of weakening the Houthis—or even with the express purpose of not strengthening them—has immediate consequences for civilian populations.

There is another practical obstacle as well. As in every conflict, Yemen has given birth to a cadre of war profiteers who are indifferent to political outcomes and will adapt to any circumstance in the pursuit of money. Their coin is overcoming scarcity, whether it be food or medicine or weapons. Their interest is in the prolongation of conflict, and they are an enduring obstacle to the efforts of the conflict resolution and humanitarian assistance communities alike. They will also need to be incorporated into any effort to resolve the humanitarian crisis in Yemen. Some will have to be weakened, and some will have to be co-opted.

In the most optimistic case, experience with relief work will bolster civil society groups in Yemen, paving the way for a stronger post-conflict environment. Yet, combatants' efforts to entwine themselves in relief work and the money flowing from it threaten to deepen the fault lines in Yemeni society.

We are far from understanding what the best way is to supply aid to a suffering population while preventing combatants from using some of that aid to advance their narrow interests and prolong the conflict. Yemen is a particularly vivid example of how important it is to make progress in this area. ■

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