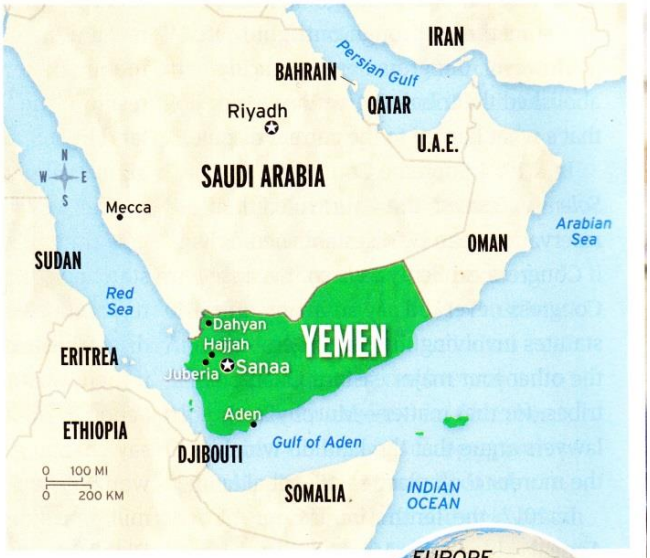
Kyle – Geography

Crisis in YEMEN

War has devastated this impoverished nation and created a massive humanitarian disaster BY PATRICIA SMITH

Yemeni children stand amid the ruins of a Saudi airstrike in Sanaa.

To survive, many Yemenis, like this girl in Hajjah, have been eating boiled leaves.



One morning last August, a laser-guided bomb dropped by a Saudi Arabian jet struck a school bus in the Yemeni town of Dahyan in the far northwest of the country. The bus had been taking students on a field trip. In an instant, 44 children and 10 adults were obliterated.

Not far from the huge crater marking where the bomb struck lies the graveyard where the victims, most of them younger than 10 years old, are now buried. At each grave, a color portrait of a victim is propped over a coffin-shaped mound of dry, rocky earth.

Even in a nation that has grown hardened to tragedy, the school bus bombing was shocking. But at the same time, it was typical of the toll that war is taking on Yemen's civilians.

Since Saudi Arabia began its military assault on Yemen almost four years ago, the Saudis have bombed weddings and funerals, as well as hospitals, roads, bridges, and factories. The United Nations (U.N.) reported in November that 18,000 civilians have been killed or injured in Yemen as a result of the fighting, almost 11,000 of them from airstrikes alone. The real number is probably much higher, experts say, but verifying casualties in Yemen's remote areas is extremely difficult.

The fighting in Yemen has also created the world's worst humanitarian crisis. Some 14 million people are facing starvation in what the U.N. says could soon become the worst famine the world has seen in 100 years. The aid agency Save the Children estimates that 85,000 Yemeni children have starved to death. Yemen is also experiencing the world's worst modern outbreak of cholera.

"I've heard many say that this is a country on the brink of catastrophe," says David Beasley, director of the United Nations' World Food Program. "This is not a country on the brink of a catastrophe. This is a country that is in a catastrophe."

A Poor, Unstable Country

Yemen, the poorest country in the Arab world, has long been extremely unstable. It's a tribal society

HAMMADI ISSA/AP PHOTO (GIRL); JIM MCMAHON (MAP); HANI MOHAMMED/AP PHOTO (CHILDREN)

Watch a video on the war in Yemen at UPFRONTMAGAZINE.COM

with deep divisions and a long history of internal conflict. To make matters more complicated, for the past 16 years, the United States has regularly carried out drone strikes in Yemen as part of its war against Al Qaeda and other terrorists operating there. These strikes have killed many terrorists—and also mistakenly struck civilians.

Yemen has been further destabilized by the rise over the past decade of a Shiite rebel group known as the Houthis. In September 2014, the Houthis captured the country's capital, Sanaa, effectively taking control of much of the northern part of the country. The internationally recognized Yemeni government fled south to the port city of Aden.

Saudi Arabia, which borders Yemen, saw Houthi control of Yemen as a threat—in part because the Houthis were getting some assistance from Iran, Saudi Arabia's longtime regional adversary. (Saudi Arabia is a Sunni country, and Iran, like the Houthis, is Shiite; the two branches of Islam have long been at odds.) So in March 2015, Saudi Arabia—leading a coalition of Arab states—launched a full-scale military campaign against the Houthi rebels in Yemen.

"This is a civil war that surrounding countries have jumped into," says Jon Alterman of the Center for Strategic and International Studies in Washington, D.C. The variety of fighting groups is so complex that Alterman calls it "a completely tangled ball of yarn."

'This is a country that is in a catastrophe.'

Further complicating the situation is U.S. involvement *(see "How Is the U.S. Involved?" facing page)*. The devastating airstrikes are being carried out by the Saudi military but with the help of U.S. intelligence and with American weapons *(see chart, below)*.

'A War on the Economy'

But Saudi Arabia isn't just bombing Yemen. Under the leadership of Crown Prince Mohammed bin Salman, Saudi Arabia has imposed international blockades and restrictions on what can be imported into Yemen in order to undercut the Houthis. Those measures have devastated Yemen's already-fragile economy and hit civilians hard.

The blockades have prevented international aid from getting into Yemen and made it impossible for the country's many fishermen to go out in their boats and make a living.

"People think famine is just a lack of food," says Alex de Waal, author of *Mass Starvation*, a book about recent human-made famines. "But in Yemen it's about a war on the economy."

The signs are everywhere, cutting across boundaries of class, tribe, and region. Unpaid university professors issue desperate appeals for help on social media. Doctors and teachers are forced to sell their gold, land, or cars to feed their families. And in the countryside, people are starving.

Yemen's economic crisis is not merely an accidental side effect of the fighting—or even due solely to the blockades. In 2016, the Saudi-backed Yemeni government transferred the operations of the central bank from the Houthi-controlled capital, Sanaa, to Aden. The bank, whose policies are essentially dictated by Saudi Arabia, stopped paying salaries to civil servants in Houthi-controlled areas, where 80 percent of Yemenis live. With the government as the largest employer, hundreds of thousands of families suddenly had no income.

Qasim Shuwe was on a school bus hit by a Saudi bomb in a Yemeni village in August. He stands amid the graves of 44 classmates who were killed in the airstrike.

LYNSEY ADDARIO/GETTY IMAGES

Top 10 Buyers of U.S. Weapons

Saudi Arabia was America's best arms customer in 2017

COUNTRY	VALUE OF WEAPONS
1. Saudi Arabia	$17.9 billion
2. Poland	$11.3 billion
3. Japan	$10.7 billion
4. Canada	$5.8 billion
5. Romania	$5.2 billion
6. Bahrain	$4 billion
7. Australia	$3.4 billion
8. United Kingdom	$3.2 billion
9. United Arab Emirates	$2.8 billion
10. Greece	$2.5 billion

SOURCE: CENTER FOR INTERNATIONAL POLICY (AMOUNTS ARE FOR 2017 NOTIFICATIONS TO CONGRESS OF INTERNATIONAL WEAPONS SALES.)

How Is the U.S. Involved?

The Saudi war in Yemen is being fought with U.S. weapons and support

The bomb that struck a school bus full of Yemeni children last August was fired by a Saudi plane. But according to several local people, the bomb had markings showing it had been made in the United States.

That shouldn't be a surprise. The U.S. sells a lot of military equipment to Saudi Arabia. Between 2010 and 2017, the U.S. delivered to Saudi Arabia 30 F-15 fighter jets, 84 combat helicopters, 110 air-to-surface cruise missiles, and nearly 20,000 guided bombs.

Experts say that the U.S. has been much more involved than the public realized since the Saudis launched the war in 2015.

"We have a long-standing relationship with Saudi Arabia that's very important," says Bruce Riedel, an expert on the region at the Brookings Institution. "When the war began, the Obama administration more or less went along with it."

The Trump administration has doubled down on support for Saudi Arabia, including the war in Yemen.

In addition to supplying weapons, the U.S. has provided critical intelligence to help guide Saudi airstrikes. The U.S. has also sent a dozen American commandos to train Saudi ground troops to secure the border with Yemen.

But now many in Congress are having second thoughts. Saudi Crown Prince Mohammed bin Salman *(above)* has been implicated in the murder of Jamal Khashoggi, a Saudi journalist who lived in the U.S. The resulting public outrage has made many less willing to support Saudi Arabia.

In December, the U.S. Senate voted to end military aid to Saudi Arabia for the war in Yemen. It was a symbolic gesture since the bill died when Congress adjourned for 2018. But it sent a message. "We cannot sweep under the rug the callous disregard for human life and flagrant violations of international norms the Saudis are showing," Senator Robert Menendez of New Jersey says.

ABACA PRESS/SIPA USA VIA AP PHOTO

The bank also began printing vast amounts of new money, which caused the value of Yemen's currency to plummet. The effects have been disastrous.

Bread, Tea & Leaves to Eat

Consider the story of Ali al-Hajaji, who lives in a remote mountain village called Juberia. In the past, the men of the village worked as migrant laborers in Saudi Arabia, whose border is 80 miles away. Hajaji worked on a suburban construction site in Mecca, the Muslim holy city. But when the war broke out in 2015, the border closed and their source of income disappeared.

Hajaji, who had five sons under age 7, watched in dismay as Yemen's currency lost half its value over the previous year, causing prices to soar. Suddenly, groceries cost twice as much as they had before the war. Some villagers sold their assets, such as camels or land, to get money for food.

But Hajaji, whose family lived in a one-room, mud-walled hut, had nothing to sell. At first he relied on the generosity of neighbors. Then he pared back the family diet, until it was only bread, tea, and a vine leaf that grows locally.

His 4-year-old son Shaadi was the first to get sick, with vomiting and diarrhea—classic symptoms of malnutrition. Hajaji wanted to take him to the hospital, but he couldn't afford the trip because fuel prices had risen by 50 percent over the previous year. Last September, Shaadi became the first person in the village to die from hunger.

The price of food has soared, and sources of income have dried up.

Another disturbing effect of the war and the worsening humanitarian crisis is a sharp rise in child marriage. The traditional Yemeni practice of families marrying off their daughters as young as 10 years old had been in decline recently.

The war has reversed that trend. According to Unicef, two-thirds of Yemeni girls are married before age 18, up from 50 percent before the war. It's traditional for a groom's family to pay a "bride price," so marriages can be a source of income for a girl's family. Besides, a Unicef official explains, parents "need to get rid of the girls, because they cannot feed them."

The Saudis aren't the only ones to blame for Yemen's food crisis. In Houthi-held areas, aid workers say, commanders demand illegal payments at checkpoints and frequently try to divert international relief aid to the families of soldiers, or to line their own pockets.

Regardless of who's to blame, experts agree that innocent Yemenis are suffering and the international community must resolve the conflict. Last month, the Saudis and the Houthis met in Sweden for U.N.-sponsored peace talks.

Alterman, the expert at the Center for Strategic and International Studies, believes a resolution is possible—if Americans outraged by Yemen's suffering demand an end to the war.

"In my judgment, the missing element has been people in the United States deciding that the crisis in Yemen is important," he says. "This is a difficult diplomatic problem, but a solvable diplomatic problem. But it can't be the 14th priority on your list." •

With reporting by Declan Walsh and Robert F. Worth of The New York Times.