

Cruelty hidden in plain sight: starvation of civilian population as a weapon of war in Yemen

AMANDA PEREIRA ARRIGO

Contextualization

Yemen's civil war began in 2014 when Houthis – Shiite rebels backed by Iran– took control of the country's capital demanding a new government and lower fuel prices. In the following year, a Saudi-led coalition of Gulf States launched a campaign against Houthis insurgents, with the support of the United States and other Western countries. Eight years have gone by and this civil war not only hasn't stopped but also is considered the world's worst humanitarian crisis (WAR IN YEMEN, 2023). The aim of this analysis is to explore how the rivalry between Saudi Arabia and Iran affects children in Yemen through starvation.

In this context, Saudi Arabia and Iran compete for regional power by supporting opposite sides in the war in a way that can be considered a relationship based on rivalry. By definition, "rivalry" means "feelings of enmity between countries, materialized in a relationship characterized by extreme competition, and usually psychological hostility, in which the issues and positions of contenders are governed primarily by their attitude towards each other" (THOMPSON, 2001).

more than 23.4 million people– half of which are children– are in need of humanitarian assistance, accounting for three-quarters of the entire population. In the first three years of the war it was estimated that 85 000 children were killed because of hunger or disease (UNICEF, 2022). With these horrifying numbers in mind, we ask: is starvation being used as a weapon of war in Yemen? If so, how does the rivalry between Saudi Arabia and Iran affect children in Yemen by using it as a warfare tactic?

Starvation as a weapon of war

Starvation can be defined broadly: not only the lack of access to food and water, but also to medicines, vaccines and objects indispensable for survival. (GARRAWAY, 2021). It has been used as a weapon of war for a long time (RUNGE & GRAHAM, 2020). Hitler, for instance, designed a “Hunger plan” aiming to starve populations in the Soviet Union, especially Ukraine, by denying food to natives in order to support Operation Barbarossa (RUNGE & GRAHAM, 2020). Even though the racist component is not replicated in Yemen, what the Nazi Hunger Plan and the civil war in Yemen have in common is that famine does not happen for natural reasons: it is imposed through political acts of men.

It is so frequently used that there is a term for it: “food wars”. Messer apud Collison & Macbeth (2014), define food wars as “situations of organized armed political violence, where combatants on one or both sides use hunger as a weapon, and where destruction of farming populations, infrastructure, waterworks and markets result in disruptions to agricultural production, food markets, health services and human nutrition”. It means that starvation of civilians does not “happen” as an effect of the war: it is intentionally used as a tactic of war.

A clear example of this is the military campaign of the Saudi-led Coalition- backed by Western powers such as the United States, French and United Kingdom- which deliberately used aerial attacks targeting Yemen’s civilian infrastructure such as medical, economic and cultural facilities (MUNDY, 2021). Along with that, the Coalition also imposed naval and air blockade, keeping civilians from accessing clean water, food, fuel, and health services. The World Organization Against Torture even said in a report in 2022 that the blockade had contributed substantially to the starvation of Yemeni civilians and can be considered a form of torture (RELIEF WEB, 2022). But they are not the only ones. The indiscriminate use of landmines by the Houthis has also affected access to agricultural lands, worsening the scenario (MUNDY, 2021).

In 2018, four years after the war in Yemen started, the Security Council adopted the Resolution 2417 (UNITED NATIONS, 2018) strongly condemning starving of civilians and denying humanitarian access as warfare tactics. Even so, it was not enough to stop the combatants in Yemen to

use starvation to leverage civilian suffering in order to put pressure on enemy parties (HELLESTVEIT, 2021). It should be clear by now that since civilians in Yemen have been experiencing sieges, blockades, sanctions and deprivation of objects indispensable for survival, they are not starving, they are being starved by the parties at war.

Final remarks

The rivalry between Saudi Arabia and Iran has internationalized the conflict in Yemen and has dragged it for a long time with no foreseeable end. Since it became an international conflict they are committing a war crime under the Rome Statute by using starvation of civilians as a warfare tactic, as it was explained in the text above (IIEA, 2022). Although maybe not in a direct way since the conflict is primarily local in its origin (CLAUSEN, 2022), Saudi Arabia and Iran are both responsible for the prolongation of the war and the more than 233 000 deaths. And all of this suffering for what? Is it gaining regional power really worth all these deaths?

We see everyday the terrible effects that disputes of power can have on people. Children are dying every single day in Yemen because of it and it seems that the only thing that matters to Saudi Arabia and Iran is to fight for regional power and gain influence in the region. Maybe it's time to think about a new definition of power, one that does not imply that terrible things can be done and excused if it means exerting power. And from that we can start to question the ways that actors are exerting their power and hopefully, change it for the better.

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