

Yemen: Using Famine As a Weapon Is Indefensible

To worsen conditions in Yemen further in the vain pursuit of “leverage” would simply be evil.

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Gerald Feierstein makes a [very weak case](#) for designating the Houthis as terrorists. First, he acknowledges that he previously opposed the designation when the Trump administration did it, but now claims that it is worth doing:

The letter, which was ultimately signed by nearly 100 former U.S. diplomats and military officers, argued that a designation would do little harm to the Houthis but would endanger the well-being of millions of innocent Yemeni civilians. Unfortunately, things have changed. The past year has demonstrated that the Houthis will not return to the negotiating table until they accept that there is no alternative to a political resolution.

There may have been some changes in the military situation over the last year, but nothing has changed as far as the effects of the designation are concerned. It is still true that a designation would do little harm to the Houthis but would endanger millions of innocent Yemeni lives, so how can a designation be any more justified now than it was then? Put bluntly, why is it somehow acceptable to cause a massive famine in the name of “leverage” now when it was not in 2021?

There is something particularly perverse about the debate over designating the Houthis. For almost seven years, the U.S. has aided and abetted the Saudi coalition as it bombs and starves the people of Yemen, and during that time none of the coalition’s members has faced any penalties for their myriad war crimes. The Saudi coalition has plunged Yemen into the abyss of mass starvation, and they have done this with U.S. backing and protection. The U.S. refuses to use the influence it has with the Saudi coalition to rein in their many abuses, but for the sake of creating supposed “leverage” with the Houthis there is serious consideration of a policy that would cause even more starvation and deprivation than the coalition’s intervention has already caused. Everyone knows in advance that terrorism sanctions won’t alter the Houthis’ behavior or compel them to negotiate. The whole of Yemen—and not just the parts that the Houthis control—will suffer terribly if the designation goes through.

Feierstein says that it is “imperative” that the U.S. and U.N. “do more to end the suffering,” but he is calling for a terrorism designation that will drastically increase the suffering for tens of millions of people. We are already seeing the economic collapse in Afghanistan that comes when a country is effectively cut off from the outside world. The same will happen to Yemen if the U.S. does this, and it will be our policy that kills huge numbers of people.

It seems that Feierstein has taken this position for lack of “viable” alternatives, and he says “it would be foolhardy not to consider the possible use of a terrorist designation as a tool in America’s kit.” When we know very well that the “tool” is nothing more than a weapon for killing innocent people, it is madness to consider using it. The pro-designation side of the debate pretends that there is some pressure that can be brought to bear on the Houthis that will force them to negotiate, but experience teaches us that sanctions do not force the target to make deep concessions when its security and survival are at stake. Even if the designation applied some pressure on the Houthis, it would be insufficient, but it would come at a staggering cost in lives needlessly lost. There is no possible justification for using famine as a weapon.

Feierstein imagines that terrorism sanctions can be “crafted in a way to minimize unintended consequences,” but there will be no getting around the intended consequences of cutting Yemen off from the rest of the world. Financial institutions and importers will not want to take the risks associated with doing business in Yemen. Overcompliance is always a problem with broad sanctions, and that is certain to happen in a case where the de facto government of a large part of the country has been labeled a terrorist organization. The devaluation of the currency and inflation that have already been wreaking havoc on Yemen’s economy will only get worse. You cannot starve an import-dependent country of trade and aid and expect anything less than mass starvation. There is no amount of clever “crafting” that will stave off disaster.

What good will this designation do? The best that Feierstein can come up with is that “it would nevertheless send a powerful, symbolic message that delegitimizes the Houthi movement.” You could not ask for a better example of destructive “do-somethingism.” Even its own advocates don’t think it will achieve anything real. It will at best have symbolic value, and that symbolism will quickly vanish when U.S. sanctions are responsible for causing a famine. Meanwhile, the millions dying from hunger and disease will be all too real. Since this is all obvious to anyone who has given it much thought, how is this even being debated?

The U.S. has been deeply implicated in the wrecking and starvation of Yemen. If the Biden administration does what supporters of a Houthi designation want, it will be responsible for one of the biggest man-made famines on record. It is bad enough that U.S. policy has helped bring Yemen to its current state. To worsen conditions in Yemen further in the vain pursuit of “leverage” would simply be evil.

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