

Yemeni Civil War Primer World History

Introduction: Use the below summary of the causes, key events and consequences of the Yemeni Civil War to inform your Options and scripted discussion on the future role of the United States in this conflict. This summary is far from comprehensive, so if you need additional resources, you are encouraged to look for other reliable sources.

Causes

Yemen has historically been one of poorest countries in the Middle East, with low life expectancy and living standards. Inspired by the nearby revolutions of the Arab Spring, these poor conditions led to pro-Democracy protests in 2011. An opposition group called the Houthi led protests for the resignation of President Ali Abed Allah Saleh, who had been in power for 33 years. After he refused to resign, tensions and support for the protests continued to grow. Eventually, single-party elections were held, which put Vice President Abdrabbuh Mansur Hadi in power. Hadi's election, as well as his subsequent policy decisions, further angered the Houthi movement. In September 2014, the Houthi insurgency took over the capital city of Sana'a and drove out Hadi. In January 2015, Houthi attacks forced Hadi to flee Yemen.

Combatants

The central conflict is between those who support Hadi and his Sunni government, and the Houthis, an anti-government group made up of a small branch of Shiite Muslims. After seizing the capital, the Houthi established a temporary government, Supreme Revolutionary Committee. This group currently controls over 35% of Yemeni territory. Meanwhile, Hadi has returned to Yemen and his followers have established a southern capital in Aden. Fighting continues as each side attempts to gain more territory.

Many foreign powers have supported Hadi's government in the fight against Houthi rebellion. In March 2015, Saudi Arabia led a coalition of Middle Eastern States which imposed sanctions and launched airstrikes against the Houthi. The U.S. and U.K. both provided support for these strikes.

Amidst the instability, factions of both ISIS and Al Qaeda have taken over portions of Yemen. The threat of increased terrorist presence concerns Western nations. The U.S. is currently carrying out targeted drone strikes in Yemen. The country is also of strategic interest to the West due to its location. The country controls important waterways for transporting oil and has the potential to affect the region's power balance between Shia-ruled Iran and Sunni-ruled Saudi Arabia. Iran has sent weapons to the Houthi, while Saudi Arabia has led a years-long naval blockade. Many consider the conflict to be a proxy war between Saudi Arabia and Iran.

In 2016, the U.N. attempted to facilitate negotiations between the two sides, but efforts failed. Armed conflict has continued, with both sides attempting to capture major cities. Saudi Arabia has deepened its involvement, launching additional airstrikes in Spring of 2018.

Consequences

The Yemeni Civil War is considered to be one of the worst humanitarian disasters in the world. The country suffered from poverty and infrastructure problems before the conflict, meaning conditions have only worsened for the civilian population. As of March 2019 the UN reported at least 10,000 civilians deaths and 40,000 injuries. Of these deaths, over half are due to Saudi coalition air strikes.

For those left living, conditions are awful. Due to Saudi blockades and the loss of imports, Yemen is experiencing severe famine, with 20 million who need help securing food, 10 million who are near famine and almost 240,000 facing "catastrophic levels of hunger." Death and illness from disease and malnutrition are widespread, especially for children. A cholera outbreak of historic proportions has also swept Yemen, with 1.49 million suspected cases and 2,960 deaths in the last two years. Almost 10 million require medical services that they cannot access.

Over 3 million Yemeni people have also been displaced by the conflict. Both sides have also been accused of committing war crimes. In particular, Saudi Arabia's airstrikes have been widely regarded illegal, often killing large numbers of civilians and children.

Current Situation

As of mid-May 2019, the U.N. is helping to secure a de-escalation plan. Despite these efforts, tensions are high and both sides are highly mistrustful of the other. The Houthis have begun to withdraw from key ports, a move which would significantly improve life for civilians by allowing imported food, aid, and other supplies. The first phase of this withdrawal seemed to be going smoothly, although Hadi and his Saudi supporters seemed to be suspicious of the Houthis' cooperation. Unfortunately, peaceful negotiations have disintegrated, as Saudi-coalition forces launched new airstrikes against residential area of Sana'a. This attack resulted in forty-one injuries and the deaths of six people, four of which were children.

Saudi media is reporting that Houthi forces have aimed ballistic missiles at Islam's holiest city, Mecca. The Houthis deny this claim. However, the Houthis are openly conducting a campaign against 300 "vital military targets." This includes drone strikes on Saudi-controlled oil stations.

Currently, the U.S. is supporting The Saudi-coalition and Hadi government with billions of dollars in support and supplies, but no military forces. U.S.-involvement is highly controversial amidst the widespread human rights violations against the Yemeni people. In April 2019, Congress passed a resolution to end U.S. support for Saudi Arabia's military efforts. President Trump vetoed the bill, and it was not overridden in Congress.

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