

Chaos in Yemen: A Conversation With Isa Blumi

A historian of the Middle East unpacks the widely misunderstood origins of one of the world's most devastating conflicts.

By [Gunar Olsen](#)

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A man looks at damaged buildings after air strikes in Sana'a, Yemen, on May 7, 2018. (AP Photo/Hani Mohammed)

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In Yemen, nearly 13 million people, or about half its population, could soon be on the brink of famine. More than 22 million people rely on sparse humanitarian aid to survive. Cholera has infected more than a million people in the past two years,

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This disaster is by no means coincidental. Rather, it is the result of a massive bombing campaign and aerial and naval blockade waged by a coalition of 10 countries led by Saudi Arabia and the United Arab Emirates. From the war's first day, the United States has provided essential support to its clients in the coalition. American-made bombs, dropped from Saudi fighter jets that are refueled in midair by American planes, have destroyed critical infrastructure and killed countless civilians, from children in school buses to families at wedding ceremonies—all targeted with the help of American intelligence agencies.

The widely reported death toll has remained stagnant at 10,000 for the past two years. A recent report puts it closer to 80,000. Although US refueling of Saudi jets ended last month, coalition bombing has continued unabated. The impact of the cease-fire brokered last week by the United Nations for Hodeidah, the port city on the Red Sea through which the very few humanitarian supplies reach northern Yemen, remains unclear.

For most of the past three and a half years, corporate media has largely ignored the war, particularly obscuring the US role. As media critic Adam Johnson showed in a report for Fairness and Accuracy In Reporting, the liberal network MSNBC broadcast more than a year's worth of segments without once mentioning US involvement in Yemen.

But amid the killing of Saudi journalist Jamal Khashoggi at the hands of Saudi operatives in Istanbul in October, the US-Saudi relationship has gotten more attention, and so has the war. After failing separately in both the House and Senate during the past year, a resolution that would direct the Trump administration to end refueling and intelligence sharing to the Saudi coalition—but would not halt arms sales or withdraw US special forces from Yemen—was finally passed by the Senate with a 56-41 margin this month. The House is expected to vote again after the Democratic Party takes control in January. The momentum to end the war in Yemen seems to be finally gaining steam.

To shed light on the origins of this disastrous war and to cut through its

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Authoritarianism (Routledge, 2010), among other books. He first visited Yemen in 1992, and lived there during the late '90s. He had originally hoped to use his time there studying the politics of the late Ottoman empire, but turned his attention to contemporary politics as the country's extraordinary situation seemed to demand it.

—*Gunar Olsen*

GUNAR OLSEN: In your new book, you write: “That millions in Yemen still resist globalization has led some within the deepest hovels of empire to conclude that the only way to pillage Yemen now is to destroy it.” Right now, who is destroying Yemen, and for what purpose?

ISA BLUMI: A layer of US government. I would expand it to conglomerative interests geographically located in the North Atlantic, traditionally since at least the 19th century the ascendant financial power of the world, and the epicenter of finance capitalism. It’s been a century-long campaign to subordinate Yemen and integrate it into this increasingly intertwined system that we would refer to today as globalization or neoliberal global economy.

Destroying Yemen is one way of maximizing the return from, in a global economic context, the scramble for the last bits of liquidity in the world. This is crucial because Yemen was one of those untapped, if you will, stores of cumulative wealth. The people of Yemen, who in World Bank statistics are very poor, are actually quite wealthy in terms of their resources, networks, infrastructure, and savings. In the context of this scramble for liquidity, places like Yemen constitute the last frontier. So destroying Yemen would basically undermine the capacity of the people’s ability to resist. Because of the considerable amounts of oil and gas wealth, both on land and off shore, as well as its agricultural potential and its fisheries—which have been largely untouched until now—Yemen is a prize waiting to be properly harnessed, in the language of the IMF [International Monetary Fund] and World Bank.

GO: For a decade after the September 11 attacks, Yemeni president Ali Abdullah Saleh was Washington’s man in the so-called “global war on terror.” But by spring 2011, the Obama administration began to push for his removal. What led to the end of Saleh’s regime? How did Saleh—

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IB: Over time, Saleh benefited in an alliance with the Americans to use drone warfare and Islam against opponents, resulting in a war against Yemenis, the imposition of austerity against independent Yemeni polities, and the rise against the state in 2011. Yemenis took the streets, and things got out of hand very quickly. What happened next was the simple replacing of one figurehead (Saleh) for another (Hadi) while maintaining a regime that would exploit all these people. Saleh's problem was that by 2011 he had lost the capacity to actually sustain that system of slowly, incrementally integrating Yemen into the neoliberal global economy, so that's why he had to go.

GO: What led the Houthis and their allies to seize Sana'a in 2014, eventually forcing Hadi to resign and flee to Riyadh in 2015?

IB: The interim government after 2011 was an attempt to more effectively steer Yemen into this system of global finance capitalism. The first act of the Hadi interim government was to put Yemen into a World Trade Organization regime. Because of this, it started this rather abusive and aggressive policy of austerity—which, as we know from elsewhere in the world, immediately ignites all kinds of social consequences and ultimately leads to resistance. He put in place new kinds of economic extraction, new kinds of taxation, a rapid liberalization of the economy, including the privatization of state land.

More importantly for understanding what unleashed the last period of resistance that overthrew Hadi's government was the attempt to impose a federation on Yemen, to divide Yemen into six distinct districts or states, delineated along lines that had no historical bearing. The federation plan assured that the majority of oil and gas wealth, and the offshore assets that have still to be exploited, would go to a vast southern Yemen territory with the least amount of population. The goal of this natural-resource gerrymandering would have created an area ruled by two or three very corrupt officials, leaving the vast majority of Yemenis impoverished, living in resource-poor regions of the rest of the country. It was also an attempt to politically isolate those in the north who were demanding collective rights throughout the 2000s and 2010s and the period after Saleh.

Hadi's mandate was two years, but when the two years were up, it just

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overthrow Hadi, they went to the negotiating table. But the Obama administration and the regional allies that would ultimately form the coalition in 2015 said, “No, we want Hadi back. We like the relationship he’s established with the international organizations, with the international economy.” So you had a clash between Yemenis, who were demanding sovereignty and their rights to negotiating their future, and the outside world, what we would call the neoliberal order.

GO: In corporate media reports, “Houthis” and “Ansar Allah” are used interchangeably, almost analogous to “ISIS” and “Daesh.” But it’s more complex than that, right?

IB: Absolutely. It’s clever rhetorical game when they say that Ansar Allah and the people we refer to as the Houthis are one and the same. We should actually be framing this as a larger coalition of people who are not mobilized by a charismatic dead leader but are mobilized because they are responding to the conditions that were created by this campaign to destroy Yemen. “Houthi” is just a reference to a charismatic member of parliament in the 1990s who was representing his district that was being economically marginalized by diplomatic concessions that Ali Abdullah Saleh was making to the Saudis. Saleh and the Saudis began to militarize a border that had since 1934 been open between Yemen and Saudi Arabia. That had negative consequences for the people along this frontier. By 2000, Saleh and Saudi Arabia signed a treaty that consolidated or recognized a border. There was not a border before in this vast area where much of the oil and gas is, in what they call the Empty Quarter.

Houthi was killed, and several members of the family were assassinated. Their campaign was a very local struggle that expanded when Ali Abdullah Saleh and the military tried to subdue them. There were six wars in that whole region along the Saudi border in the northwest. That movement has more or less been affiliated with this man. But it’s actually a much broader group of communities who all see eye to eye on this. They had problems with the central state, which was basically giving away their livelihoods to the Saudis with these concessions. Once the Hadi government came to power in 2012, it became an overt move to try to completely isolate this vast area of mountains in the northwest. That was why they were able to mobilize a huge coalition that called itself Ansar

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GO: A year into the war, when US support was perhaps less hands-on than it is today, Bruce Riedel, senior fellow at the Brookings Institution and a former long-time CIA analyst for Middle East affairs—so, not an anti-war activist—asserted, “if the United States of America and the United Kingdom tonight told King Salman that this war has to end, it would end tomorrow because the Royal Saudi Air Force cannot operate without American and British support.” Is this merely a “US-backed” “Saudi-led” war? Or can we actually call it a “US war” that’s being waged by Washington’s main ally in the Gulf? Whose war is this?

IB: This was initially Qatar’s war. When Hadi took power in 2012, it was basically an extension of Qatari power, with the Muslim Brotherhood party, Islah, as its primary backer. The Americans enabled and pushed this. But the Qataris were not able to lead a kind of one-country coalition after the Houthis forced Hadi out. Qatar was astute enough not to take the lead, rhetorically at least, when the bombing started in March 2015.

But ultimately it is an American war with and through Saudi Arabia. The Americans can shut off any campaign anywhere—and that includes Israel, of course. So in the end, the responsibility lies directly in the hands of the military industrial complex.

GO: Can you explain the evolution of the relationship among the members of the Gulf Cooperation Council waging war in Yemen? How has the Trump administration affected this? Where does the diplomatic rift with Qatar fit into this?

IB: There was a shift in power from 2012 with the imposition of Hadi as president. During the 2012–2014 period, Hadi ripped up previous leases and contracts that UAE companies like Dubai Ports World had with Yemen. The UAE—which had long been doing business with Saleh’s government and had been hostile to political Islam, especially the Muslim Brotherhood, since the 1970s—was being pushed out of Yemen during Hadi’s government. They probably were very frustrated with how close the Clintons were with Qatar. Hadi began issuing new leases to Saudi and Qatari companies, pitting the GCC countries against each other. Yemen was the front line.

The Saudis took advantage of the unexpected violence and chaos in the

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of the last twenty years or so. That manifested itself from the very beginning of the war in March 2015. From the Saudi perspective, the war was a kind of desperation to grab the assets that Yemen had, to subdue its rivals to the death just across the border in the areas that we would associate with the Houthis. If the UAE didn't participate in this war—they were holding their nose to this—then they would have been completely shut out of Yemen.

At least in the first 100 days of his administration, Trump came with a very different approach toward the GCC. He was (and still is) very hostile to the Muslim Brotherhood. He was hostile to Qatar because he's hostile to the Clintons and the Bushes, the neocons. There was that very telltale raid very early on, during Trump's first month in office. He ordered the military to go into Yemen and take out some Al Qaeda fighters. This raid was very controversial in the coalition, especially amongst the Qatars, because these guys were actually Qatari assets, the primary wackos being used against Ansar Allah. It's very curious that when Trump went to Riyadh in May 2017 and did this iconic silly gesture with the leaders, touching the globe, it's almost two or three weeks after that Qatar is out. Trump forces Mohammad bin Salman to do this silly marketing tour where he gets celebrated by the big newspapers, and he gets to go to Silicon Valley, and he's invited to be an investor in American companies. It's basically saying "pay up or shut up," and this is the first time that some of these players in the GCC have been spoken to in this way by amateurs—amateurs in diplomacy, but certainly not amateurs in the business world. It has caused some interesting fissures in the way global politics works.

GO: In an interview on The Real News Network, Robert Malley, president and CEO of the International Crisis Group and former Obama administration official for Middle East policy, recently tried to explain the Obama administration's thinking on its decision to support Saudi Arabia in this war. At a time when the US was finalizing the Iran nuclear deal—which Saudi Arabia opposed—Malley said that the Obama administration offered support for the war to prevent “a historic break in.... what was perceived as a very important relationship.” Malley said that administration officials thought, “we can’t say no to a partner, so let’s try to slice it by supporting parts of the war, but not all of the war.”

What do you make of those claims?

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for Obama and the Clintons and does not mention Qatar at all. That someone claiming to have such intimate knowledge about how things were running, would strategically leave out the principal actor—the Muslim Brotherhood, whose interests were most at stake in Yemen—suggests that we shouldn't be listening to these people. They are trying to shape the narrative, they are agreeing to interviews, they are getting their scoops published in AP news stories—like the ones about how the UAE is torturing Yemenis and cutting deals with Al Qaeda in the Arabian Peninsula. These stories all highlight the UAE. There's a suspicious lack of mention of Qatar and the origins of this war. Qatar is exonerated in these stories, despite the fact that it was one of the main actors igniting conflict by using takfiri groups since the 1990s. I see this in the medium and long term as a reentry of Qatar as the principal ally of the United States.

GO: Can you address the claim, often cited in corporate media, that the Houthis and their allies are “puppets of” or “aligned with” Iran? What purpose does this narrative serve?

IB: This narrative obviously justifies bombing civilians, day and night, 24/7. The problem is that Iran historically has no connections to Yemen. The reference to the fact that the Houthis are Zaydi Shia demonstrates a very poor understanding of what Zaydism is. Theologically, Zaydism is closer to Sunni Islam than to Shia Islam. Even today, to suggest that Iran is threatening the stability of Saudi Arabia is of course absolute nonsense as well, for the basic fact that Yemen is completely surrounded. There's an embargo and there's absolutely nothing that can get through without the sanction of the countries that are placing the embargo on Yemen. Any ship that goes to the port of Hodeidah has to go through quarantine. They have to be docked in Djibouti, they are heavily inspected, and then they are escorted to Hodeidah. The only things that come through are food and medicines, so there's no way that weapons come through that way. So the argument that the well-armed Yemenis, who are resisting the invasion of their country, are being armed by Iran is nonsense. People are conveniently forgetting that the Arab Republic of Yemen under Ali Abdullah Saleh had the biggest military in the region. In terms of numbers and weapons, it was the most heavily armed country.

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has “high confidence” that Mohammed bin Salman personally ordered the killing of Khashoggi. Where does the Khashoggi killing fit into all this? How has it affected US-Saudi relations?

IB: It demonstrates the extent of the divide within centers of power in Washington and New York. It highlights what I would call the return of the Qatari elements within the neoconservative and broader intelligence community and Pentagon universe who clearly see the writing on the wall of, if not the entire Saudi enterprise, certainly Mohammed bin Salman’s reign. Qatar and that whole element had been pushed out; the UAE and Saudi Arabia had successfully sequestered them out of the coalition during Trump’s first 100 days or so. What the Khashoggi incident suggests is that the key actors that had long supported a robust presence in the Middle East using Qatari-funded assets in Syria and Libya have found a window of opportunity for this more complicated network of interests to assert that Mohammed bin Salman has to go. The alliance with Turkey has meant that the Khashoggi event allowed [Turkish President Recep Tayyip] Erdogan to really play this well. So it’s a political ploy. It’s just used as the pretext to change the dynamics of power, which I think are going to shift at the benefit of Qatar and at the loss of Saudi Arabia. Let’s not be surprised if something drastic happens in six months’ time.

GO: What’s significant about the Trump administration’s recent decision to stop refueling Saudi jets?

IB: Yes, the Pentagon has put an end to the resupplying of fuel for Saudi Arabia, but that does not mean that it has stopped its operations on the ground in Yemen itself. Special forces are still in Northern Yemen. There are a lot of things that seem like a structural shift on the surface, but at the same time what is actually happening is a new kind of American role in this war, and it does not look good in the long term. It’s a more direct, active role—boots on the ground, etc. They’re not going to advertise this because they cannot be seen to be directly supporting something that’s leading to starving children on TV screens.

GO: Leading pundits like to blame the Houthis for the heretofore failure of the United Nations–sponsored peace talks. Defenders of the war and US participation in it—Gerald Feierstein, director of Gulf affairs for the

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Riedel has said that this resolution is “so unbalanced that it is a barrier to peace, not a pathway to peace.” Does the UN have blood on its hands in this war?

IB: It certainly does. Whatever the UN special envoy [Martin Griffiths] says doesn't have any real meaning or value because whatever he proposes is clearly in the interest of the Security Council and its five permanent members [US, UK, France, Russia, China—all of which have recently sold arms to Saudi Arabia] who have no desire to pursue a real long-term end of this conflict on terms that would secure the well-being of the people of North Yemen. The UN has shed all its facade of being a fair arbiter in conflict. They've demonstrated over and over again in the case of Yemen that they are in the pocket of powerful interests. It has basically given the green light to this war in the first place. It has consistently made statements blaming this war on the people who are being bombed and who are starving to death. One thing is for sure: The UN has long served the interests of American imperialism. Certainly, in the case of Yemen, it's not going to come in and save the day for millions of people.

GO: How does this war end?

IB: This war cannot end in a stalemate for the primary parties who are making war on Yemen. This is the problem. They can't afford it. They can't just step back now. Most likely North Yemen will be consistently bombarded and attacked while parts of South Yemen will be divided amongst those who are able to negotiate the division of assets. Saudi Arabia would not survive if it accepted a cease-fire. There would be no way to negotiate a cease-fire because the Saudis need desperately Yemen's resources, and its two neighbors in the GCC will not allow them to secure it. It's already run up the books. It needs Yemen's assets. It needs ports to access the Indian Ocean. It needs Yemen's infrastructure.

GO: To borrow political scientist Robert Vitalis's term, what is the likely fate of “America's Kingdom” in the Saudi oil frontier?

IB: This is the end of an era. Saudi Arabia will not exist. Territorially, it will be redivided. Who knows who will get the most symbolically important Mecca and Medina regions and the port city Jeddah. Probably

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exile. The boundaries are redrawn. It could be that Qatar benefits, it could be that UAE benefits—who knows. There's going to be a lot of violence to resolve that issue.

Gunar Olsen Gunar Olsen is a New York-based journalist and former *Nation* intern.

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