

How COVID-19 Affects Complex Conflicts: War and Postwar Implications in Yemen

MOHAMMED SINAN SIYECH



The civil war in Yemen has now been raging for a full five years with the complicated, multi actor conflict taking place across multiple geographical regions of the nation. In the north, Houthi rebels (supported by Iran) have been fighting the official government of Yemen, led by Abd-Rabbo Mansour Hadi and propped up by a Saudi Arabia led coalition.¹ In the South, the Hadi government has also been squaring up to the Southern Transitional Council (STC) backed by the UAE government, which has been demanding secession. To make matters worse, the South is also a traditional base of Al Qaeda in the Arabian Peninsula (AQAP), one of its strongest affiliates across the world.²

Given an already run-down economy, the civil war has exacted punishing financial tolls on Yemen creating multiple humanitarian challenges. This includes a breakdown of the medical system, massive internal displacement, a death toll exceeding one million and outbreaks of diseases such as cholera and diphtheria, among others.³

The arrival of COVID-19, exactly five years after the conflict began in March-April 2015, has only worsened the situation. To date, the virus has infected close to 20 million people and killed almost a million individuals

globally, whilst its effects have decimated even prospering economies such as those of Saudi Arabia and the UAE.⁴ Unsurprisingly, its presence in Yemen has only exacerbated all the problems caused by the civil war. The brief will elaborate further on the effects of the pandemic on the Yemeni conflict.

War and Epidemics – Regular Associates

The history of human conflict is strewn with examples of epidemics and wars discussed alongside one another. Given the unsanitary conditions, food and water shortages, lack of medical hygiene in treating wounded soldiers and cramped living conditions, epidemics have normally been a by-product of wars and have often been responsible for a higher death toll than the actual war itself. For example, America lost seven times as many soldiers to diseases than to its opponents in the 19th century Mexican war.⁵ Similarly, more than a million Yemenis have been affected by cholera, diphtheria, dengue and other diseases since the outbreak of war in 2015.⁶

In some historical situations, epidemics changed the course of an ongoing war, such as the Peloponnesian war of 431–404 BC: Although the Athenians had secured their resources and food while inflicting continuous defeats on their opponents, the Spartans, an

To date, the virus has infected close to 20 million people and killed almost a million individuals globally, whilst its effects have decimated even prospering economies such as those of Saudi Arabia and the UAE

outbreak of disease caused the Athenians to rethink their positions and seek peaceful negotiations.⁷ Similarly, various colonial powers were able to overthrow many populations in Southern America primarily due to the diseases they brought with them, which wiped out local civilizations such as the Mayans and Incas.⁸

It is no wonder then, that current wars have also faced the problems of groups taking advantage of the confusion to enhance their credentials as a strong organization. For example, in countries like Iraq and Nigeria, groups such as the Islamic State and Boko Haram have ramped up their attacks.⁹ This is in response to the diversion of military resources to deal with the pandemic. Other groups, such as the Taliban, have made efforts to instill precautionary measures in the absence of government services, thereby increasing their social currency among local populations.¹⁰ Simultaneously, they have also engaged in information warfare to present themselves as positive actors who would benefit their populations.

Yemen and COVID-19

The timeline of COVID-19 in Yemen begins officially in April 2020 when the first known case was imported into the nation. Houthi rebels, who controlled much of the northern part of the country, refused to release figures regarding infections in order to maintain troop morale as well as to avoid looking incompetent in the eyes of the populations under Houthi control.¹¹

As such, while Yemen is among the countries with the lowest official number of infections, interviews with various doctors, humanitarian workers and epidemiologists have revealed that the rate of community spread is quite high. Even more problematic is the high death rate, with some estimating it to be as much as 30%.¹² This is due to the atrocious medical system, whereby even those with a fever and common cold are at the risk of dying due to the lack of basic medicines in the country.¹³

A few salient features mark the entry of COVID-19 into the conflict and are affecting the current situation as well as the looming postwar reconstruction efforts. The first was a Saudi led coalition effort to impose a 2-week ceasefire in April due to the rising number of infections. However, this was futile since the Houthis immediately began violating the ceasefire,¹⁴ leading to the continued bombing of locations by the Saudi coalition in various parts of Yemen and resulting in yet more civilian casualties – a mainstay of the Saudi led coalition's efforts in the nation. As such, fighting has continued relentlessly across the country with the Houthis slowly gaining ground.¹⁵

Against this backdrop, it is expected that the Saudi government will have to review its expenditure on the war in Yemen

While it was initially expected that the virus would bring respite from the ravages of the war, such expectations were soon shattered, but since the war is being fought between a local and an international force, there are additional implications. Specifically, in the case of Saudi Arabia which has been acutely affected by the plunge in oil prices and the depleting reserves of its sovereign wealth fund.¹⁶ Against this backdrop, it is expected that the Saudi government will have to review its expenditure on the war in Yemen – an expense already considered excessive given that operations in Yemen were meant to finish in a few weeks as opposed to the five years that they have dragged on for.¹⁷

The Houthis, on the other hand, have been far more comfortable financially given their advances on oil fields across Yemen which have boosted, their fortunes. Indeed, even though the Houthis supporter Iran has been hit financially by the pandemic, it is not as invested in the war as Saudi Arabia and spends more efficiently as opposed to its rival.¹⁸ Moreover, financial support sent to Yemen for humanitarian purposes has largely been controlled by the Houthis, thereby empowering them further.¹⁹ This

dynamic had already put Saudi Arabia at a disadvantage before the pandemic came into play.²⁰ With the current situation, it is expected that Saudi Arabia's capacity to engage in the war will only further reduce.

The virus has also led to further internal displacement of Yemenis causing people to migrate to areas where the virus has not yet been reported.²¹ This could have the result of the virus spreading further into rural areas where the health infrastructure is even more chaotic.

Ultimately though, it is not immediately clear which party (i.e. the Houthis or those fighting them) will gain an advantage on the ground due to the virus. Although the lack of reliable numbers and poor reporting makes predictions difficult, it can be assumed that since the Houthis are in power, they could ensure that treatment and precautions are undertaken by their sympathizers, as opposed to their enemies, thereby tipping the scales in their favor.²² Whether this equation remains the same through the course of the war however, remains to be seen.

The scale of the internal displacements, while already high, has multiplied further, leading to a greater burden on parties trying to reconstruct the demographics affected by the conflict

Postwar Implications

Perhaps more than the war itself, the pandemic will have wider ranging implications for postwar efforts in Yemen:

- Firstly, the scale of the internal displacements, while already high, has multiplied further, leading to a greater burden on parties trying to reconstruct the demographics affected by the conflict. The amount of money spent to rehabilitate displaced families will cut into the pool of money available for aid once the war ends.
- Secondly, COVID-19 has also affected the medical systems across the country leading to total breakdowns in healthcare and a loss of doctors and medical personnel.²³ While war related injuries were mainly related to other groups such as civilians and soldiers, doctors were not among the victims. However, given the infectiousness of the virus, COVID-19 victims also end up infecting doctors who are unable to use Personal Protective Equipment (PPE) due to shortages.²⁴ This reduces the pool of doctors and medical personnel who are essential building blocks in any postwar society.
- Thirdly, another way that the pandemic will affect Yemen's war and post-conflict recovery efforts is through the loss of remittance coming from Gulf nations. More than 10% of all Yemenis rely on remittances for income; a pool which has dried up by 80% since the pandemic began in January 2020.²⁵ As such, not only will Yemenis bear the burden of this financial loss, but many will also begin to return to the country due to job losses elsewhere, further increasing the number of unemployed people in the country. This is an ominous issue due to the potential for educated, unemployed individuals to engage in violence if the circumstances are ripe – as is often so in a (post) war zone.

Additionally, the loss of external financial support will not only be limited to Yemeni nationals abroad. Unfortunately, aid agencies and external donors such as the richer Gulf countries will be too busy working through their own recoveries to be able to concentrate on foreign aid. Indeed, more than 10,000 medical workers in Yemen who were being paid by the UN have lost access to funds given the dire situation that the UN finds itself in.²⁶ Such circumstances will severely hamper the rehabilitation efforts in Yemen.

Navigating an unpredictable Future

Yemen's troubles, which seemed to have started decades ago and intensified with the outbreak of civil war in 2015, have only worsened further since the pandemic began. As such, the pandemic may have provided a slight advantage to the Houthis over the Saudi led coalition simply because they expend far less resources to maintain their pressure on the coalition, which is bleeding money domestically and in the war. However, regardless of which side is deemed the short- or long-term victor, the ultimate losers are the Yemeni populace who must deal with much more than just a war in order to survive.

Given that a lack of economic stimulus will only lead to fresh bouts of conflict and violence, it is important to discuss the pandemic's effects on both the war and the postwar scenario. Moreover, COVID-19 is not the only unpredictable event, since issues like climate change will also intensify conditions conducive to harboring conflict. In order to mitigate these threats, many steps must be taken by external and local actors across the board. For example:

- All actors in the conflict should put aside their strategic interests in order to help the Yemeni populations which they

are trying to control and administrate. To do so would require ceasefire agreements to give hospitals breathing space and allow them to focus on COVID-19 cases rather than casualties of war.

- External donors could also incentivize and subsidize agricultural production as an effective way to create local produce and export it to neighboring countries. This could help reduce the reliance of locals on Khat, (the mild drug which consumes large amounts of both time and household finances, as well as creating vast environmental problems with its growth) allowing for employment and increased food supplies to Yemeni locals.²⁷ Although this would be a difficult step to take given the major dependence on the plant, it is still worth considering.

Ultimately stakeholders in the country and abroad must realize that the catastrophic humanitarian situation cannot be sustained much longer. Its consequences will spill over into neighboring nations making it important for them to stem the tide of war and conflict amidst the pandemic as well as climate change issues. Only when this is done can the actors hope to achieve a semblance of peace and begin the rebuilding effort in this war-torn nation.

All actors in the conflict should put aside their strategic interests to help the Yemeni populations which they are trying to control and administrate. To do so would require ceasefire agreements to give hospitals breathing space and allow them to focus on COVID-19 cases rather than casualties of war

Endnotes

- 1- "Why Yemen is at war," *Reuters*, April 27, 2020, <https://www.reuters.com/article/us-yemen-security-explainer/why-yemen-is-at-war-idUSKCN22924D>
- 2- Ibid
- 3- Lisa Schlein, "With Collapse of Health System, Yemen Struggles to Contain Disease Outbreaks", *VOA News*, <https://www.voanews.com/middle-east/collapse-health-system-yemen-struggles-contain-disease-outbreaks>
- 4- "Gulf economies face a fight for survival as impact of coronavirus bites", *TRT World*, May 13, 2020, <https://www.trtworld.com/magazine/gulf-economies-face-a-fight-for-survival-as-impact-of-coronavirus-bites-36277>
- 5- Clara E. Councell, "War and Infectious Disease," *Public Health Reports* (1896-1970) Vol. 56, No. 12 (Mar. 21, 1941), pp. 547-573 (27 pages)
- 6- Omer Karasapan, "Yemen and COVID-19: The pandemic exacts its devastating toll", *Brookings*, June 15, 2020, <https://www.brookings.edu/blog/future-development/2020/06/15/yemen-and-covid-19-the-pandemic-exacts-its-devastating-toll/>
- 7- Ryan Evans and Neville Morley, "The Plague and The Peloponnesian War", *War on the Rocks*, March 23, 2020, <https://warontherocks.com/2020/03/the-plague-and-the-peloponnesian-war/>
- 8- Alexander Kotch et. al, "European colonization of the Americas killed 10 percent of world population and caused global cooling", *The Conversation*, January 31, 2019, <https://www.pri.org/stories/2019-01-31/european-colonization-americas-killed-10-percent-world-population-and-caused>
- 9- Emilia Columbo and Marielle Harris, "Extremist Groups Stepping up Operations during the Covid-19 Outbreak in Sub-Saharan Africa," *Center For Strategic and International Studies*, <https://www.csis.org/analysis/extremist-groups-stepping-operations-during-covid-19-outbreak-sub-saharan-africa>
- 10- Ruchu Kumar, "Taliban launches campaign to help Afghanistan fight coronavirus", *Al Jazeera*, 06 April 2020, <https://www.aljazeera.com/news/2020/04/taliban-launches-campaign-afghanistan-fight-coronavirus-200406055113086.html>
- 11- Fatima Abo Alasrar, "Houthi's Approach to Coronavirus Designed to Benefit Movement's Elite," *Arab Gulf States Institute in Washington*, June 17, 2020, <https://agsi.org/houthis-approach-to-coronavirus-designed-to-benefit-movements-elite/>
- 12- Saeed al Batati, "Yemen records highest daily virus tally as UN warns of 'alarming' death rate," *Arab News*, June 17, 2020, <https://www.arabnews.com/node/1690921/middle-east>
- 13- "Coronavirus: Yemen's healthcare system 'in effect collapsed'," *BBC*, 22 May 2020, <https://www.bbc.com/news/world-middle-east-52769919>
- 14- Ben Hubbard and Saeed al Batati, "Saudi Arabia Declares Cease-Fire in Yemen, Citing Fears of Coronavirus," *New York Times*, April 08, 2020, <https://www.nytimes.com/2020/04/08/world/middleeast/saudi-yemen-ceasefire-coronavirus.html>
- 15- Scott Peterson, "Could pandemic pave a path to peace? Why Yemen war is resistant," *CS Monitor*, April 22, 2020, <https://www.csmonitor.com/World/Middle-East/2020/0422/Could-pandemic-pave-a-path-to-peace-Why-Yemen-war-is-resistant>
- 16- "Gulf economies face a fight for survival as impact of coronavirus bites", *TRT World*, May 13, 2020, <https://www.trtworld.com/magazine/gulf-economies-face-a-fight-for-survival-as-impact-of-coronavirus-bites-36277>
- 17- Bruce Reidel, "Saudi Arabia wants out of Yemen", *Brookings Institution*, April 13, 2020, <https://www.brookings.edu/blog/order-from-chaos/2020/04/13/saudi-arabia-wants-out-of-yemen/>
- 18- Sam Lagrone, "Panel: Iran Benefits from Saudi Arabia's Involvement in Yemen," *US Naval Institute*, October 26, 2018, <https://news.usni.org/2018/10/26/panel-iran-benefits-saudi-arabias-involvement-yemen>

- 19- Lisa Barrington, "Aid to Houthi-controlled Yemen to be cut back over risk it can be diverted -sources," *Reuters*, February 06, 2020, <https://www.reuters.com/article/us-yemen-security-aid/aid-to-houthi-controlled-yemen-to-be-cut-back-over-risk-it-can-be-diverted-sources-idUSKBN2001JT>
- 20- Sam Lagrone, "Panel: Iran Benefits from Saudi Arabia's Involvement in Yemen," *US Naval Institute*, October 26, 2018, <https://news.usni.org/2018/10/26/panel-iran-benefits-saudi-arabias-involvement-yemen>
- 21- "Internal Displacement in Yemen Exceeds 100,000 in 2020 with COVID-19 an Emerging New Cause," *IOM*, 21 July, 2020, <https://www.iom.int/news/internal-displacement-yemen-exceeds-100000-2020-covid-19-emerging-new-cause>
- 22- Fatima Abo Alasarar, "Houthis' Approach to Coronavirus Designed to Benefit Movement's Elite," *Arab Gulf States Institute in Washington*, June 17, 2020, <https://agsi.org/houthis-approach-to-coronavirus-designed-to-benefit-movements-elite/>
- 23- Lisa Schlein, "With Collapse of Health System, Yemen Struggles to Contain Disease Outbreaks", *VOA News*, <https://www.voanews.com/middle-east/collapse-health-system-yemen-struggles-contain-disease-outbreaks>
- 24- Ibid
- 25- Omer Karasapan, "Yemen and COVID-19: The pandemic exacts its devastating toll," *Brookings*, June 15, 2020, <https://www.brookings.edu/blog/future-development/2020/06/15/yemen-and-covid-19-the-pandemic-exacts-its-devastating-toll/>
- 26- Ibid
- 27- Mustapha Rouis, "Yemen's Qat Addiction Worsens," *World Bank*, March 20, 2014, <https://blogs.worldbank.org/arabvoices/yemen-qat-addiction-worsens>

ABOUT THE AUTHOR

Mohammed Sinan Siyech is a Research Analyst with the International Centre for Political Violence and Terrorism Research (ICPVTR), a constituent unit of the S. Rajaratnam School of International Studies (RSIS), Nanyang Technological University, Singapore. He has written on politics, conflict and security pertaining to West Asia and India.

ABOUT AL SHARQ STRATEGIC RESEARCH

A think tank that looks to undertake impartial, rigorous research to promote the ideals of democratic participation, an informed citizenry, multi-stakeholder dialogue and social justice.

Address: Istanbul Vizyon Park A1 Plaza Floor:6

No:68 Postal Code: 34197

Bahçelievler/ Istanbul / Turkey

Telephone: +902126031815

Fax: +902126031665

Email: info@sharqforum.org

research.sharqforum.org



SharqStrategic

الشرف
للأبحاث الاستراتيجية

AL SHARQ
STRATEGIC
RESEARCH