

Civil War in Yemen: Saada Under Siege

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“One of the reasons I’m here is to try to give a bit more profile to a conflict, and its humanitarian consequences, which had been fairly low on the list of the international media’s priorities.”

– John Holmes, UN Under-Secretary-General for Humanitarian Affairs and Emergency Relief Coordinator, at the conclusion of a three-day visit to Yemen (IRIN News, 12 October 2009).

“I saw children [in al-Mazraq camp] on the brink of death due to acute malnutrition and dehydration ... I have never seen such a sight since I became UNICEF regional Goodwill Ambassador in 2003 – not when I was in Darfur five years back, or anywhere in this region.”

– Mahmoud Kabil, UNICEF’s Goodwill Ambassador for the Middle East and North Africa, on his visit to al-Mazraq refugee camp, 300 km northwest of Sanaa (IRIN News, 20 October 2009).

Yemeni President Ali Abdullah Saleh’s latest campaign against Zaidi rebels in the northern governorate of Saada – aptly dubbed “Operation Scorched Earth” – has raged since August 12, leaving the residents of the war-torn province bordering Saudi Arabia utterly devastated.

The conflict between Yemen’s government and the Zaidis dates back to June 2004. Mutual recriminations between the parties over the underlying motives of other continue to forestall any meaningful settlement; the government claims the rebels want to revive the Zaidi Shia Imamate overthrown in 1962, while the rebels point to the systemic political and socioeconomic marginalization of their community. Constituting at least a quarter of Yemen’s population, they maintain they only wish to reassert their legitimate rights as citizens (for additional background, please see [“Yemeni Daggers Unsheathed”](#)).

Add to this the somewhat-truthful accusations of foreign interference, and you have all the necessary ingredients for a proxy-war, a protected struggle, and a humanitarian crisis.

According to the UN Office for the Coordination of Humanitarian Affairs, 50,000 Yemeni civilians have been displaced since August alone, bringing the total number of internally displaced persons (IDP) from the northern governorates of Yemen (Saada, Amran, al-Jawf and Hajjah) to 150,000. By UNICEF’s count, one-half of them are children. The most intense clashes between rebel and government forces have taken place in Saada, and as expected, its people have suffered the most.

Giancarlo Cirri, the World Food Programme’s representative in Yemen, screened children in Saada City and the surrounding IDP camps. He found that 4.5 percent of the children in

those camps suffered severe malnourishment and nearly 13 percent moderate malnourishment. He reported to IRIN News that, “The nutrition situation in the city was even more serious, with 12.6 percent of children severely [malnourished] and 27.2 percent acutely malnourished.”

The true extent of the calamity in both Saada City and its governorate is likely an underestimate, both due to logistical constraints placed on relief agencies by the fighting as well as other (quite deliberate) obstacles placed in their way by the government. In addition, there is a complete media blackout on the area.

Since the war’s inception, President Saleh has wasted no time in either implying or directly inferring that the Iranian government has trained and aided the Zaidi rebels (also known as “Houthis”; named after their first leader, Hussein Badr al-Din al-Houthi). The government alternatively labels the Houthis as “Shia rebels” as a way to further impugn Shia Iran as having cause to interfere in the fighting, a designation now routinely adopted by the major media outlets. Although the Zaidis may technically be Shia Muslims, in practice, they are much closer to the four Sunni schools of Islam.

Iran’s purported support of the rebels is not an unreasonable query, although evidence substantiating the claim has been wanting. Saudi Arabia’s direct interference and role in aiding Yemen’s government however, and more disturbingly, its despicable practice of forcibly returning civilians fleeing the conflict back to the war zone, is indisputable.

The contempt and avowed hostility Saudi Arabia and its Wahabi establishment has for Shia Muslims is well-known (the ideological footnotes distinguishing Zaidis from other Shias being largely irrelevant to them), and is one important reason why they have provided both moral and material support to the Saleh regime’s attempt to put down the uprising strictly through military means.

That being said, it was not only morally inexcusable, but a violation of international law when Saudi authorities forced hundreds of fleeing Yemeni civilians back across the border, denying them safe passage and sanctuary from the fighting (Bloomberg, Sept. 16).

Human Rights Watch, in a [letter](#) to John Holmes prior to his visit to Yemen, implored him to:

“Call on Saudi Arabia to immediately cease its refoulement [unlawful forced return to persecution or a situation threatening life or freedom] of Yemeni refugees by opening its border posts to all refugees fleeing the conflict zone seeking safety in Saudi Arabia and by ending its deportation of Yemenis fleeing the conflict who have already entered Saudi Arabia.”

Joe Stork, Deputy Director of Human Rights Watch’s Middle East and North Africa division, also wrote, “To date, the Yemeni government has not responded to calls by the UN Secretary-General and UN agencies for the establishment of humanitarian corridors to allow civilians to safely flee the conflict zone and to guarantee agencies safe passage to reach civilians, including the displaced, who remain.”

The Yemenis in Saada – and I say *Yemenis*, because regardless of whether they are called Zaidis, Houthis, or Shias, they are still Yemenis – are trapped between the forces of their own government to the south, and a country denying them refuge to the north..

Much as the Israelis blamed the Palestinians of Gaza for their malnutrition, starvation, disease, and impoverishment (a perverse exculpatory practice - blaming the victim for their own misery), Saleh's government is doing no less to the residents of Saada and surrounding governorates.

By allegedly "cracking down" on al-Qaeda, Yemen has been lauded by the United States for pulling itself back from the brink of "failed state" status. Yet a country and leadership that demonstrates such disregard for the welfare and well-being of its citizens, while simultaneously perpetuating the humanitarian disaster engulfing them, can never be considered to be anything more than the most wretched kind of state there is.

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