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By Jean Shaoul
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COVID-19 will compound catastrophic impact of Saudi Arabia's war on Yemen

Yemen officially reported its first case of COVID-19 on Friday, raising the spectre of calamity in the poorest country in the Middle East. Its health care system has been destroyed by five years of war waged against the country by a Saudi-led coalition backed to the hilt by Washington and London. Its people are starving, and cholera, an entirely treatable disease, and more recently dengue fever, is widespread.

The deadly virus may well have spread more widely, given the fragile state of Yemen's infrastructure and at least 4,934 cases and 65 deaths in neighbouring Saudi Arabia, and 4,521 cases and 25 deaths in the United Arab Emirates (UAE), both of whose forces have been fighting in Yemen.

The COVID-19 announcement came as UN humanitarian agencies are slashing their aid programmes, which include assistance for health, sanitation, water, malnutrition and the fight against cholera in the country, because of lack of funding. The UN's World Food Programme, which feeds more than 12 million Yemenis a month, said it was halving aid to areas under Houthi control because donors, notably the US, have cut their funding, claiming the rebels are diverting and weaponizing aid.

USAID has cut its funding for north Yemen by \$200 million annually in a bid to force Houthi rebels, who control Yemen's most populous region in the country's north including the capital Sanaa and are on the point of defeating Washington's Saudi-led proxies, to agree a ceasefire.

Lise Grande, the United Nations' humanitarian coordinator for Yemen, said that the cuts "could not have come at a worse time, with COVID-19 threatening." She added, "If there is one country that cannot deal with a coronavirus outbreak, it is Yemen. The health system is fragile and, in many cases, broken. And after five years of war, the immunities of the population are some of the worst in the world. Yemenis are starving. We fear people are going to die of cholera and now we've got coronavirus."

More than 110,000 Yemenis have lost their lives and hundreds of thousands more have been wounded since the Saudi monarchy invaded the country in March 2015 in an attempt to reimpose the unelected puppet government of President Abd Rabbuh Mansur Hadi, now holed up in Riyadh. Saudi-led coalition airstrikes—more than 257,000 in the five-year war—initially targeted Yemen's military establishment, but have since hit civilian targets, including homes, hospitals, schools, buses and weddings, accounting for more than two-thirds of Yemen's civilian casualties.

None of this would have been possible without US and UK weapons, training, intelligence, aerial refuelling, and Special Forces support to the Saudi monarchy and its de facto head Crown Prince Mohammed bin Salman, as well as political and diplomatic cover at the United Nations. While the United Nations Security Council—where both Washington and London wield a veto—has imposed sanctions against the Houthi rebels, it has not approved a single resolution condemning Riyadh's mass killing spree.

The Trump administration has backed the war in Yemen as part of its efforts to forge an anti-Iranian alliance made up of the Saudi monarchy, the Persian Gulf Sunni oil sheikdoms and Israel, branding the Houthi rebels as an Iranian "proxy force."

The House of Saud intervened in Yemen, which along with Djibouti controls the southern entrance to the Red Sea through which much of the region's oil exports are shipped, to prevent the emergence of any government on its southern border it doesn't control. It also fears that the Houthis might provide a political template for its own oppressed Shia minority in its main oil producing region to emulate.

The war has produced the world's worst humanitarian catastrophe. At least 14 million Yemenis are on the brink of famine, while 80 percent of the country's 24 million people are reliant on food aid. Save the Children estimated last year that at least 75,000 Yemeni children under the age of five have starved to death since the onset of the war. Nearly 3.6 million people have been displaced by the conflict.

Meanwhile, the country has been ravaged by the worst cholera epidemic on record, with an estimated 1.2 million people infected and at least 2,500 deaths, and most recently by dengue fever in Hadramawt province. Dengue fever's symptoms are similar to COVID-19, but without testing, it is hard to tell the difference. This is due not only to the destruction wreaked by the Saudi bombing campaign, but its punishing air, sea and land blockade of the country aided by the US Navy.

Despite the expenditure of enormous firepower, the Saudis have achieved none of their objectives and are on the brink of defeat, with the Houthis close to driving Saudi ground forces out of the oil- and resource-rich border province of Marib. Meanwhile, the Houthis have fired missiles at Riyadh.

The Saudi-led coalition, codenamed Operation Decisive Storm, comprising the Gulf States, Sudan and Morocco as well as mercenary outfit Academi, formerly Blackwater, has disintegrated. Qatar was suspended in 2017 following Riyadh's fallout with Doha, while Morocco and the UAE withdrew their troops last year, followed by Sudan's military-led transitional government that replaced the ousted dictator Omar al-Bashir pulling out its 30,000 troops in December.

The cooling of relations between Saudi Arabia and the UAE has been crucial, with Abu Dhabi announcing the withdrawal of its troops from Yemen last July. This gave succour to Islamist forces in the Southern Transitional Council seeking an independent southern state of Yemen, which would facilitate the UAE's own influence over the Red Sea and access to the Horn of Africa where it has considerable commercial interests. There have been reports of secret talks between the UAE and the Houthis.

Abu Dhabi has toned down its condemnation of Iran, releasing \$700 million of frozen funds to Tehran in October and shipping multiple batches of medical equipment in March to Iran.

Iran has seen the region's worst coronavirus outbreak, with 4,585 reported deaths, part of a broader humanitarian crisis as a result of US sanctions. Last September's attack on Saudi Arabia's Aramco oil facilities, blamed on Iran despite the Houthis claiming responsibility, exposed Riyadh and Abu Dhabi's vulnerability in the event of a US-led war with Iran.

The UAE has also sought to improve relations with Syrian President Bashar al-Assad, which is backed by Iran, reopening its embassy in Damascus in December 2018. It views his regime as a bulwark against Turkey, which backs the Muslim Brotherhood along with other Islamist forces it considers as hostile. Abu Dhabi Crown Prince Mohammad bin

Zayed went public in his support for Assad, calling him on March 27 to voice his support for the Syrian people.

At the same time, Riyadh precipitated a catastrophic fall in oil prices, following a failure of the OPEC producing countries to agree a cutback in production, as it sought to hold onto its market share and push out its competitors in Russia and the US. But with oil providing the main source of government revenues, the fall in oil prices along with global demand plummeting by 30 percent as the economy moves towards a slump, the Saudis' international bonds as well as those of Saudi Aramco plunged, with the Saudi riyal falling sharply against the US dollar. Riyadh's move provoked fury in the US, where the US shale producers face bankruptcy.

Increasingly isolated and with opposition to the disastrous war in Yemen and a deteriorating economy mounting, the Saudis announced a unilateral, two-week-long ceasefire ostensibly because of growing concerns over the spread of the coronavirus, in an effort to bring the Houthis to the negotiating table. They pledged \$500 million for the UN's humanitarian response plan for Yemen and a further \$25 million to help Yemen deal with the pandemic but said nothing about ending its blockade.

US Secretary of State Mike Pompeo hailed the move, tweeting, "Pleased to see the Saudi-led Coalition's announcement of a unilateral ceasefire in #Yemen" and urged the Houthis to "respond in kind." The Houthis dismissed the cease-fire announcement as a "political and media manoeuvre."

At Thursday's G20 summit, Saudi Arabia, Russia and other members agreed to cut production by a record 9.7 million barrels per day, with other members agreeing to buy up crude to fill emergency stockpiles and cut new oil supplies, in a bid to revive the oil market, although this is nowhere near enough.

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