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**Covid-19 in the Gulf
Special Coverage**

**Covid-19 in War-Ravaged Yemen: Ends or doubles the war?
Betul Dogan-Akkas**

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Introduction

Yemen is a suffering war zone since the beginning of the civil war in 2014, out of the clash between Yemeni government in Sana'a' and the Northern tribes, mainly, the Houthi insurgents. As of 2020, after two military interventions by the Saudi-led coalition the Operation Decisive Storm and the Operation Restoring Hope in 2015, the conditions for the people of Yemen are not endurable neither politically nor economically, considering the catastrophic impact of an open war, the blockade, cholera and finally Covid-19,.

Yemen was already the poorest country in the Arabian Peninsula suffering from a variety of issues related to unemployment, chronic food insecurity, lack of clean water and sanitation system, repeated local conflicts and lack of central authority. Estimated number of people killed in turmoil since 2015 has reached [100,000](#), over 8000 of them are civilians; and 20,000 air raids by the Saudi-led coalition have been reported so far, according to the [Yemen Data Project](#). Due to the ongoing conflict, more than [three million people](#) have been displaced, and over 24 million people –more than half of the total population- requires humanitarian aid.

Particularly in the food security, Yemen faces the most catastrophic case in the world. The [UN data](#) indicated that with the protracted crisis, over 17 million people are in acute need of food, they are struggling with the starvation. Even

before the coronavirus, Yemen has been fighting against cholera with the highest number of suspected cases in recent history with [more than 2.3 million people since 2017](#). [The UNICEF states](#) the number of children that needs urgent treatment for malnutrition is over 2 million, which makes them more vulnerable to the coronavirus than anybody else. The first three of the [UN's 16 sustainable development](#) goals for Yemen are “no poverty, zero hunger and good health and well-being”. The sixth goal is “access to clean water and sanitation” that is another critical problem for a society with the lowest levels of immunity. In the absence of these vital factors for safe, healthy and clean-living conditions, the outbreak of Covid-19 can terribly affect the entire county.

The very first confirmed case of the virus was reported on [April 1 in the eastern province of Hadramout](#); however, the aid groups working with international and local agencies were already preparing the country for the outbreak since mid of March. Schools and universities had already been closed since March, and the movement of people between the Houthi controlled areas and Yemeni government of President Hadi territory have been limited. By the mid of March, activists and health specialists have demanded the authorities to take the threats posed by the virus seriously by meeting the required precautions. The country's health system is already fragile and shattered, heavily depending on foreign aid. [Dr Sameh Al-Awlaqi](#), who is a public health specialist from Yemen, adds social dimensions to these

worsening health conditions. The qat chews, which is a social practice encouraging close contacts, may lead to the spread of the virus. A [social campaign](#) to increase public awareness thus is also a key element to help society against the virus with informing them, in addition to material supports with food, medication, clean water and sanitation. Dr Al-Awlaqi states the collaboration of the WHO with the Yemeni Ministry of Health in Sana'a and Aden to provide screening testing kits for the coronavirus to prepare the fragile health system of the country since March.

The Ceasefire and Cut of Funds

After the UN's call for the all parties of the conflict in Yemen to quit fighting to cope with potential threats from COVID-19, on April 8, the Saudi-led coalition forces [announced](#) a two-week ceasefire and then extended it [by one month](#). However, the donors for supporting the Yemeni society against famine have decided to cut the funds that are sending the Houthi controlled areas. The spokesperson of the USAID explained the reasoning behind the decision of reducing financial assistance as an outcome of unacceptable interference by the Iranian backed Houthis. This move will have a definite negative impact on the conditions in Yemen because the [USAID provides](#) the second-biggest financial support to Yemen, following the Saudis. Its annual pledge was \$746M last year and, it was mainly transferred to the government-controlled regions. With similar concerns, the [World Food Programme \(WFP\) announced](#) that they are planning to halve the aid to Yemen to

prevent the use of funds by the rebellions referring to the Houthis.

Political calculations always play a role in the distribution of funds and financial support; however, the potential impact of the spread of coronavirus will not select among areas controlled by the Houthis or the government forces. The food provided by the WFP feeds over 12 million Yemenis a month, and almost 80 per cent of them are in the Houthi-held region. The worsening conditions in Yemen without sustainable food or healthcare can enormously trigger the spread of the virus. The evidence collected worldwide suggests that even under heavy mobility restrictions the virus spreads very fast. The Yemenis thus will not be safe, if the international and local agencies do not implement an emergency plan including the regions controlled by the various forces.

The Houthis already [rejected the ceasefire](#) and announced a list of wishes to end the conflict under the supervision of the UN. They defined the Saudis decision of ceasefire as a media maneuver. Although they continue military actions in Marib leading further displacement of people in the outbreak of a pandemic, [the vision](#) they announced includes a section for a joint governmental body to fight against the Covid-19. According to this, the UN and the Saudi-led coalition forces will be fully responsible for providing equipment for the entire country. Meanwhile, both the Houthis and Yemeni government of President Hadi have released prisoners to prevent the spread of the virus. In addition to ongoing fight in the North, despite the ceasefire, and the spread of virus, a strong flood hit the Southern Yemen, mainly Aden. The Yemeni government already declared Aden an area of

disaster due to damages including civilian casualties and destruction of infrastructure caused by flash floods.

A Joint Response or Total Destruction

The very fluid situation as a result of the conflict makes difficult to determine which area is controlled by every party. The territories under the control of the different fighting forces – the central government, the Houthis, the Souther Transitional Council (STC)- have been changing hands frequently. However, according to the research platforms and news agencies, there are at least four sources of power ([Yemeni government of President Hadi](#), [STC](#), [The Houthis](#), [AQAP and ISIS](#)) in Yemen that are supported by the external powers. The UN talks between the Houthis and the central government supported by the Saudi-led coalition are the primary process can lead to a peace. Yemen thus is far away from being controlled politically nor territorially by one power, neither internal nor external. The absence of a unified response is the biggest problem in the fight against the spread of the pandemic.

Since the impact of coronavirus is discernible even in the most developed countries with good governance and extended health system, this could encourage the warring parties to think more peace-oriented. The pandemic could worsen conditions in Yemen without differentiating the Houthis, the government supporters or the Southerners. The spread of virus thus can convince the parties for peace to prevent the total destruction of the population. If it does not, then Yemen definitely faces two wars at the same time. However, so far, neither the

cease-fire is fully implemented, nor the parties of conflict agreed on a coronavirus plan. The violence has continued under the declared and the extended cease-fire because the Houthis demand the lifting of air and sea blockades before accepting it. Meanwhile, [the SCT took further steps](#) to strengthen its independency and ordered that all taxes in Hadi's government controlled bank in Aden to be deposited in its bank accounts. Under the current conditions, war-ravaged Yemen struggles the most due to the disunity, which is the curse for any potential solution towards the civil war, cholera, food insecurity or Covid-19.

About the author

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About the Gulf Insights series:

The "Gulf Insights" series is published by the Gulf Studies Center on a weekly base with the aim to promote informed debate with academic depth. The Gulf Insights are commentaries on pressing regional issues written by the GSC/GSP faculty, staff PhD and MA students, as well as guest scholars, and they can be between 1,200 to 1,500 words.

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