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**ADDRESSING THE ISSUE OF JIHADISTS'
HUMAN RIGHTS VIOLATIONS IN YEMEN**

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Basic Overview of the Issue

Yemen occupies a critical position on the southwestern tip of the Arabian Peninsula, making it a focal point in regional and global geopolitics. Since 1990, Yemen has been facing a cascade of problems such as separatist movements, civil wars, poverty, hunger, and terrorism. The Arab Spring protests of 2011, leading to the ousting of long-term President Ali Abdullah Saleh, provided a fertile ground for jihadist groups such as Al-Qaeda in the Arabian Peninsula (AQAP) and ISIS to expand their influence on the region. The subsequent Houthi insurgency escalated into a full-scale civil war by 2014, and the situation was further complicated by the intervention of a Saudi-led coalition in 2015, creating even more space for terror. These terrorist groups have committed multiple human rights violations including torture, enforced disappearances, extrajudicial killings, child soldier recruitments, attacks on civilians.

The ramifications of these human rights violations can be seen throughout the region. Civilians as well as neighboring countries constantly face security threats from these terrorist organizations. For instance, these groups have conducted numerous attacks on commercial shipping in the Red Sea, significantly disrupting global trade routes. The international response includes humanitarian aid and counterterrorism operations. The United Nations has coordinated humanitarian assistance to address the dire needs of the Yemeni population, with 197 aid organizations delivering aid in 2024. Additionally, the United States has conducted operations targeting groups like AQAP and ISIS-Yemen, primarily through airstrikes and special operations. However, these efforts have mostly been fruitless.

Explanation of Important Terms

Jihadists

These groups typically interpret Islam in an extreme way and use brute force to achieve their political objectives. In Yemen, groups like Al-Qaeda in the Arabian Peninsula (AQAP) and ISIS-Yemen are prominent examples of jihadist groups (Encyclopædia Britannica).

Human Right Violations

Actions that infringe upon the basic rights and freedom that are guaranteed to all



individuals under international law (Oxford Dictionary). Examples could include torture, extrajudicial killings, forced displacement, and deprivation from water.

Arab Spring

A series of pro-democracy protests that arose in the Arab world in 2010 , (Encyclopædia Britannica). In Yemen, the protests in 2011 against President Ali Abdullah Saleh led to his resignation; however, it caused a bigger instability in the region.

Civil War

An internal conflict within a country where different factions fight for control (Oxford Dictionary). The Yemeni civil war started in 2015, when the Houthis took control of the capital, Sana'a.

Terrorism

The use of violence, or the threat of violence, to attain political goals through fear, intimidation or coercion (Oxford Dictionary).

Detailed Background of the Issue

The Arab Spring and the Fall of Saleh

In 2011, the effects of the Arab Spring also hit Yemen, which resulted in massive government protests. As a result, Ali Abdullah Saleh, who has been the president of the nation for 22 years, resigned from his position, and fled to Saudi Arabia. His successor, Abdrabbuh Mansur Hadi, similarly, struggled to maintain stability over the region, enabling jihadist groups to thrive.

Jihadist Groups in Yemen

Jihadist groups in Yemen, such as AQAP and ISIS, have caused significant human rights violations for years. These groups emerged and expanded due to Yemen's political instability, weak governance, and socio-economic challenges. The central government struggled to maintain authority over rural regions, creating a vacuum that allowed extremist ideologies to flourish.



Figure 1: People have to carry water to their towns due to the conflict in the region



The formation of AQAP in 2009 marked a turning point in the rise of jihadist influence. By merging Yemen and Saudi branches of Al-Qaeda, AQAP capitalized on local grievances, such as unemployment, corruption, and inadequate infrastructure, to gain support among communities who have been deprived of their basic needs. They presented themselves as an alternative to the failing state. The outbreak of the civil war in 2015 between the Houthi rebels and Hadi's government further fragmented Yemen. This further destabilized Yemen and allowed AQAP to strengthen its hold in southern regions. By 2014, ISIS emerged as another faction, bringing even more violent tactics and worsening the humanitarian situation.



Figure 2: A baby is carried out of rubble caused by conflict

These jihadist groups committed severe human rights abuses, including targeted killings, public executions, kidnappings, forced recruitment of child soldiers, and the imposition of strict interpretations of Sharia law. Entire communities were displaced, and civilians were terrorized through bombings in public places.

Today, jihadist groups continue to exploit Yemen's fragile state. AQAP remains active in rural areas, launching attacks on both civilians and military targets. Although ISIS has weakened in recent years, it still carries out brutal operations to maintain relevance.

Social, Economic and Political Impact

The ongoing civil war between the Houthi rebels and the Saudi-backed government has allowed jihadist groups to thrive. The war diverts attention and resources from combating extremism and creates a chaotic environment in which these groups operate with little resistance.

Jihadist groups have disrupted society by instilling fear, displacing families, and forcing civilians to adhere to extremist ideologies. Communities have been torn apart, and generations of children are growing up with little to no education, as schools have either been destroyed or repurposed for militant use.

Yemen's already fragile economy has been further devastated by jihadist activities. Businesses have been forced to close due to insecurity, and agricultural production has declined as farmers flee conflict zones. The destruction of infrastructure, including roads and



marketplaces, has hindered trade and worsened poverty. Jihadist groups also exploit the economic desperation of civilians, offering money in exchange for loyalty or recruitment.

The Yemeni government's inability to effectively govern or secure the country has weakened its legitimacy. The ongoing civil war diverts resources from combating extremism, allowing jihadist groups to operate with little resistance. The presence of these groups complicates international efforts to negotiate peace, as they pose an ongoing threat to any political stability that might emerge.

Major Parties Involved

Yemen

The Yemeni government, formerly led by President Abdrabbuh Mansur Hadi, has struggled to maintain control of the region due to ongoing conflict with various factions. Although it is internationally recognized as the authority in Yemen, a large portion of the country is under the control of different groups like the Houthis, Al-Qaeda in the Arabian Peninsula (AQAP), and ISIS.

Al-Qaeda in the Arabian Peninsula (AQAP)

AQAP is one of the most dangerous branches of Al-Qaeda, a terrorist organization responsible for many casualties in the Middle East and the notorious 9/11 attacks. The organization has taken advantage of the unstable environment in Yemen and established strongholds in some regions. AQAP is responsible for many human rights violations including executions, forced recruitment, and targeted violence.

Islamic State – Yemen Province (ISIS – Yemen)

ISIS – Yemen emerged as an offshoot of ISIS and it is competing for dominance in the region. Similar to AQAP, the group is well known for its human right violations and brutal tactics. While its influence is fairly limited compared to that of AQAP, the group still remains as a significant threat to Yemen's stability.



Houthis

Houthis are a Shiite rebel group originating from Zaidi Shia. They have been a central party in the Yemeni civil war, seizing control of the capital, Sana'a. The Houthis are mainly supported by Iran and are in direct conflict with the Yemeni government.

United States of America (USA)

The United States focuses on counterterrorism operations against AQAP and ISIS. The US is in support of the Yemeni government, and fight against rebel groups such as Houthis. Its involvement in the region has been criticized due to civilian casualties from military operations.

United Kingdom (UK)

The United Kingdom has played a significant role in the Yemen conflict through diplomatic and military channels. The UK supports the internationally recognized Yemeni government and has provided humanitarian aid to address the crisis. However, the UK, similar to the US, has been criticized for its arms sales to Saudi Arabia.

Israel

Israel's involvement in Yemen became more direct on July 20, 2024, when it conducted airstrikes on Hodeidah in response to a Houthi drone attack on Tel Aviv that caused casualties. The strikes targeted infrastructure allegedly used for Iranian weapons supply to the Houthis. This marked Israel's first direct military action in Yemen.

Saudi Arabia

Saudi Arabia leads the coalition supporting the Yemeni government against the Houthi rebels. It views the Houthis as a proxy for Iran and a threat to regional security. Similar to the US, its military interventions, including airstrikes, have faced international criticism for causing civilian casualties and worsening Yemen's humanitarian crisis.



Islamic State of Iran

Iran provides significant support to the Houthi rebels, supplying weapons, training, and financial assistance. Its involvement in the issue is caused by religious beliefs as well as countering the Saudi influence in the Middle East.

Gulf Cooperation Council (GCC)

Led by Saudi Arabia, the GCC supports the Yemeni government and has mediated peace talks to resolve the conflict. However, the council's effectiveness is often limited.

Chronology of Important Events

| Date | <i>Description of Event</i> |
|--|---|
| October 31st, 1918 | Independence of North Yemen due to the collapse of the Ottoman Empire |
| November 30th, 1967 | British withdrawal from South Yemen |
| May 22nd, 1990 | The unification of North and South Yemen |
| October 12th, 2000 | USS Cole Bombing by AQAP |
| September 17th, 2008 | AQAP attack on the US Embassy in Sanaa |
| April 23rd, 2011 | Resignation of President Saleh due to the protests |
| February 27th, 2012 | Hadi becomes the President |



| | |
|--|---|
| | of the Yemeni government |
| September 16th, 2014 | Start of the Yemeni Civil War |
| November 13th, 2014 | Formation of ISIS-Yemen |
| January 29th, 2017 | U.S. Special Forces raid on an AQAP compound in Yemen |
| June, 2019 | AQAP suicide bombing at a military base in Aden |
| July 20th, 2024 | Israeli airstrikes on Hodeidah in response to a Houthi drone attack on Tel Aviv |

Relevant International Documents

- Agreement on the implementation mechanism for the transition process in Yemen in accordance with the initiative of the Gulf Cooperation Council (GCC), 5 December 2011
- Al Hudaydah Agreement, UNMHD, 16 January 2019
- Adopted by the Security Council at its 6634th meeting, 21 October 2011 (**S/RES/2014**)
- Adopted by the Security Council at its 7119th meeting, 26 February 2014 (**S/RES/2140**)
- Adopted by the Security Council at its 7382nd meeting, 14 February 2015 (**S/RES/2201**)
- Adopted by the Security Council at its 7426th meeting, 14 April 2015 (**S/RES/2216**)

Past Attempts to Resolve the Issue

Past attempts to address the human rights violations committed by jihadists include military interventions, peace negotiations, and humanitarian initiatives. The United States conducted many military operations against AQAP and ISIS-Yemen. These operations mainly included airstrikes, which caused civilian casualties. The US also supported the Saudi-led intervention in the Yemeni civil war, which were mainly directed towards the



Houthis rather than the jihadist groups. In the midst of the civil war these attempts to solve the issue only provided a better ground for jihadist groups to thrive. Local tribal militias have resisted jihadist control in some areas, but their efforts are often uncoordinated and lack the support needed to achieve lasting success.

Other nations, such as Israel and the UK, have also been active in addressing the situation. The UK has provided intelligence and logistical support to counterterrorism efforts in Yemen, while Israel's recent airstrikes on Hodeidah in 2024 targeted Iranian-backed Houthis, indirectly impacting the activities of other militant groups.

United Nations organizations have played a critical role on the humanitarian front. Agencies like the United Nations Office for the Coordination of Humanitarian Affairs (UNOCHA) and the World Food Programme (WFP) have provided food, medical supplies, and essential services to Yemeni civilians affected by the conflict. However, their efforts have often been hindered by blockades, attacks on aid convoys, and restrictions imposed by various factions.

Solution Alternatives

To address the issue of human rights violations committed by jihadist groups, the solutions should focus on directly removing these groups from the region. It is very unlikely that any negotiation to prevent human rights violations will be fruitful as both the AQAP and ISIS are non-state actors that are not bound to any international treaty or body. In order to fully remove these groups from the region a military intervention is necessary. The problem with most past interventions was that it also caused many civilian casualties. Hence, operations should be based on high quality and real time intelligence to accurately target jihadist strongholds. This could be achieved with intelligence sharing among actors including the Yemeni government, Gulf Cooperation Council, and international bodies. Use of more precise weaponry, such as drone strikes, is another way to mitigate the harm caused to civilians.

In order to help civilians who have already been affected by the instability in the region and prevent further harm, humanitarian corridors could be established. These corridors would allow civilians to have a safer place while also providing them with humanitarian aid from other Member States. Yemeni citizens currently suffer from famine, water shortage,



disease outbreaks, etc. These humanitarian corridors could serve as an excellent way for the transport of supplies. On the other hand, the establishment of humanitarian corridors could make the place a saturated target for jihadists.

While short-term solutions such as military action and humanitarian aid are necessary, long term solutions to address the root cause of extremism in Yemen would be effective. Strengthening the government and establishing a central authority would mitigate instability in the region.

Useful Links

- <https://www.unicef.org/emergencies/yemen-crisis>
- <https://news.un.org/en/story/2019/02/1032811>
- <https://www.theguardian.com/world/yemen>
- <https://www.securitycouncilreport.org/un-documents/yemen/>

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