

# Yemen: The invisible war

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## Reportage

More than 10,000 killed, two million displaced, as Saudi Arabia leads the Arabian Peninsula's bloodiest fight in decades.

Middle East by Alia Allana Nov 06, 2017



On November 4, Yemen's Houthi rebels fired a rocket aimed at Riyadh, Saudi Arabia's capital. It was an audacious move—the rebels had shown that they were willing to inflict mass civilian deaths inside Saudi Arabia. It also showed that the Houthi rebels had weapons that could target Riyadh. The rocket was shot down outside the city by Saudi forces using American-made Patriot surface-to-air missiles. The timing of the Houthi attack couldn't be more significant. Around the same time Saudi Crown Prince Mohammad bin Salman had ordered the arrest of 11 princes of the house of Saud including those holding defence

portfolios and the billionaire investor Prince Alwaleed bin Talal for corruption. Prince Salman was the architect behind the Saudi-led coalition force that was engaged in battle in Yemen. As he conducted the purge, his country blamed Iran for empowering the Houthis. For Yemen, a country that has seen only war and death since 2015, it was just another day as the Arabian Peninsula's latest battleground.

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In Haidan no stone was without the scar of war. A town along the Yemen-Saudi Arabia border, Haidan's people had started living in caves, cracks in the mountain their only refuge. While death stalked people, Nagda, the sole midwife in Haidan, went about bringing new life. Inside caves, in darkness, she delivered babies. Her kitchen knife cut umbilical cords. The war couldn't stop her.

"Life doesn't wait for anybody," she would tell her husband.

"Nor does death," he would argue.

Nagda travelled across three districts in Saada to help women. As the attacks there intensified, hospitals and clinics became targets. Each house in each village had its tale of tragedy. She knew of farmers blown to bits by cluster bombs when they took their sheep to graze. An airstrike in Saada had killed 47 people of whom 26 were children.

It was as though the Saudi-led coalition forces wanted to cleanse the rebel heartland of its people. Nagda got pregnant but continued to work. Often people paid her in food but most paid her with *duas*. When she went into labour, her husband ran from house to house for help. He didn't get any. Nagda died giving birth.

Her husband named their daughter Eman, because that's all he was left with: Faith.

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Mediaeval Arabs used to say "In Yemen, there is wisdom". It is one of the oldest centres of civilisation in the Middle East and its capital Sana'a has been inhabited for more than 2,500 years. Yemen is the poor tip of the Arabian Peninsula, bordered by oil-rich Saudi Arabia and Oman in the north and across the Red Sea from Ethiopia. It is mountainous and arid, its interior a maze of mud skyscrapers, hill towns and wadis. Yemenis live in skyline villages, isolated and protected, teetering above fertile valleys.

Once known as Arabia Felix, or Happy Arabia, Yemen's fortunes have fallen. Competing tribes, secessionist movements, civil wars and corrupt governance have made Yemen the poorest country in the Middle East. Since 2015, the country has been the site of a civil war where old foes—former president Ali Abdullah Saleh and the Northern Houthi rebels—have joined hands in a face-off against a US-backed Saudi-led international coalition that supports exiled President Abd-Rabbu Mansour Hadi. Adding to this is the simmering Sunni-Shia rivalry between Saudi Arabia and Iran, and the presence of jihadis. Yemen, also, has the second most heavily armed citizenry in the world.

The war has claimed over 10,000 lives and shows no signs of a slowdown. Forty-five per cent of Yemen's population goes to bed hungry, 20 million—eighty-two per cent of the population—are reliant on aid, and over 2 million are internally displaced. It is home to the world's worst cholera outbreak as clean water is a luxury. On cloudy days nothing works but the resilient Yemeni joke—at least we are a green country. Civil servants haven't been paid in months, only 45 per cent of hospitals are operational, and only 30 per cent of the required medical supplies get in. Currently, a child under the age of five dies every 10 minutes of preventable causes. The UN estimates that the country requires \$2.1 billion in humanitarian aid this year. The largest donors, America, Saudi Arabia, Great Britain and the United Arab Emirates, are the main actors in the war.

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Abdo was a sea-hardened sailor and Raghda a Western-educated reporter. He used to smuggle *khat* and migrants, she used to travel across Yemen speaking to tribesmen. They met one night under a bomb-lit sky. Hundreds had gathered at al-Boraika port in Aden, Yemen's main port city, and waved \$100 bills, determined to leave a city where the dead were piling up on the streets. She waited to board his boat in May 2015.



A hollowed out house after an explosion in Sana'a in April 2015. Photo: (This and title image): Ameen Alghabri

A woman with seven children was hysterical because she'd left her husband, a family of Syrian beggars and a broke Indian nurse pleaded for a free ride while Yemenis with British or American passports elbowed ahead. Above, Saudi jets circled the sky in a relentless air campaign against the Houthi rebels. American and British-made bombs hit military installations, homes and markets. Snipers from the Houthi-Saleh alliance competed with militias and loyalist soldiers associated with Hadi. This was a free-for-all: extremists from al-Qaeda and hardline armed Salafis joined the cacophony.

The port was part of the frontline and had already been targeted. The passengers piled on top of each other and when they couldn't, they simply knelt. Abdo let her sit in his rat-infested cabin and set sail for Djibouti.

Over the 26-hour journey across the Red Sea he spoke about his home in Hodeida, a port on the Red Sea. It had fallen to the rebels, on October 2014, who had lined the shore with mines fearing a coalition invasion. He reminisced of simpler days when the only nuisance was Somali pirates lusting after *khat*. Fishermen had become suspects now and were often accused of carrying arms sent by the Iranians. Foreign navies soon began appearing at sea. That night the sea was calm. By the morning the calm was shattered when two elderly women were found dead. Couple of hours later a seven year-old-boy died of an asthma attack.

“The sea is a form of suicide,” he told her as they parted ways.

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On the night of March 26, 2015 F-15s and F-16s from Saudi Arabia headed for Yemen. They were later joined by a nine-country Arabian and African coalition led by Saudi Arabia. The stated aims of Operation Decisive Storm are to reinstate Hadi and repel the Houthi Zaydis.

The Zaydis emerged following Zay'd, the fifth Imam's uprising against the Ummayah Caliph in 724 CE. Under the Mutawakkilite Kingdom, they ruled North Yemen from 1918 until 1962. It was only under Ali Abdullah Saleh in 1978 that a nationalist and leftist army ushered Yemen into the modern age, severing all ties with the theocratic elite. “Zaydis are often referred to as the Sunnis of the Shia and the Shia of the Sunnis,” says Waleed Mahdi, Professor of US-Arab Cultural Politics at University of Oklahoma. Even in Saleh's rule, Houthis continued to hold important political and military positions in Yemen.

Modern-day Zaydism started as a grassroots revivalist movement opposed to what was perceived as Saudi-backed Salafi expansion in north Yemen. It morphed into a militia under the leadership of Hussein al-Houthi who was killed in the first round of fighting in 2004. The current leader of the Houthis, Abdul-Malik al-Houthi is both a military man and a Zaydi preacher.

The Houthis are battle-hardened guerrillas who fought Saleh in a low-level insurgency from 2004 to 2010. The Houthis were present in large numbers at Change Square in the days of the “Arab Spring” when Yemenis demanded the ouster of Saleh in 2011. After he resigned, they participated in the national dialogue but as the political transition faltered, the Houthis reverted to arms. They stormed the capital, Sana'a, in September 2014. A few months later they ousted Hadi, who fled to Aden. Abdel Malek appeared on TV after the bloodless coup and spoke of a second revolution in Yemen: “Yemenis will not allow despots to rule the country again,” he said. His focus was not military but the restoration of fuel subsidies and economic reform.

Their unlikely ally has been their former enemy, Saleh. He saw in the Houthis—strong fighters but poor administrators—an opportunity for revenge on those who turned on him in 2011. Saleh has lorded over Yemeni politics with a unique blend of savvy and thuggishness since 1978. His 33-year rule has seen every institution gutted. But Saleh is a rare figure: a dictator overthrown by popular revolt who manages to remain in his country, unmolested.

Hadi is not without criticism. Weak and ineffectual, he never enjoyed genuine support among politicians or the army. He was elected to power for two years on February 21, 2012 in what was a one-candidate election. Many Yemenis view his presidency as illegal. He rules from exile in Riyadh while a faction of his internationally-recognised government is based in Aden.

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When Mazen, a conservationist, was a boy his grandfather would tell him that Aden, built on the crater of an ancient volcano, was as old as human history itself. Local legends claim the city was founded by Cain and Abel. When his grandfather arrived from India, Arabic songs were sung to Indian music and new residents assimilated into Indian neighbourhoods. He called it “a city of tolerance”.

Temples stood next to churches, Zoroastrians worshipped at the Fire Temple, and synagogues were accommodated. In 1948 things started to change: Jews were the first to move out, temples began boarding up their doors and the church bells stopped chiming. “Preserving ancient sites will be important for the future,” Mazen’s grandfather would tell him. Dark days were coming, he warned as al-Qaeda reared its ugly face with bombings and assassinations. By 2011, al-Qaeda capitalised on post-Arab Spring chaos and settled in the southern provinces.

Five days after Hadi promised to raise Yemen’s flag on Mount Marran in Saada, the Houthi heartland, he abandoned his heavily guarded palace in Aden. The advancing Houthi rebels offered a bounty of \$93,000 for the president’s capture on state television while Hadi was seen pleading for assistance to the UN, to the Arab League. There were rumours that he had dashed across the waters to Oman or Djibouti and onwards to Saudi Arabia.

The Houthis took their positions around the mountains. They hid in forts, around 500-year-old walls in the Hussein Mosque. Three men camped in the mosque. Mazen asked them to leave. Not far from the mosque, a group of about 10 men had entered the military museum. It was an old British colonial building. He looked around and couldn’t see weapons anywhere.

Then the coalition attacked. They flattened the mosque leaving just one minaret standing, knocked down the side façade of the museum. In the chaos of war, religious fanatics, al-Qaeda and hardline Salafis were determined to wipe out what they consider idolatry. The statue of Mary on the Saint Joseph Church was destroyed and Mazen appealed to the governor to protect antiquities. No one listened.



*Clean water is a luxury in Yemen. The country is the site for the world's worst cholera outbreak brought about by the war. Photo: Eman al-Awami.*

So a group of friends began collecting valuables from the church. A few weeks later, it was set on fire by extremists. They now have in their possession Ottoman weapons and parchments and are keen to return it to their rightful owners.

“When the Christians return I will give it to them,” he says.

What about the government? I asked.

“We don’t believe in this government,” he said. “The flag of the independent South flies all over South Yemen, nobody believes in the legitimacy of Hadi. The only place he can fly the unified flag of Yemen is in his bathroom.”

Hadi rules in exile from Riyadh.

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Saudi Arabia has no clear endgame beyond putting Hadi back in power, securing its borders with Yemen and checking Iran’s power in the region. It assumed that given the size and sophistication of its air force and the prowess of Emirati ground troops, this would be a short war. They miscalculated badly.

Behind the Saudi-led misadventure in Yemen is Mohammad bin Salman, known popularly as MBS, the new Saudi crown prince. At 32, he is seen as a long-awaited young reformer with the potential to shake up the world's most autocratic society, or as an impetuous and inexperienced princeling. The war in Yemen can be seen as an attempt to bolster his standing. Should he succeed and expand the Wahhabi *dawah*, Saudi's religious beliefs, southwards he could legitimise himself in the eyes of the ulama, the traditional kingmakers.

But the war is being called Saudi Arabia's Vietnam, according to experts. In a leaked email obtained by the online news site Middle East Eye in 2017, the crown prince wrote to Martin Indyk, former US ambassador to Israel, and Stephen Hadly, former US national security adviser saying, "I don't care who wins, I want it to end." Meanwhile, a UN panel investigating 10 air strikes by the coalition—in which at least 292 civilians were killed—found that most were the result of an "ineffective targeting process" or deliberate attacks on peaceful targets. The 63-page report (2017) claims that the "panel considers it almost certain that the coalition did not meet international humanitarian law requirements of proportionality and precautions in attack." The panel considers that some of the attacks may amount to war crimes.

"The war in Yemen has produced 3.15 million internally displaced persons. Although the United States government has provided most of the bombs and is deeply involved in the conduct of the war, reportage on the war in English is conspicuously rare," wrote Julian Assange when WikiLeaks released the Saudi Cables. Journalists have been denied access to cover the war. Recently the coalition blocked BBC journalists from travelling to Sanaa.

The Saudi Cables reveal the extent to which Saudi Arabia goes to monitor and co-opt Arab media. It is meticulous in ensuring that the right message is presented on Saudi Arabia and Saudi-related matters. The policy is "neutralisation" and "containment". A "neutralised" journalist or media institution is one whose silence and co-operation has been bought. "Containment" consists of active propaganda where journalists and media are not only required to peddle the kingdom's line but also lead attacks on critics.

The Houthis are no saints. When they took Sana'a in 2014, they shelled Yemen State TV and replaced media professionals with Houthi-affiliated media groups. The rebels used two Yemeni journalists as human shields while investigative journalist Mohammed al-Absi, known for reporting on a number of Houthi-related-corruption stories, was poisoned. A Houthi-controlled court issued a death sentence against journalist Yahya al-Joubayhy for being a "Saudi spy".

The young leader of the Houthis, Abdul-Malik al-Houthi warned in 2016: "The media are more dangerous to our country than the nationalist and warring mercenaries."

Facebook, Twitter and YouTube are the frontlines of this battlefield. Yemen is often referred to as the "forgotten war" because of lack of media coverage. However, even with the destruction of infrastructure, patchy cellular networks remain operational, and the Internet

was never switched off the forces. Even as media found it difficult to enter Yemen, the activists and witnesses inside have continued to put out images and updates on the Web. Leading Yemen's twitterati is Hisham al-Omeisy who was picked up on August 12 by the Houthis and has hasn't been heard since.

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In a country where Kalashnikovs are fired at weddings and grenades thrown in joy, when the war arrived, Ammar's neighbour calmed petrified children by telling them it was just a "celebration". With no electricity, Sana'a was covered in darkness. From the balcony, they'd watch the tracer shells from WWII era anti-aircraft guns light up the darkness. Often the shells would crash down or spray small metal shards. They seldom reached the target, the Saudi F15s. The bombers would target at random: military installations and homes, chicken farms and mountains. No one was safe. Ammar, a film maker, had settled into a nervous rhythm and on October 6, 2016, while he chewed *khat* with friends in the afternoon, he heard a massive explosion, and then another.

Their phones began to beep and ring.

The Al-Kobra Grand Hall had been hit while mourners gathered for the funeral of the Minister of Interior's father. "It's a mess," he was told. Mourners had been trapped as chandeliers, air-conditioners and the ceiling caved in. Many were buried in the rubble. Under the hall were the guards with RPGs. These exploded. The Grand Hall went up in flames fast.

Videos began to stream into his Facebook feed. People were taking pictures with their mobiles and he was seeing chopped hands, a brain spilt on the ground. State TV didn't censor anything. Hadi's channel didn't censor anything. "Day after day, they'd show horrible images," he says. He'd hear people talk; someone found a hand in the garden or a head on the roof.

He decided to make a movie about the attack. "It's my work of art not to show blood," he says. Instead he spoke to families: to a young woman, a dentist who had just given birth and refused to believe her husband died. They haven't found his body. To a 10 year-old who was protected by his father's dead body. BBC was on the scene in a rare appearance. Its segment concluded by confirming that the missile responsible was American and not British. On the seventh day he completed *The Great Crime*, of Saudi war crimes in his city.

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The attack on the funeral shook the international community. Initially, Saudi Arabia denied that jets from the coalition had been involved. But in a later statement "about the regrettable and painful bombing," it accepted responsibility. The statement claimed that the attack which killed at least 140 people was based on "wrong information" provided by an unnamed party.

The US responded quickly. The National Security Council conducted an “immediate review” of its support for the coalition, claiming that “US security cooperation with Saudi Arabia is not a blank check”. America is crucial to Saudi Arabia’s mission: not only does it provide arms and logistical support but provides mid-air refuelling for Saudi warplanes. Without this, they would not be able to bomb Yemen. On June 13, a resolution to stop the sale of precision guarded munitions to Saudi Arabia was defeated by a 53-47 vote in the Senate.

The United Kingdom too is heavily invested in this war. Immediately after the strike at the funeral, the UK said it would present a draft resolution to the UN Security Council which calls for an immediate ceasefire. An earlier draft was rejected by Russia for not being strong enough. The new resolution would counter resolution 2216 that remains the key Security Council decision on Yemen. But the new draft was never circulated, apparently after pressure from Saudi Arabia.

Amnesty International has accused the US and UK of covering for Saudi Arabia. “They have received political support, logistical support, intelligence support and the provision of weaponry from the key allies the US and UK,” says James Lynch, Deputy Director of *Global Issue*. Since the attack on the funeral, the UK and US have increased arms export to Saudi Arabia during this conflict. In May 2017, President Trump signed an arms deal with Saudi Arabia worth \$10 billion on what he described as a tremendous day. He called the bombs “beautiful.” Six months after the funeral strike, the British government approved a £283-million arms sale to Saudi Arabia. This includes combat aircraft components to the Saudi air force, bombs and missiles. New research by War Child UK found that British arms companies have earned more than £6 billion from trade with the Saudis during the war in Yemen.

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Murad began weaving a narrative even before a bulldozer threw up dust as it cleared rubble from Sana’a’s streets. The façade of the building had been torn and all that remained was a wall. He drew a yellow hourglass but instead of sand he painted skulls.

Concrete, brick and stone skirted a classroom; a tree had collapsed next to a yellow desk in the courtyard of the school. On a wall he drew a mural of a child with a grenade instead of a textbook in his hand. His work appeared across Sana’a, it combined artistic expression with social and political commentary in a country where journalists were under lock and key.

He wanted to get into Taiz, a city under siege. He rented a car and travelled with a woman friend, a photographer. If the Houthi rebels thought they were family they were less likely to be stopped across the many checkpoints. They left Sana’a at 3 a.m. They wanted to get back after sunset on the same day. They took the long road because they had no other option. A four-hour journey took them 19 hours. They drove past bombed out villages and across cities like Dhamar where it seemed as though no building was left unbombed. On the road to Ibb a crucial bridge had been blown up. They took another route and drove through a small river.

Taiz, the cultural heart of Yemen, is a city on its knees under a Houthi siege. Women smuggle medicines under their burqas, cars are prohibited from the ring road and donkeys ply over mountains with essential supplies. Murad wanted to target areas that were destroyed. It was impossible to get in, so he went as far as he could. He painted on a rusted pipe in the al-hwban area. A picture of a young girl in a dress watering a rose that grew out of a mortar.

He tried to keep working. The three art shops of Sana'a remained open. But during war, he said, "It is not one of the important things to care about." The embargo, the blockade, the siege meant that there was a 100-150 per cent increase in prices. A 5 ml pot of colour used to cost 850 rial and now costs 1700 rial. It's been four months since he's made anything. He needs to sell paintings that will support his work on the streets. He doesn't want anyone to pay for that, he doesn't want to affect the message's honesty.

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Parts of the country are rubble. Rather than moving towards dialogue, the coalition and allied fighters have opened a new front in Saada, the Houthi heartland. Over the past decades both Saudi Arabia and Saleh sponsored Salafi-Wahhabi madrassas and used Sunni Islamists for political goals. The aim was to weaken the Zaydi elite. The attack began on Ashura began in October 2016. Border towns was taken by coalition fighters despite the stiff resistance from the Houthi forces. They moved towards Kutaf, once a site for a popular Salafi madrasa and centre for anti-Shia agitation. Members of Yemen's Wa'ila tribe, some of whom have adopted the Saudi brand of Salafi-Wahhabism, offered the Saudi-allied fighters shelter. Soon the mercenaries, the "Afghan-Arabs" arrived on the scene. There is footage on YouTube which shows AQAP fighters fighting alongside the coalition forces.

The Wa'ila who had fought wars with the Houthis saw this as a moment to exact revenge and have integrated with Saudi-paid Sudanese fighters in the offensive against Saada which was under Houthi control since March 2017. The Houthis have not suffered in silence: They have fired Katyusha rockets on a Saudi army stronghold in Jizan. In an intense battle four cars came to a military position and carried off the bodies of four soldiers while Saudi soldiers pulled the bodies of their wounded men. Later in the month, the Houthi snipers killed six Saudi soldiers in Jizan. In June 7 Saudi soldiers were shot at the Alab crossing. The Saudi offensive, however, was met with stiff resistance. Politically this is headed for disaster since Hadi has appointed a Wa'ila tribesman, Hadi Tirshan al-Wa'ili, a dedicated Salafi, as governor of Saada.

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On May 7, the coalition dropped leaflets warning Saada residents to leave. Ten days later, UN satellites showed that a total of 1,171 structures in Saada city had been damaged or destroyed by air strikes.

There's no water in the pipes. Electricity was cut on day one of the war. More than 350 trucks with wheat flour, sugar and salt were hit while delivering aid. Most villages on the border have been destroyed and the toll in Saada stands at 3,000 civilians. This is the frontline of

the war where Saada's famed grape farms are targets. More than 50 farms were attacked by airstrikes in one go. Ninety per cent of the population here is displaced.

"The Yemeni flag has never left Marran," says Loai who works with internally displaced persons. "But unfortunately Hadi flies the the KSA and UAE in Aden and not the Yemeni."

The Houthis retaliate with long-range rocket strikes and cross-border raids into Saudi Arabia. These have grown more powerful since late May 2017. The arsenal supposedly has BM-21 and BM-27 multiple rocket launchers and advanced Iranian-supplied anti-tank systems such as the Metis-M, Kornet-E, and RPG-29. Saudi homes are pockmarked with shrapnel. Missiles fired by Houthi rebels land in the towns of Najran and Gizan and have the power to reach Makkah according to Saudi Arabia. Between June 6, 2015 and November 26, the Saudi authorities counted 37 missiles fired from Yemen into their territory.

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In 2013 after Yemen averted a civil war, a Facebook post announced the setting up of a book club at Sana'a's Coffee Corner. It became a place for heated discussions, got invited by the US embassy, and its fame reached the hinterland. Bashir from Dhamar travelled 100 km to attend the weekly meetings.

In 2014, the book club met at Dhamar's Bardouni Library, named after Yemen's most famous poet. They read *Love in the Time of Cholera* by Gabriel Garcias Marquez. Clouds of war engulfed the country.

In 2015, the war rained down. Sana'a was bombed day and night; a bomb exploded next to Coffee Corner, which was badly hit. On May 27, a military camp near the Bardouni library in Dhamar was bombed. The windows of the library shattered and the nearby museum that housed 12,500 artefacts, the oldest dating to about 10,000 BCE was flattened.

By 2016, most book club members had fled the country. For those who remain, life is hard. Wages aren't paid; many flee to the countryside. The airport at Sana'a is shut. Books no longer come in. Over the months, the Bardouni library fixed its windows, and a depleted book club reassembled. "Everyone is frustrated," says Bashir, the organiser.

In 2017, a country of killing fields, rubble and starvation remains. In Taiz, another book club run by al-Qaeda in the Arabian Peninsula is set up. The book they read is titled *This is Our Message*, an al-Qaeda manifesto, and members are invited to join a contest to summarise it in 30 pages. The first place submission gets a brand new Chinese-made automatic rifle, the second place a motorcycle, third place a pistol, fourth place a laptop with mobile phones and cash prizes for the other winners.

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The coalition's targeting of weapons storage facilities in areas controlled by the Houthi-Saleh forces has contributed to the scattering of military equipment. Saudi Arabia has played a role in weapons proliferation by supplying arms to militant groups without ensuring

accountability. There is footage of weapons airdropped into Aden, which have ended up in the hands of extremists. In Taiz, armoured vehicles similar to those used by the opposition are being used by resistance fighters affiliated to a Salafist group called the “Emirate of Protectors of the Creed.”

America has tolerated this, despite its aim being the defeat of the very people it indirectly is arming. In the January 2017 raid the US targeted and killed AQAP tribal leader Sheikh Abdel Raoud al-Dhahab. In the lead up to the US raid, al-Dhahab was in a meeting with Hadi’s military chief of staff where he was paid \$60,000 to join Hadi’s fight against the Houthis. There is a black market for weapons and resistance fighters offer to sell small arms and light weapons on social media.

Armed Salafists have been mobilised in resistance-held urban areas like Aden and Taiz. Salafist preachers use mosques and Friday sermons to galvanise and mobilise local supporters. AQAP has used the pretext of Sunni defence against the Shia Houthis to blend with local tribes and Salafi sympathisers and get access to weapons.

In November 2014, ISIS entered the Yemeni jihadi sphere through a tweet pledging allegiance to al-Baghdadi. Competition between al-Qaeda and ISIS is building up. ISIS has claimed responsibility for more than 20 operations in Aden, Bayda, Dhamar and Sana’a. In March the group killed 140 people in a double suicide bombing in Sana’a in two mosques used mainly by supporters of the Houthi rebels. In October they targeted government ministers and coalition forces at the Qasr hotel in Aden. In December they killed the Governor of Aden, Major General Jaafar Moahmmmed Saad, in a car bombing. But AQAP is still stronger than ISIS.

A 2017 UN report states, “Terrorist groups such as Al-Qaida in the Arabian Peninsula (AQAP) and the Islamic State in Iraq and the Levant (ISIL) affiliate in Yemen are now actively exploiting the changing political environment and governance vacuums to recruit new members and stage new attacks and are laying the foundation for terrorist networks that may last for years.”

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Abdel Latif, a coffee merchant, spoke of an ancient Yemen, of villages perched on mountain tops and boxy mud brick houses etched with white filigree. The locals spoke of a Sufi saint from 1450 who drank a magical potion, a chocolaty, dark, thick syrup and was able to pray deep into the night. Coffee. Soon its trees began to transform the mountains, terraced hillsides thrived as farmers invented new techniques. If Ethiopia was the source of coffee, Yemen was instrumental in bringing coffee to the world through a port called Mokha. The Dutch East Indies Company used Mokha as a bridge between Ethiopia and India and brought coffee cultivation to Indonesia. Coffee from Mokha made its way to destination further west, to the island of Martinique and Central America.

Over time government neglect saw the fortunes of Mokha fall while the famed mocha coffee made way for the more lucrative *khat* trade. But since the beginning of the war, something has been changing in the valleys. Civil servants who hadn't been paid for months were returning to their villages and old plantations were back in action. General Suleiman, a career officer from Saleh's army had been trained in Europe and the US. After a three-decade career in the army and months with no salary, he quit at 50 and returned to his ancestral farm. He planted 5,000 coffee trees this season and was preparing to plant another 5,000 for the next, transforming the village in Anis.

"It is so magical here," he said. "The war is far from these villages. They are still as they were."

But the war made itself felt: the blockade meant bags imported from India and America, necessary to pack the coffee, were slow to arrive. A web of checkpoints from Sana'a to Aden hiked transport costs, a journey that would ordinarily take six hours took 12. The delays affected the quality of the coffee. But when the Mocha Haima was brought to the market, it was divine and sold for \$280 per kg in Sana'a governorate. This caught the attention of some farmers and thus began Latif's goal: to replace *khat* with coffee, to revive Mokha and its coffee.

When he heard about the attack on the port of Mokha, he recited a quote: "But man is not made for defeat. A man can be destroyed but not defeated," from Ernest Hemingway's *Old Man and the Sea*.

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The Gate of Tears or the Bab al Mandeb is strait between the horn of Africa and the Middle East. With Yemen on one side and Djibouti on the other, it is a chokepoint, a narrow but vital waterway, essential for international maritime trade between Europe and Asia. It links the Mediterranean Sea and Indian Ocean through which million barrels of crude oil on supertankers navigate every day.

In October 2016, the Spanish-flagged merchant tanker *Galicia Spirit* was attacked by a RPG fired from a small speedboat. Two days later, the liquefied natural gas tanker *Melati Satu* was attacked in the same area, again with RPGs. It was rescued by a Saudi Arabian naval vessel. Warships USS *Mason* and USS *Ponce*, were attacked from the Yemen coastline and responded by launching cruise missile strikes at targets in Yemen. It was only after the attack on HSV-2 *Swift*, a UAE flagged vessel that was rendered inoperable, that the Houthis claimed responsibility. In January, they attacked a Saudi frigate killing two sailors. In May 2017 a small boat exploded in a thwarted attack on a tanker, while in June an oil tanker came under the fire of three rocket-propelled grenades. An international naval coalition is stepping up its presence in response to what is believed to be Houthi attacks.

Hadi's government and the Saudi-led coalition accuse the rebel forces of using the ports to smuggle arms from Iran and other suppliers. It is alleged that militias are using Zagar and Hanish islands to smuggle weapons

Security Council Resolution 2216 authorises the coalition to enforce an arms embargo against Houthi forces and those loyal to Saleh but measures have gone too far. Ships have been delayed for up to four weeks before receiving a permit to enter. Ninety per cent of Yemen's food and 8 per cent of its medical supplies are imported. At the start of the war only 15 per cent of pre-crisis imports were entering Yemen. As fuel for the generator at the main hospital began to run out, the UN began warning about the risk of famine. There is talk of an impending Saudi attack on the port of Hodeida. This next phase of war will make the siege of Yemen complete and leaving its people with nowhere to flee.

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***(The cover story of the October 2017 edition of Fountain Ink)***

**(Update, Nov 6, 2017:** The story has been edited to better reflect the changing situation in Yemen's ongoing war.)

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