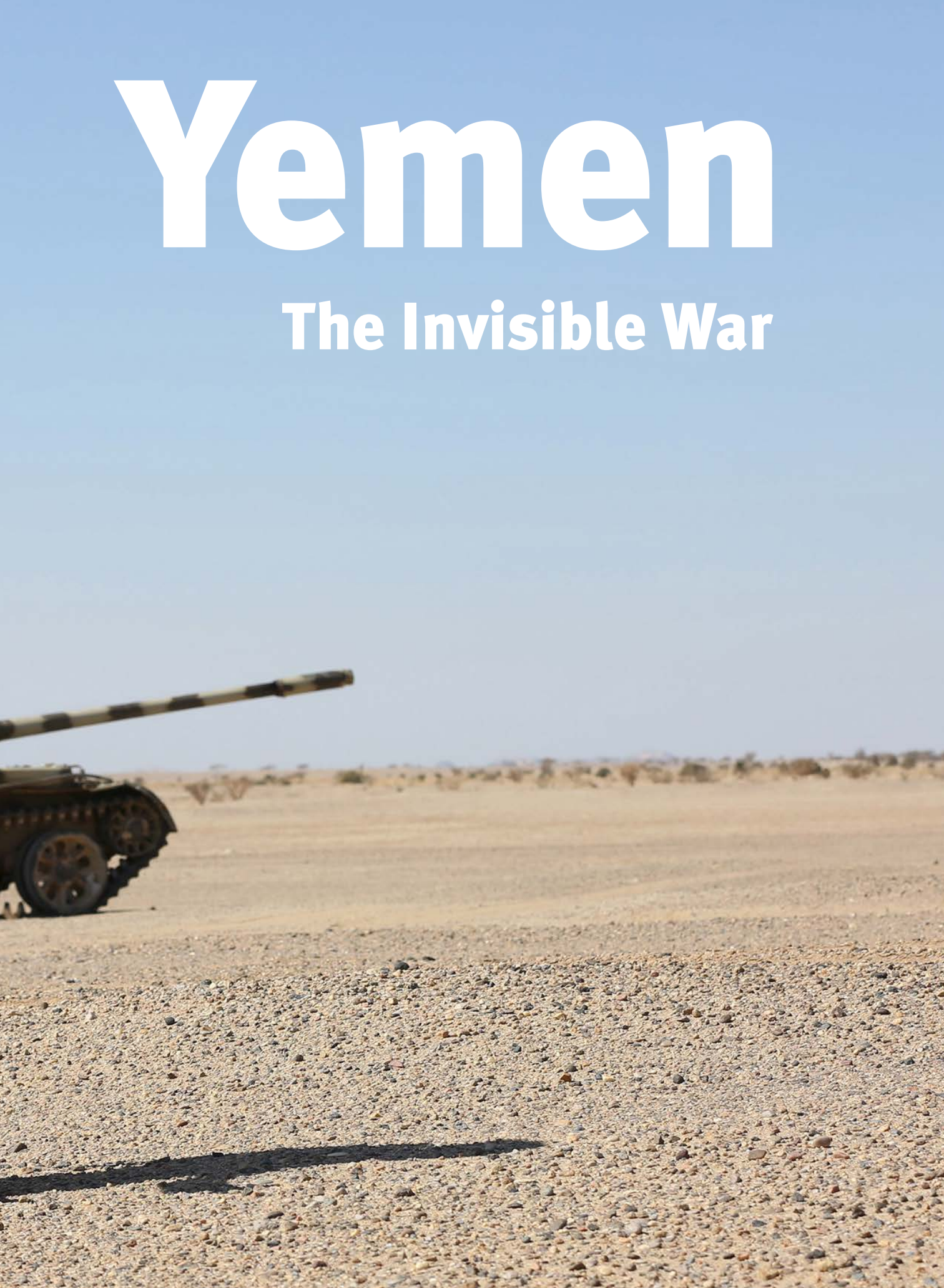
Yemen

The Invisible War



MODERN CONFLICTS

After four years of disastrous civil war, Yemen is at breaking point, with an estimated 233,000 casualties and 10 million on the brink of famine. Why is the silence of the international community so deafening? ***OLGA YOLDI*** *reports.*

Yemen's devastating conflict originated in the Arab Spring when a wave of popular unrest convulsed the Middle East. Protests against poor economic conditions, corruption and low wages triggered revolutions in many countries. Yemen's uprising ended up in a proxy war.

In 2011 protesters launched peaceful protests calling for the resignation of President Ali Abdullah Saleh, a dictator who had ruled Yemen for 33 years. After months of unrest, in 2012 Saleh was forced to transfer power to his deputy, Adrabbuh Mansour Hadi, who agreed to launch a democratic transition. He set up a transitional government, created a National Dialogue Conference as a forum to solve the country's problems and promised to call elections a year later.

But the National Dialogue soon fell apart. The new president struggled with economic challenges, corruption and constant military attacks from Saleh loyalists and al-Qaeda. As the economic situation deteriorated Yemenis became disappointed with Hadi and saw his rule as a continuation of the old regime.

Taking advantage of the situation, Houthi rebels (a

revivalist Shia movement with a strong base in northern Yemen and ties to Iran), reached Yemen's capital, Sanaa, and took control of it in 2014 and the coastal city of Aden soon after. Saleh allied himself with the Houthis and his supporters joined the rebels in the fight against President Hadi's troops, forcing the new government into exile.

Then the Houthi political leadership announced the dissolution of parliament and the formation of a revolutionary committee to govern the country. With Yemen slipping into instability Saudi Arabia feared Houthi insurgents were gaining control over Yemen, thus giving Iran a foothold in the region, and decided to intervene.

The conflict escalated in 2015 when, at the behest of Hadi, the Saudi-led coalition of Saudi Arabia and eight mostly Sunni Arab states – United Arab Emirates (UAE), Egypt, Morocco, Sudan, Jordan, Kuwait, Bahrain and Qatar (which later withdrew) – and backed by the US, Britain and France, began air strikes against Houthi positions with the aim of restoring Hadi's government. The US and Britain provided intelligence and logistical support for the campaign, called Operation Decisive Storm.

This was the beginning of a conflict that has shattered Yemen. It was supposed to last just weeks, but has now marked four years. It has escalated, spiralled and fractured to such an extent that all attempts at peace building have failed.

Today, press reports describe a chaotic and multisided war with many actors and shifting agendas, being fought on several fronts: the civil war in the north between Houthi rebels and Hadi's central government forces; another civil war between the central government and the Southern Movement(SM) – a loose coalition of separatists centred on Aden; and a nationwide campaign and US-led war against radical Islamist terrorist groups, including al-Qaeda in the Arabian Peninsula (AQAP), which has expanded to include an ISIS affiliate, Islah, an Islamist movement allied to the government. AQAP has set up local authorities over some areas in the south-east and Saudi Arabia has allied with AQAP in the fight against Houthi rebels.

"But there is also a regional conflict, pitting Saudi Arabia and the UAE against Iran, as well as UAE proxy forces and various different militias – some Salafi, some local and some closer to criminal gangs – all vying to grab and hold as much territory as they can," Gregory D Johnsen from the Arabia Foundation wrote in *Lawfare*.

The combined battles have inflicted serious damage on the economy and essential services and caused an unrelenting crisis with three-quarters of the population depending on aid to survive and 10 million people with no reliable access to food. UN Secretary-General António Guterres has described Yemen as "the world's worst humanitarian catastrophe".

While forces loyal to Hadi and the southern separatists have bombed swathes of the country, it is the Saudi-led Coalition that has caused the most damage. For the past four years it has bombed key centres, conducted a ground war, imposed air and naval blockades of its ports, destroying vital infrastructure and killing civilians, showing a total disregard for human life.

According to the Yemen Data Project, an independent collection of data on the conduct of the war in Yemen, Operation Decisive Storm conducted more than 16,749 coalition air attacks. Two-thirds have been against non-military and unknown targets, including places that are generally protected against attacks under international humanitarian law such as residential areas, vehicles, market places, mosques, boats, social gatherings and camps for internally displaced persons.

"The coalition isn't accidentally attacking civilians and civil infrastructure, it is doing it deliberately," wrote Jeff Bachman, a lecturer at the American University School of International Service, in *The Conversation*. According to Bachman these attacks, combined with the blockade, constitute genocide: "Genocide actions in Yemen amount to nothing short of what Raphael Lemkin, who coined the term 'genocide', referred to as a synchronised attack on different aspects of life."

The Saudi-led coalition would not have been able to commit these crimes without the material and logistical support of the US and complicity of the Obama and Trump administrations. Britain and the US sell Saudi Arabia and its coalition partners billions of dollars' worth of arms and provide logistical support, intelligence, expedited munitions resupply and maintenance, as well as the mid-flight refuelling of military aircraft, which was recently stopped. President Trump has been unwilling to cut the vital support that is fuelling this brutal and almost invisible war.

According to human rights reports, violations have been perpetrated by all actors in this conflict. Maggie Michael from the Associated Press (AP) investigated UAE-controlled prisons in Yemen in 2017, where disappearances and widespread torture is regularly perpetrated on people suspected of being members of al-Qaeda.

The Houthi insurgents have also been accused of engaging in torture, recruiting child soldiers, bombing the homes of local opponents, using weapons in unguarded residential areas and using civilians for cover.

The Saudi-led coalition says the Houthis are puppets

of Iran and Houthi insurgents (an army of about 100,000 fighters) say their war is a form of jihad against the US, but this is a battle that neither side is winning.

In 2018 the Houthi rebels escalated the conflict by firing long-range ballistic missiles across Saudi Arabia's southern border. Then Hadi's forces, supported by the coalition, began attacks to capture the key port of Hodeidah, controlled by Houthi insurgents and a strategic centre and entry point for the vast majority of food and lifeline for millions of people depending on aid for their survival. Since then Hodeidah has become the centre of gravity and the most active theatre in this complex war.

Following the Houthi attack the Saudi-led coalition imposed a naval and air blockade designed to restrict or stop the flow of food aid, which sparked fears of a catastrophic humanitarian disaster. The International Crisis Group warned that a decisive move on Hodeidah would have devastating consequences for all Yemenis, because such an assault would block all roads leading from the port to the central highlands – leaving an estimated 18 million people without food supplies.

According to the UN panel of experts on Yemen, vessels seeking entry to Yemen ports are stopped and inspected by the coalition to prevent, restrict and delay the distribution of food, fuel, medical supplies and humanitarian aid. Military scholar Martin Fink says the blockade causes massive delays and creates uncertainty about what products will be allowed to enter. "Imports are often held for a long time. In some cases the food that makes it through the blockade is already spoiled."

The food that manages to get past the blockade still needs to cross many military checkpoints. The World Food Program (WFP) has also collected evidence showing that Houthi rebels have diverted shipments of food sent to alleviate the crisis. WFP spokesperson Herve Verhoosel said their greatest challenge comes from the obstructive and unco-operative role of some of the Houthi leaders in areas under their control. "If we don't get the access and freedom to decide who gets this vital assistance, then we will have to take the hard decision of implementing a phased suspension in Houthi-controlled areas," Verhoosel said.

To make matters worse, the unrelenting bombing has destroyed much of Yemen's transport infrastructure, making it hard to transport food and other essentials to

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the different governorates. A Save the Children's report indicated that commercial imports through Hodeidah had fallen by more than 55,000 metric tons a month – which only meet the needs of 4.4 million people.

At the same time a lack of fresh water has caused outbreaks of cholera not seen in the past 50 years, according to the World Health Organisation. A recent UN-commissioned report by the University of Denver has revealed that more Yemenis are now dying of hunger, disease and lack of health clinics and other infrastructure than from fighting.

Save the Children estimates that 85,000 children have already died from hunger and disease. It bases its figures on mortality rates for untreated cases of severe malnutrition since the Saudi-led coalition joined the war. "For every child killed by bombs and bullets, dozens are starving to death and it is entirely preventable," said Tamer Kirolos, Save the Children Yemen's director. "Children who die of starvation suffer a prolonged agony as their vital organ functions slow and eventually stop." The report revealed that on average, one child dies from the war and its side effects every 11 minutes and 54 seconds.

This is not the first time food is used as a weapon of war, a bargaining tool and an instrument of genocide. Joseph Stalin used famine in 1932 causing the deaths of about 4 million Ukrainians. The Nazis Hunger Plan used hunger in besieged Leningrad where the population decreased in three years, and recently in Syria civilians were denied food and aid as a tactic of war carried out by the Bashar al Assad regime.

Alex de Waal, a renowned expert on humanitarian crises, in his book *Mass Starvation: The History and Failure of Famine*, writes that while the world almost conquered famine as a result of the spread of democracy, human rights and the ending of wars, it has made a comeback and he highlights the elements common to all of today's famines: "The weaponisation of starvation and the rollback of humanitarian norms."

He argues that UN agencies and the press have been coy about singling out Saudi Arabia, the US and Britain for their role in precipitating the food crisis. Often we believe famine is caused by overpopulation or climate change, yet 70 percent of famine deaths are man-made, according to de Waal. "The reason hat famine has not been outlawed under international law in a strong manner is that we ourselves – the Western powers, the US and UK – have used hunger and blockade as a weapon of war throughout the 20th century," he writes, "and for that reason the international law books do not contain prohibition on starving of the type that is really warranted." He describes Yemen as "the greatest famine atrocity of our lifetimes used by deliberately destroying the country's food-producing infrastructure".

While there has been wide condemnation of the Syrian government by the international community for starving its own people, no concerted action has been taken against the Saudi-led coalition to stop this in Yemen. "Nikki Haley, [then] America's ambassador to the UN has rightly condemned the Syrian government," de Waal writes. "But it is easy to call out villains, like President Bashar al Assad; it is harder to call out one's allies."

"One child dies from the war and its side effects every 11 minutes and 54 seconds." -Tamer Kirolos

In May last year the UN Security Council passed a resolution condemning the starvation of civilians. But the UN has been largely ineffective in ending the conflict in Yemen and the international community has been slow to respond. A media focus on the wars in Syria and Iraq may have eclipsed the tragedy in Yemen.

Press reports say it was the emergence of President Trump's son-in-law and senior adviser on Middle East, Jared Kushner, the Administration's key figure in Middle East diplomacy, that moved the focus towards Palestine and Israel, and away from Yemen. At the same time Kushner and Trump have warm relations with Saudi Prince Mohammed bin Salman, and that relationship, analysts say, has shaped US Middle East strategy. On the other hand Trump's enmity towards Iran has also shaped his policy towards Yemen as a key battleground for countering Iran.

"If under Obama support assumed the form of enabling the campaign under President Trump it has taken the costlier shape of encouraging and emboldening those who prosecute it framing the conflict as a battle against Iran." Robert Malley, president of International Crisis Group wrote in *The Atlantic.*

How the US became entangled in such a military misadventure and complicit in such a disastrous war is still hard to understand. Two administrations have given the Saudi-led coalition a blank cheque: even when there were signs the war would not be won, they continued to support the coalition. Four years later, the US has little to show for its investment but the horrors of a brutal and protracted war.

It took the murder of Saudi journalist Kamal Khashoggi in Istanbul to push Washington into issuing the ceasefire call. The US scaled back assistance, but did not stop it. Attempts to end US involvement in the Yemen war have so far failed. Last April the US Congress invoked the 1973 War Powers Resolution to pass a bill to end military assistance in Yemen. But President Trump vetoed the bill as "an unnecessary, dangerous attempt to weaken my constitutional powers … It would also imperil American citizens and brave service members today and in the future," Trump said.

Political commentator Simon Tindall wrote in *The Guardian* that Trump's actions amounted to flagrant defiance of the Act that checks a president's ability to

engage in armed conflict without the express consent of Congress. "Trump's veto over Yemen is a scandalous abuse of presidential powers," Tindall said. "It will prolong the suffering of millions in Yemen." Trump has said that cutting military assistance would be counterproductive because it would embolden the Houthi insurgents and Iran.

Last December the UN finally managed a meeting with the warring parties in Stockholm. The 2018 Stockholm Agreement signed at the meeting is described as a trust-building step aimed at averting a full-scale assault on Hodeidah. It is also aimed at stopping the war by restoring the internationally recognised Hadi government and paving the way for wider peace talks to set up a UN-led transitional authority. The withdrawal of troops was meant to have been completed by January, but the deadline passed without any forces leaving their safe havens or abiding by their commitments. Instead, violence has intensified.

Since May renewed clashes have broken out between Houthi rebel fighters and the coalition in Hodeidah breaching the ceasefire, and complicating the troop withdrawal agreement. Houthi rebels launched a bomb-laden drone into Saudi Arabia, hitting an arms depot in a military airport in Najran. Then Riyadh retaliated by launching strikes in Sanaa killing civilians. Last July Abha airport in Saudi Arabia also came under repeated missile and drone attacks wounding 26 civilians. Houthi rebels insist they will continue attacks as long as the Saudi led military intervention persists. This further increased tensions over the US-Iran standoff, with the US deploying an aircraft carrier and bombers to the Gulf after Washington accused Iran of shooting down a US drone over international waters.

UN envoy Martin Griffiths warned that the alarming intensification of violence could wipe out the progress made in Hodeidah: "War has a habit of trumping peace – its impact is more corrosive than the positive impact of ending wars. We must not let war take peace off the table."

Griffiths, who is working through a series of proposals for mutual redeployment, called on the UN Security Council to urge the warring parties to put in place the remaining actions as part of the Stockholm Agreement. The withdrawal of troops stalled over disagreement on who would control Hodeidah.

Convincing Houthi insurgents to abandon the port city in favour of a neutral force might be challenging, as Hodeidah is their primary source of revenue through customs and duties for funding this war. According to the BBC, the two sides are yet to agree on a sovereign council – the top tier of power where both want a majority. There may also be a need to include the Southern Movement in the ceasefire negotiation, so far they have been excluded.

Finding a dignified political exit for all parties will be difficult. Any chance of peace must also involve Iran suspending military aid to Houthi insurgents, and the US and UK stopping arms transfer and other support to the Saudi-led coalition and therefore giving up lucrative arm deals. Let's not forget that the Security Council's permanent members, the US, Britain, France and to a lesser extent China and Russia all supply arms to the Saudi led coalition.

"The US and UK officials are now under scrutiny," an International Crisis Group report said. "They have expended major political capital to defend arm sales and other support to the Coalition. The UK government has gone to high court to argue that licensing arms exports to Saudi Arabia for use in Yemen did not violate international law."

Concerted effort will be required to push with all parties to compromise. Mohammed Ali al Houthi, the head of the Houthi Supreme Revolutionary Council said recently on Twitter that the withdrawal of troops would start soon, but that remains to be seen.

What is clear is that Yemen cannot wait any longer for peace. It is hard to tell what the future holds for the country. A unified, democratic Yemen with all warring parties having an equal place in Yemen's future, commentators say, may be an unrealistic goal as there are too many factions that are likely to struggle for power.

"Yemen, which only unified in 1990, is broken and probably will be for years to come" writes Gregory D Johnsen in *Lawfare*. "No one peace agreement, no matter how comprehensive, will be able to end each of these three wars. There are too many armed groups in the country, none of which is strong enough to impose its will upon the entire country, but all of which can act as spoilers any time they don't like a particular decision."

However there may be alternatives. According to analyst Ariel I Ahman, the best outcome is for Yemen to resemble Somalia, Moldova or Cyprus, where weak central states coexist with territories of consolidated separatist rule. "De facto states like Somaliland, Transnistria or North Cyprus lack formal recognition by the international community, but they are not geopolitical black holes or anarchic zones," he wrote in *Lawfare*. "These arrangements are far from perfect, but they may be better outcomes than further war."