



# Food as a Weapon in Yemen

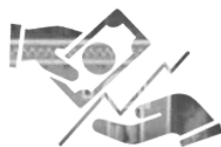
**Y**emen is suffering from the worst humanitarian crisis in the world today, as is often stated. Widespread hunger is the result of a war that has now ravaged the country for half a decade. An estimated number of 24 million people are in need of humanitarian assistance. Many news sources have stated that the situation in Yemen is due to the intentional use of food as a weapon, but more research is needed.

RIKO has published an article on the situation, with a more in-depth mapping of the direct strategies of intentional starvation, employed on both sides of the conflict.

## The main findings suggest that:



agricultural production has been clearly targeted by Saudi coalition air raids,



the yemeni market has been disrupted with the intention of starving opponents into submission



food aid has been diverted from the intended beneficiaries.





# Food as a Weapon in Yemen

By Joel Ekström

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*Little research has been carried out on the use of food as a weapon in what has been aptly called the “forgotten war” in Yemen*

## INTRODUCTION

Yemen is suffering from the worst humanitarian crisis in the world today, as is often stated.<sup>1,2,3</sup> Widespread hunger is the result of a war that has now ravaged the country for half a decade. According to the United Nations Office for the Coordination of Humanitarian Affairs (OCHA) an estimated number of 24 million people are in need of humanitarian assistance, which is about 80% of the country’s entire population.<sup>4</sup> A reoccurring explanation in the media for the case of Yemen, is that food has been used as a weapon - that parties to the conflict have employed direct strategies of intentional starvation.<sup>5,6</sup> Further elaboration is rare, and thus the claim remains little more than rhetoric (however powerful).

What strategies have actually been employed in the conflict, and how do we know that the wide-spread starvation in Yemen is in fact intentional? This article presents a more thorough analysis of the use of food as a weapon in Yemen.



# BACKGROUND

## THE CONFLICT IN YEMEN

Following the Arab spring, Yemen experienced much unrest. In November 2011 the former president Ali Abdullah Saleh handed over his power to the former vice president Abd-Rabbu Mansour Hadi. A deal was developed, intending to divide Yemen into six regions as part of a new federal structure.

This deal was rejected by the Houthis - a group that emerged out of the Zaidi Shi'a Muslim branch in northern Yemen, opposing economic discrimination as well as the spread of Sunni ideology. While taking up arms already in 2004, the Arab Spring presented the opportunity for the Houthis to expand their control over much of the northern territories of Yemen.

In March 2015, a coalition led by Saudi Arabia including other Gulf Cooperation states, Egypt and Sudan, and backed by the United States and the United Kingdom, launched an operation that was intended to be short and swift, but fighting has continued.<sup>7,8,9,10,11</sup>

## FOOD SECURITY SITUATION

Major political changes over the past 50 years in current day Yemen has led to a severe decrease in domestic food sovereignty. The change in food sovereignty is clearly visible in the fact that the country imported 18% of its consumption of staple cereals in the 1970s, whereas this number had risen to 75% in 2014. Staple foods generally consist of 90% imports today.<sup>12</sup> Food prices have risen, poverty has spread and Yemen's population has increased by 350% since the 1980s, putting further pressure on resource use.<sup>13, 14, 15</sup> For these reasons, control over water and food resources is important for both sides of the conflict - it is even a tactic employed by them.

## THE USE OF FOOD AS A WEAPON

When we talk about food as a weapon, what we actually mean is a tactic targeting peoples food security. This can imply many things, as food security is determined by several different factors in terms of availability, access, utilization and stability.<sup>16</sup> Furthermore, a weapon can be described as "a means of gaining advantage or defending oneself in a conflict or contest", which is a fairly broad definition.<sup>17</sup> In fact, there is no formal definition of the term weapon

under international law. Thus, it can be a physical object, an action or something even more abstract, when used with the above stated intentions. This multitude of dimensions imply the existence of more than one way to cause food insecurity or starvation.



*Attacks on agriculture are more than accidental - they are a precise strategy*

One of the earlier examples of scholarly use of the term "hunger as a weapon", is the work by Ellen Messer (1991)<sup>18</sup>. Messer described the strategy as "active targeting of livelihoods and sources of food by belligerents in conflict for the purpose of starving the opponent into submission". Providing a more structured entrypoint for analysis, she also identified the main pathways to cause food insecurity and starvation. These pathways are through *decreased agricultural production, disrupted markets and diversion of food aid*.<sup>19</sup> British scholar Martha Mundy has documented the targeting of agricultural land and rural areas in the Yemen conflict.<sup>20</sup> Other than that, despite the use of the concept in media and reports from various organizations<sup>21</sup>, little research has been carried out on the use of food as a weapon in what has been aptly called the "forgotten war" in Yemen.<sup>22</sup>

To provide a better description of this phenomenon, we will now turn to an analysis of Messers three pathways as they have occurred in Yemen, starting with the Targeting of agricultural production, then Disrupted Markets, and lastly Diversion of food aid.

## Targeting of Agricultural Production

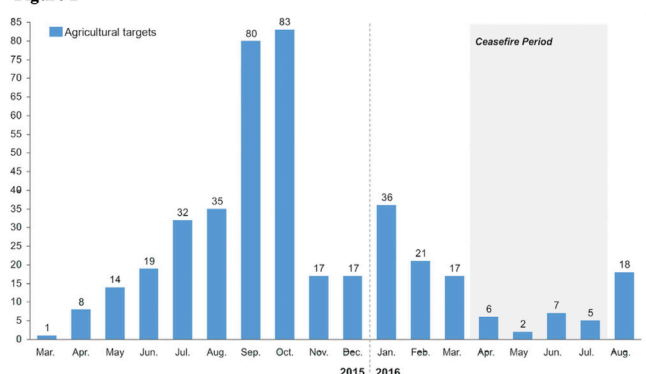
Yemen has experienced a rapid decrease in agricultural production since the onset of the conflict. Between 2014 and 2017, as much as 76% of the country's cropland saw diminished results.<sup>23</sup> An estimated third of total production in agriculture and the fishing industry has been lost.<sup>24</sup> But how can we state that this is the result of an intentional strategy? Well, the evidence is visible in the damage done by air raids on agricultural land and the infrastructure critical for the fishing industry.

When the Saudi coalitions operation began, targets for air strikes were primarily of military nature. From August 2015 and onwards, the strategy appears to have changed to more civilian targets, including water infrastructure and facilities for food production and distribution.<sup>25</sup> This shift is visible in



statistics from the Yemen Ministry of Agriculture and Irrigation, showing a clear increase in agricultural targets after August 2015 (see Figure 1).

**Figure 1**

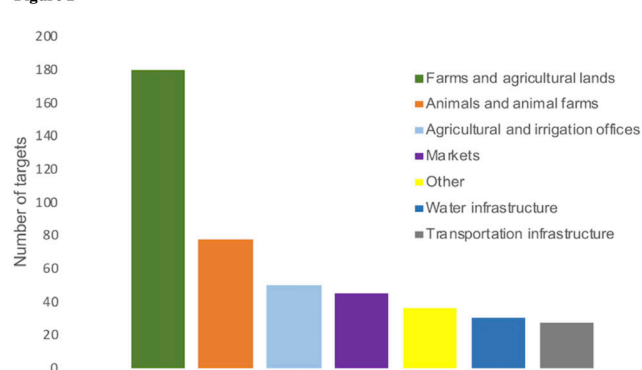


Graph indicating number of agricultural targets for Saudi Coalition air raids during Mar 2015 - Aug 2016.

Data Produced by Yemen Ministry of Agriculture and Irrigation, Sana'a. Graph gathered from Mundy (2018)

Furthermore, we can see that attacks on farms and agricultural lands were distinctively more frequent compared to other civilian targets, when looking at overall attacks between March 2015 and August 2016 (see figure 2).

**Figure 2**



Graph indicating frequency of strikes from Saudi Coalition air raids on agricultural and other civilian targets from Mar 2015 - Aug 2016.

Data produced by Yemen Ministry of Agriculture and Irrigation, Sana'a. Graph gathered from Mundy (2018)

Given that cultivated land covers less than 3% of Yemen's total land surface, targeting it this systematically requires intentional aiming. Therefore, these statistics speak for the fact that attacks on agriculture are more than accidental – they are a precise strategy.<sup>26</sup> As Bachman states, these attacks “constitute deliberate attacks on the ability of Yemen's population to grow, store and transport its own food”.<sup>27</sup>

Besides land-based agriculture, another important sector is the fishing industry, which has been at the top of export value, second only to oil and gas.<sup>28</sup> This sector provided livelihoods for 1.7 million Yemenis, many of whom were already before conflict among the poorest in the country. Close to all fish-of-floating ports along the coast have been targeted, and it is therefore apparent that these attacks were also intentional and part of a strategy to target the fishing industry.<sup>29</sup>

Despite much media coverage of urban battles such as the battle for Hudaydah, statistics show that 68% of fighting has occurred in rural areas, leading to large numbers of displaced people. The agricultural sector had lost 50% of its workers by 2016, mostly in Al-Hudaydah, a main agricultural region.<sup>30</sup> Being displaced often puts people in situations without access to land and livelihood opportunities where they rely on humanitarian assistance to survive.<sup>31</sup> These above-stated patterns of targeting agriculture and fishing translates to overall loss of agricultural productivity across the country. As indicated, this is due to direct loss of capital as well as the loss of labour supply and access to land caused by the displacement following attacks. Thus, food availability has been affected, and clearly targeted. However, this development has had a double impact, visible in the fact that substantial parts of the Yemeni population have also experienced major loss of income, therefore leaving them without access to the food market.

## Disrupted Markets

The situation today is that food is actually generally available, with the bigger issue being that people cannot afford or access it.<sup>32</sup> Already before the conflict Yemen relied heavily on imports, making the country vulnerable to changes in market dynamics – something the warring parties were not late to use in their tactics.

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*Amnesty International:  
The Saudi blockade is a  
collective punishment of  
civilians*

Part of the Saudi-led operation in Yemen has since the beginning been to seal off the country, with blockades of air, sea and land ports.<sup>33, 34</sup> What import is allowed has been redirected to a select few ports, but with the motivation to prevent smuggling of weapons, the Saudi Coalition insists on inspecting cargo thoroughly before letting it enter Yemen. This leads to further delays and price increases. 90-97% of Yemen's fuel needs come from imports, and fuel is needed to both pump and transport water. Fuel prices had after only a few weeks of blockade doubled, and have continued to rise ever since.<sup>35, 36</sup> Food prices also increased dramatically, and for water delivered by truck, the price had increased by as much as 600% as a result of the rise in fuel prices.<sup>37, 38, 39</sup> Despite the fact that domestic production was far from making Yemen food sovereign prior to conflict, at least 60% of the population relied on agriculture as the main source of income. The price increase of fuel has put 85% of farmers in situations without capabilities to operate properly.<sup>40, 41</sup>

Matters like these led Amnesty International to state that the Saudi blockade is a "collective punishment of civilians".<sup>42</sup> Add to this the 224 Coalition air raids targeting marketplaces, the 792 air raids targeting transport infrastructure and other crucial facilities (as of December 2020), the potential presence of Houthi landmines around cities, and the obstacles for a properly functioning market are clear.<sup>43</sup>

As if dramatic price increases were not enough, average household income has plummeted. In the fall of 2016, the Central Bank of Yemen was moved from Sana'a to Aden. This made money transfers more difficult, but most importantly it led to the Hadi government ceasing to pay salaries to all government employees in Sana'a, as well as many others in the service sector. The government is the largest single employer in the country, with at least one government employee per three urban households, and per five rural households.<sup>44, 45</sup> This provides a sense of how big an impact the absence of government salaries has for the Yemeni population. As of December 2017, 1.2 million public sector workers had not been paid for over a year, cutting the lifeline for another 7 million people in families depending on these salaries.<sup>46</sup>

Direct targeting by air raids of transport infrastructure and marketplaces proves the intentional character of this economic warfare, intending to severely disrupt the food market. The Houthis also contribute to this end, as their use of landmines put rural residents at risk when traveling to physical markets. Thus, restricting food access is as much a strategy as restricting food availability, in the use of food as a weapon in Yemen. As a result, 24 million people are in need of humanitarian aid. More specifically, 20 million are in need of food support and 9.9 million of them are in *acute* need.<sup>47</sup> The problem is that this humanitarian aid has also been diverted away from the intended beneficiaries - by both parties to the conflict.

## Diversion of Food Aid

As humanitarian aid enters Yemen the same way commercial imports do, the blockades - and even bombings - of crucial ports has often prevented this assistance from getting to where it needs to go.<sup>48</sup> At the time of the most strict Government/Saudi Coalition blockade, the UN deemed the Hadi Government as using the threat of starvation as an instrument of war.<sup>49</sup>

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*Humanitarian assistance is financing war efforts by the government as well as the opposing Houthis*

The United Nations Office for the Coordination of Humanitarian Affairs identifies "hard-to-reach districts", where humanitarian workers are facing moderate or severe access constraints.<sup>50</sup> In many of these, the main obstacle is direct fighting. However, in many other districts, bureaucratic restrictions and lack of trust from warring parties is what's stopping the assistance.<sup>51, 52</sup> Occasionally, this lack of trust turns into direct violence targeting aid organizations. For example, Oxfam International and other international NGOs were hit by RPGs in December 2019. The attackers have not been identified, but there are indications that they could have been members of an Islamist group.<sup>53</sup> Humanitarian staff have also been kidnapped by groups such as Al Qaeda.<sup>54</sup> Saudi air raids have targeted NGOs four times, and bodies of the UN eight times.<sup>55</sup>

According to UN officials, the Houthis have also hindered humanitarian assistance. Reportedly, in 2015, Houthi-Saleh forces used snipers to target people seeking food and medical aid.<sup>56</sup> They are also said to be impeding food aid trying to enter Houthi-held areas, removing supplies from distribution areas and reselling it or giving it to those not entitled to it.<sup>57, 58, 59</sup> The Houthis deny this.<sup>60</sup> The UN, however, maintains its position and because of it, WFP has cut assistance to people in Houthi-controlled areas by 50%. This will significantly reduce access to food for 8.5 million people and increase the levels of acute food insecurity.<sup>61</sup>

WFP had for some time a contract with a Houthi-appointed aid agency to carry out the task of distributing humanitarian assistance. However, the UN has reported that some of this aid has not reached the intended beneficiaries, despite records stating that the aid has been delivered. In 2018, 1200 tons of food aid was diverted from Sana'a during August and September alone. Interviews by CNN show that despite people on the ground being listed as beneficiaries, thousands of them had gone without any aid for a long time. One woman said that she saw a record stating that she had received 110 000 Yemeni Riyals from another aid organization, but in actuality she had not received anything at all. Some of this lost aid is said to have been diverted towards fighting units and some is used to buy political support for the Houthi aims. Moreover, when WFP switched to an alternate NGO to carry out the delivery, Houthi associates hindered assistance from taking place.<sup>62</sup>

Furthermore, taxation at roadblocks and checkpoints of humanitarian aid imports as well as commercial imports provides the forces on both sides of the conflict with revenue even before distribution.<sup>63</sup> The UN Panel of Experts on Yemen has concluded that not only is aid taxed when entering the country through such ports as Hudaydah, but it's taxed again when crossing the frontlines - thus, humanitarian assistance is financing war efforts by the government as well as the opposing Houthis. This income goes both to the forces in general and to individual commanders.<sup>64</sup>

# CONCLUSION

Widespread hunger is the result of a war that has now ravaged Yemen for half a decade. As the analysis shows, this is no coincidence. Food has been used as a weapon on both sides of the conflict. Using Messer's theoretical framework, the strategies become clear. Intentionally decreased agricultural production and a disrupted market put millions of Yemenis in need of food aid, which parties to the conflict divert from intended beneficiaries.

The significance of proper understanding becomes apparent when looking at actions by international actors. For example, Sweden has sold weapons to countries in the Saudi Coalition to a value of more than 200 million USD during the period 2015-2019.<sup>65</sup> No new deals between Sweden and Saudi Arabia or the United Arab Emirates have been made since 2013, but this does not stop exports included in earlier agreements. During 2019, Swedish weapons trade with Saudi Arabia alone, therefore reached a value of 14 million USD.<sup>66</sup> Denmark has also officially suspended weapons sales to the Saudi Coalition, but a recent investigation revealed an ongoing arms trade between Denmark's largest defence company Terma, and United Arab Emirates. These supplies were found to be used in Yemen.<sup>67, 68</sup> Furthermore, a recent study by Oxfam IBIS revealed that 15 of the largest pension funds in Denmark have invested in foreign weapon producers, supplying the Saudi Coalition with arms.<sup>69</sup>



*Intentionally decreased agricultural production and a disrupted market put millions of Yemenis in need of food aid, which parties to the conflict divert from intended beneficiaries*

The UN Security Council Resolution 2417 from 2018 recognized the connection between hunger and conflict, and condemned the use of food as a weapon.<sup>70</sup> Similarly, the ICC recently voted to extend its jurisdiction to include the use of starvation as a weapon in non-international conflicts.<sup>71</sup> However, the strategies of using food as a weapon, in Yemen as well as elsewhere, have received insufficient scholarly attention, leading to a lack of evidence for these occurrences. Continued investigation of the use of food as a weapon is much needed, as proper knowledge of modern conflict and strategies used in them is crucial for any fruitful response to situations such as that in Yemen, the worst humanitarian crisis of today.

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