Yemen crises

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Yemen, one of the Arab world's poorest countries, has been devastated by a civil war. Here we explain what is fuelling the fighting, and who is involved.

How did the war start?

The conflict has its roots in the failure of a political transition supposed to bring stability to Yemen following an Arab Spring uprising that forced its longtime authoritarian president, Ali Abdullah Saleh, to hand over power to his deputy, Abdrabbuh Mansour Hadi, in 2011.

As president, Mr Hadi struggled to deal with a variety of problems, including attacks by jihadists, a separatist movement in the south, the continuing loyalty of security personnel to Saleh, as well as corruption, unemployment and food insecurity.

The Houthi movement (known formally as Ansar Allah), which champions Yemen's Zaidi Shia Muslim minority (with the help of ex president Saleh), took advantage of the new president's weakness by taking control of their northern heartland of Saada province and neighbouring areas.

Disillusioned with the transition, many ordinary Yemenis - including Sunnis - supported the Houthis, and in late 2014 and early 2015 the rebels gradually took over the capital Sanaa. Then attempted to take control of the entire country, forcing Mr Hadi to flee abroad in March 2015.

Saudi Arabia interference and its coalition with eight Sunni Arab states to fight Houthi rebels (backed by ex president Saleh)

Alarmed by the rise of a group they believed to be backed militarily by regional Shia power Iran, Saudi Arabia and eight other mostly Sunni Arab states began an air campaign aimed at defeating the Houthis, ending Iranian influence in Yemen and restoring Mr Hadi's government. The coalition received logistical and intelligence support from the US, UK and France. Coalition ground troops landed in the southern port city of Aden in August 2015 and helped drive the Houthis and their allies out of much of the south.

Mr Hadi's government has established a temporary home in Aden, but it struggles to provide basic services and security and the president continues to be based in Saudi Arabia. The Houthis rebels still have control of Sanaa and north-western Yemen. They have been able to maintain a siege of the third city of Taiz and to launch regular ballistic missile and drone attacks on Saudi Arabia.

The launch of a ballistic missile towards Riyadh in November 2017 prompted the Saudi-led coalition to tighten its blockade of Yemen. It said it wanted to halt the smuggling of weapons to the rebels by Iran - an accusation Tehran denied - but the restrictions led to substantial
increases in the prices of food and fuel, helping to push more people into food insecurity. The alliance between the Houthis and Ali Abdullah Saleh (Ex president) also collapsed in November 2017 following deadly clashes over control of Sanaa’s biggest mosque. Houthi fighters launched an operation to take full control of the capital and Saleh was killed.

Rise of Militant group AQAP

Militants from al-Qaeda in the Arabian Peninsula (AQAP) and the local affiliate of the rival Islamic State group (IS) have taken advantage of the chaos by seizing territory in the south and carrying out deadly attacks, notably in Aden.

Battle for port city Hudaydah (Pt SHOT)

In June 2018, the coalition attempted to launch an attack to capture from the Houthis, the Red Sea city of Hudaydah, whose port is the principal lifeline for almost two thirds of Yemen’s population. The UN warned that the port’s destruction would lead to massive loss of life due to famine.

Stockholm agreement

After six months of fighting, the warring parties agreed a ceasefire at talks in Sweden. The Stockholm agreement required them to redeploy their forces from Hudaydah, establish a prisoner exchange mechanism. While hundreds of prisoners have since been released, the full redeployment of forces from Hudaydah has not yet taken place, raising fears that the Stockholm agreement will collapse and that the battle for Hudaydah will resume.

Fight among the coalition backed government and its ally Southern Transition Council

In August 2019, infighting erupted in the south between Saudi-backed government forces and an ostensibly allied southern separatist movement supported by the United Arab Emirates, the Southern Transitional Council (STC). Forces loyal to the STC, which accused Mr Hadi of mismanagement and links to Islamists, seized control of Aden and refused to allow the cabinet to return until Saudi Arabia brokered a power-sharing deal that November.

The UN hoped the agreement would clear the way for a political settlement to end the civil war, but in January 2020 there was a sudden escalation in hostilities between the Houthis and coalition-led forces, with fighting on several front lines, missile strikes and air raids.

Impact of war

Yemen is experiencing the world’s worst humanitarian crisis.

1. The UN had verified the deaths of at least 7,500 civilians by September 2019, with most caused by Saudi-led coalition air strikes.

2. Thousands more civilians have died from preventable causes, including malnutrition, disease and poor health.
3. It is estimated that 85,000 children with severe acute malnutrition might have died between April 2015 and October 2018.

4. Almost 20 million people lack access to adequate healthcare

5. Almost 18 million do not have enough clean water or access to adequate sanitation.

6. The largest cholera outbreak ever recorded, which has resulted in more than 2.2 million suspected cases and 3,895 related deaths since October 2016.

7. About 80% of the population - 24 million people - need humanitarian assistance and protection.

Some 20 million people need help securing food, according to the UN. Almost 10 million of them are considered "one step away from famine".

Why should this matter for the rest of the world?

1. It also worries the West because of the threat of attacks - such as from al-Qaeda or IS affiliates - emanating from the country as it becomes more unstable.

2. The conflict is also seen as part of a regional power struggle between Shia-ruled Iran and Sunni-ruled Saudi Arabia.

3. Yemen is also strategically important because it sits on a strait linking the Red Sea with the Gulf of Aden, through which much of the world's oil shipments pass.