

# Endless War Crimes in Yemen Slowed by Ceasefire

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*Saudi Arabia's Yemen has a fascist whiff of Franco's Spain circa 1936*

*The first lie about Yemen's dirty war in the world of official journalism is that the fighting there has been a "nine-month conflict" and that "the conflict started in March," as the [New York Times put it](#) on December 17. This is simply not true in any meaningful sense. What started in March was [a savage, one-sided air war backed by the US](#), all too similar to the Nazi-backed one-sided air war in Spain in the thirties that gave the world "Guernica".*

*Yemen's civil war has already lasted decades, on and off. And Yemen has an even longer history of conflict ([all of which the Times knows](#), without letting perspective clarify its reporting). For decades at least, Yemen has suffered from chronic foreign interventions and manipulations, none of which have brought much peace to the Yemeni people, who live in [one of the oldest civilized regions of the world](#).*

The illegal, brutal war that goes unspoken (except as a "nine-month conflict that started in March") is the genocidal bombing of Yemen by Saudi Arabia and its Arab allies. This is essentially [a rolling war crime of unending dimension](#), all supported materially, tactically, and unjustly by the US. The US is at war (the naval blockade alone is an act of war) with Yemen, on the side of the aggressors, and Congress doesn't seem to know about it, presidential candidates fail to talk about it, the media report it little but dishonestly, and [the nation stumbles on in bloody silence](#) as its moral numbness deepens.



A Houthi Shiite fighter stands guard on Thursday as people search for survivors under the rubble of houses destroyed by Saudi airstrikes near Sanaa Airport. (photo: AP)

The sides in Yemen (there are at least four) are complicated, but the main axis of conflict is between the Houthis (and elements of the Yemeni government) and the remnants of the Yemeni government driven into exile by the Houthis, triggering the Saudi bombing campaign. The Houthis are an indigenous, tribal, Zaidi Shia Muslim population in northwest Yemen that has been in rebellion since 2004. They live in a region where people have lived continuously for more than 7,000 years. The Yemeni government in exile has only a veneer of legitimacy, having been installed by a foreign alliance (including Saudi Arabia) and confirmed in an election without opposition. Neither side is particularly savory. A purported Houthi logo reads: "God is Great, Death to America, Death to Israel, Curse on the Jews, Victory to Islam." Saudi Arabia is an intolerant police state that has promoted fundamentalist Sunni jihad and counts ISIS among its allies in Yemen. These people, one way and another, have been at each other's throats for centuries.

## Periodic peace talks put off mass starvation among Yemeni civilians

The possibility of good news recently was that [peace talks began on December 15](#) at an [undisclosed location in Switzerland](#), mediated by the UN special envoy for Yemen, Ismail Ould Cheikh Ahmed. He reportedly facilitated an exchange by shuttling back and forth between the parties, working on issues as a middleman as long as the parties remain unwilling to talk directly. The talks are “aimed at establishing a [permanent and comprehensive ceasefire](#),” according to the UN. [Previous talks in June and September](#) have produced only marginal benefits, mostly allowing humanitarian aid to be distributed to a population close to starvation and without a medical system (the Saudis have bombed hospitals). Whether the talks can do more than minimally relieve some suffering is doubtful, since the Saudi side has shown no willingness to negotiate anything but the terms of Houthi surrender.

The role of the UN is self-contradictory in Yemen. UN aid agencies are trying to save as many civilian lives as possible (about 6,000 have died in the conflict so far, roughly half of them civilians) and the UN special envoy is trying to find a negotiated settlement. The UN Security Council has made a negotiated settlement all but impossible by passing in April, in the midst of the Saudi-led war in violation of international law, a resolution that [virtually calls for the Houthis to surrender and disarm](#), with no provision for their security. Resolution 2216 in effect applauds the Saudi-led indiscriminate bombing of Yemen (the exact, Orwellian language is “*commending* its engagement” [emphasis in original]). Resolution 2216 essentially blames the Houthis for everything:

such actions taken by the Houthis [that] undermine the political transition process in Yemen, and jeopardize the security, stability, sovereignty and unity of Yemen.

Unity of Yemen is a fantasy. Sovereignty of Yemen has been violated by anyone who wants to, including the Saudis, al Qaeda, ISIS (the Islamic State), and the US, [first with drone assassinations, now with the Saudi-led war](#). Security in Yemen has been little more than a random hope for years, not least because of US civilian-killing drones. If the political transition process in Yemen had been more than political myth-making, the Houthis’ interests would have been respected and peace preserved. Resolution 2216:

Calls on all parties to comply with their obligations under international law, including applicable international humanitarian law and human rights law.

The resolution passed without dissent (Russia abstained) with some countries voting for [compliance with laws they were openly violating](#) in their participation in the Saudi-led war. While singling out the Houthis for blame, US Representative to the UN Samantha Power omitted mention of US participation in the bombing campaign and naval blockade. She managed to express the full absurdity of a resolution divorced from reality, when she said that:

The resolution also recognized the costs of the rapidly deteriorating humanitarian crisis. A consensus agreement of all political parties was the only way forward; the United Nations must continue its efforts in that light.

Continuing to talk about talking allows bombing to go on unimpeded

The most obvious way to alleviate the humanitarian crisis, even back in April, was to stop bombing and lift the blockade. It wasn't going to happen. It hasn't happened.

Those who might do most to quell the carnage aren't about to do so. The apparent reason for their collective murderousness is a belief that the Houthis, as Shia Muslims, are some sort of advance strike force for Iran. They don't often say this out loud, and they have so far offered no compelling evidence that Iran's involvement in Yemen is any more than a tiny fraction of their own almost unlimited warfare. Basically, the attacks on the Houthis and their allies are little more than internationally sanctioned gang rape. That ugly reality gives the Saudi aggressors and their Yemeni puppet government little incentive even to acknowledge just claims on the other side, much less to make concessions to them. In Qatar (whose planes also bomb Yemen), [the Yemeni Prime-Minister-in exile](#) recently made his side's intransigence and willingness to rely on force clear, as far as any talks go:

Despite the optimism, and based on our experience, the talks won't be easy.... We are seeking to reach peaceful solutions but the stick will remain to achieve what could not be achieved in the talks.

At the same time the talks began in Switzerland, the parties had agreed to start a seven-day ceasefire in Yemen on December 15. [So far, the ceasefire has held](#), sort of, with both sides reporting violations on the ground. The Saudi side has continued some air strikes (killing at least 15) but says Houthi violations [may cause the talks to collapse](#). An [exchange of several hundred prisoners](#) on each side in Yemen was held up by al-Baydah tribesmen and then apparently carried out. The Houthis continue to hold members and relatives of the government-in-exile in Saudi Arabia. Saudi planes and gunboats have attacked targets in the north daily since the ceasefire began. By the time anyone reads this, the ceasefire may be over in principle as well as in fact.

It's not a ceasefire for everybody in Yemen anyway. [ISIS continues to fight for control of Aden](#). On December 17, ISIS claimed credit for the [suicide car-bomb that killed the governor of Aden](#), installed by the Saudi-backed Yemeni government after the Saudi-coalition re-took Aden from the Houthis last July. ISIS referred to the Saudi-back governor as a "tyrant." Not far from Aden, [al Qaeda recently took over two other cities](#). Both ISIS and al Qaeda have benefitted from the US-back Saudi obsession with the Shia Houthis. As the crazies in and out of US government call for more and more war in the Middle East, the pointlessness and incoherence of American policy becomes so stark it's a wonder so few people seem to notice. Killing people by the millions failed for 20 years in Indo-China, [why does anyone expect it to work](#) in the Middle East?

Like Spain in 1936, Yemen has a civil war in which foreign countries, especially the US, have intervened militarily against no effective military opposition. US military officers meet daily with Saudi military officers in Riyadh, where together they plan the next massacre in the defenseless killing ground. Yemen was the poorest country in the region even before the richest country in the region (Saudi Arabia) joined with the richest country in the world (US) in [an all too literal war on poverty](#). And mostly, [except for organizations like Democracy NOW](#), this unrelenting horror goes unreported in the gaseous media cloud of promoting and tut-tutting Donald Trump and other distracting irrelevancies.

Yemen today resembles Spain in the thirties in another respect: it is a real-world [test zone for advanced Western weaponry](#). Amnesty International and other human rights groups have documented how [the UK government's illegal sale of advanced weapons to Saudi Arabia](#) end up killing civilians in Yemen (like the British cruise missile that destroyed a ceramics factory). And it's hardly limited to the UK. Saudis buy billions of dollars of weapons from the US and anyone else who's selling. The US and others sell the Saudis internationally-banned cluster bombs. The Saudis drop them on Yemen. Business is booming.

And Saudi Arabia says it has pledges from 34 governments to join [a new Islamic coalition to fight terrorism](#). How many of these governments, like Saudi Arabia, rule their countries by terror? Think about it. The leader of the coalition carrying out massive terror-bombing in Yemen is going to lead another coalition in counterterrorism.

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