Jake Longworth examines how the conflict in Yemen has escalated and the part that outside forces have played in making a complex situation worse

YEMEN:
INTRACTABLE CONFLICT AND THE GROWTH OF EXTREMISM

I've worked in war zones for the past 11 or 12 years, in some of the worst conflicts like Syria" wrote Michael Seawright, a project coordinator for Médecins Sans Frontières in Sa'dah, "but I have never seen such destruction conducted in such a short period as in Yemen".

Since the Houthi Movement seized Sana'a, Yemen's Capital City, in September 2014, the conflict in Yemen has escalated at an unexpected pace. The Houthis, a Zaidi Shi'a group from Northern Yemen, carried out a string of protests in Sana'a in August 2014, calling for the resignation of President Abd Rabbuh Mansur Hadi and the reversal of fuel subsidy cuts. When a group of Houthi demonstrators were fired upon by security forces in North-West Sana'a early the following month, Houthi forces began mobilising for a military push into the city. Beginning their assault in earnest on 19th September, the Houthis fought off limited resistance from Yemeni Army units affiliated with General Ali Mohsen al-Ahmar and the conservative Sunni Al-Islah Party, declaring their control over Sana'a within a matter of days.

Subsequent negotiations between the Houthis and President Hadi's cabinet were consistently mired by disagreements. In January 2015 the Houthis rejected a proposed constitution, which would see Yemen divided into six federal regions, instead expressing support for two regions reminiscent of Yemen prior to its unification in 1990. By 6th February, in a televised statement, the Houthis announced that they would be taking control of the country, sparking mass protest in Southern Yemen.

Houthi militants, with the support of army units loyal to exiled former Yemeni President Ali Abdullah Saleh, made significant advances into the South of the country, reaching the outskirts of Aden on 25th March 2015. This day coincided with the beginning of the Saudi-led intervention in Yemen, which saw a coalition of nine Arab states embark on a bombing campaign of Houthi-controlled territory and a naval blockade of Yemen's ports. While Houthi militants were eventually driven out of Aden by Hadi-loyalists and Saudi-coalition forces in July, a stalemate has persisted in Ta'izz, Al Bayda' and Ma'rib.

As of 28th January 2016, a UN Agency has declared that "more than half of the total population of Yemen – some 14.4 million people – are food insecure, as on-going conflict and import restrictions have reduced the availability of essential foods and sent prices soaring". Oxfam also recently put the death toll after nine months of fighting at 5,500, with over 26,500 injured. UN and locally brokered ceasefires have been persistently violated and peace talks have failed to gain much traction. Evidence of human rights violations and war crimes committed by both sides is also building.

Unfortunately, the outlook for Yemen remains bleak. Resolution of the conflict is likely to take years,

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rather than months. While the international media has portrayed the Yemen conflict as a 'proxy war' between Saudi Arabia and Iran, and as a simplistic sectarian struggle for power, the reality is far more complex.

Firstly, Tehran's material support to the Houthis and influence over the war appears to have been overstated. A leaked cable from a senior US advisor in Sana'a, published in 2009, stated that "despite Yemen's seemingly heartfelt concerns that Iran is backing the Houthi rebels and the Republic of Yemen's Government's desire to convince its powerful friends (the US and Saudi Arabia) of Iran's nefarious intentions in Yemen, it has to date been unable to produce any concrete evidence of what it says is wide-scale meddling". The Saudi-led naval blockade of Yemen has also prevented the Houthis from receiving much in the way of external support. While regional geopolitics may have driven the Kingdom of Saudi Arabia to prevent the Iranians from gaining a potential foothold on its Southern border, evidence of Iranian support for the Houthis has largely been confined to media propaganda and diplomacy.

Militiamen show their support for the Huthi rebels

Secondly, while sectarianism is sometimes used as a divisive tool to achieve conflict objectives in Yemen, especially by groups such as Islamic State and Al Qaeda in the Arabian Peninsula (AQAP), it is tribal and political disputes that tend to form the basis of grievances in the country. A Sunni and Shi'a divide has been exacerbated by the Saudi-led intervention in Yemen and by the aforementioned terrorist groups, but framing the conflict in sectarian terms obscures the intricacies of underlying domestic disputes.

Thirdly, and clouding the picture further, alliances in Yemen tend to be superficial, quickly breaking down when common objectives are achieved. For example, while the Houthis have received relatively open support from Ali Abdullah Saleh and his army during their recent uprising, they fought several wars against the former President's Government from 2004 to 2010. As Al-Jazeera journalist Farea Al-Muslimi writes, "a key to the success of peace negotiations with Saleh and the Houthis is recognising them as separate entities with differing agendas" despite their current military alliance.

Similarly, in attempting to oust the Houthis from Aden in 2015, Hadi drew on the support of al-Hirak, a popular Southern movement that has sought independence from Northern Yemen since 2007. Once the Houthis had been driven out of the port city, divisions between al-Hirak and Hadi's support base quickly re-emerged. Hadi has historically been opposed to a divided Yemen, which could later undermine his political popularity in the South where he has found the majority of his support.

Bloodied from over a year of violent civil war, Yemen's multiple conflict protagonists, both domestic and foreign, have developed divergent and increasingly entrenched ideas of what the country's future will look like. A conflict that began primarily over issues of human welfare and political representation has morphed into a clash of identity, exacerbated by a downward spiral of violence that has proliferated mutual distrust and a resistance to resolution. Speaking to the UN Security Council in December 2015, UN High Commissioner for Human Rights, Zeid Ra'ad Al Hussein, stated that a "failure to act decisively does not only spell misery for the millions of vulnerable people in Yemen today. It would inevitably push the country into an irreversible process of Balkanisation, the consequences of which would lie outside of anyone's control". The complete disintegration of Yemen is avoidable through constructive dialogue, but the Saudi-led intervention supported by American and British arms sales and military advisors, has left a prominent stain on the negotiating table. Iraq, Afghanistan, Syria and now Yemen are a testament to the failure of modern military interventions premised on ruthless self-interest.

Yet the conflict in Yemen has had two unlikely beneficiaries. Unfortunately, for Yemen and the rest of the world, this has been AQAP and Islamic State. With

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Hadi's forces' and the Saudi-coalition's eyes myopically focussed on battling the Houthis, both radical groups have been given ample space to expand their networks in Southern Yemen. AQAP is one of Al Qaeda's strongest and most dangerous modern franchises. Al Qaeda in Yemen has been responsible for past terrorist attacks such as the bombing of the USS Cole in 2000, the bombing of the tanker MT Limburg in 2002 and claimed responsibility for the Charlie Hebdo shootings in Paris in 2015. Since the outbreak of civil war in Yemen, AQAP has annexed control of Al Mukalla, an Eastern port city in Hadramawt Province and areas of Abyan, Aden, Al Bayda', Ma'rib, Shabwah and Ta'izz. As Saudi-coalition and pro-Hadi forces drove the Houthis out of Southern-most Yemen, AQAP fighters were quick to fill the security vacuum in their wake. The group has used the conflict to unite with Sunni tribes, framing the Shia Houthi expansion as a threat to the Sunni-controlled order in the country. The group has managed to simultaneously engage the Houthis, while continuing assassinations and bombings intended to undermine Hadi's regime.

While AQAP has undoubtedly stoked a Shia-Sunni divide in Yemen to achieve its goals, it is Yemen's emerging Islamic State cells that have thrown fuel on the sectarian fire. Pro-Islamic State groups in Yemen began organising themselves into 'Wilayats' (provinces) in late 2014, with cells operating in at least eight Yemeni governorates. On 20th March 2015, Wilayat-Sana'a carried out the group's first major attack in Yemen; coordinated suicide bombings at Shia Mosques in Sana'a and Sa'ada, killing 137 people. Islamic State has carried out multiple Shia Mosque bombings since, most notably the Ramadan vehicle-borne improvised explosive device attacks at the al Kibsi and al Qubah al Khadra Mosques in Sana'a, which killed at least 20 people, and the suicide bombing of the al-Balili Mosque, also in Yemen's capital city, which led to 25 fatalities. Islamic State has conducted similar attacks in neighbouring gulf nations in order to stimulate sectarian rivalry and mistrust.

Both groups are seeking to gain a monopoly over violent Jihad in Yemen and abroad, but Islamic State in Yemen does not currently pose a direct challenge to AQAP's existing hegemony, which is built upon an extensive leadership structure and a nuanced understanding of Yemen's tribal and political landscape. AQAP has distanced itself from Islamic State's more barbarous attacks, citing guidelines from Sheikh Ayman al Zawahiri against "targeting mosques, markets, and public places out of concern for the lives of innocent Muslims". However, with no groups directly engaging AQAP and IS on the ground aside from the Houthis, their expansion will continue largely unchecked. This will have severe repercussions for the future stability of the Yemeni state.

Businesses with existing interests in Yemen, or those eyeing the country for future investment, must accept that Yemen's path to peace is set to be long and fragile. No conflict is beyond eventual resolution, but the growth of extremist groups in Yemen gives cause for concern, both internally and internationally. Even if a ceasefire is brokered at a national level, local conflicts are likely to endure in the absence of any centralised security governance. AQAP and Islamic State will also do everything they can to derail the process of reconciliation. Attacks on energy infrastructure, kidnappings, assassinations, tribal militancy, bombings and unrest have been features of Yemen's thorny security landscape for some time, but these threats won't fade until the conflict protagonists embark upon an earnest attempt to pursue political dialogue over violence. Only then can the scourge of AQAP and Islamic State be confined and confronted.

The Saudi-led coalition can never 'win' in Yemen and their intervention could protract the conflict indefinitely by supporting a President whose legitimacy to rule a united country has evaporated. Once the conditions for a ceasefire have been met, UN-sponsored peace talks should occur without the self-interested meddling of regional powers whose own disputes will only increase the odds against resolution.

For Yemen to raise itself from the rubble, it must be helped to make peace with itself and not have a peace imposed upon it.

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A Muslim Yemeni girl holds a flag bearing an image of Huthi leader Abdul-Malik al-Houthi

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