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We Need to Break the Wall of Indifference Around the War in Yemen

BY

LAURENT BONNEFOY

Western states and arms companies have facilitated a destructive war in Yemen that's already claimed 400,000 lives. A six-month truce recently ended without agreement on a peace deal — ending this horrific conflict must now be an international priority.

Review of Helen Lackner, *Yemen: Poverty and Conflict* (London: Routledge, 2022)

Interest in the war that has been ongoing in Yemen since 2015 has been persistently limited, whether among diplomats, the media, or the general public. This is surprising when one thinks of the war's wider ramifications across the Middle East.

Those consequences have included Iranian encroachment in Yemen through Tehran's support for a rebel group, the Houthis, and daily air bombardments by a foreign power, Saudi Arabia, with the assistance of other states — first and foremost the United Arab Emirates (UAE) — and armed by Western military companies.

This indifference is even more puzzling when one takes into consideration the multiple violations of international law that have occurred in Yemen and the immense humanitarian tragedy that the conflict has produced. According to UN figures, the war has claimed four hundred thousand victims, directly or indirectly, yet it remains largely under the radar in the West as well as in Arab countries.

It took some time for academics to provide an intelligible picture of the Yemeni conflict through books in English that are accessible to a wide audience. Such works have gradually hit the market, but few match the quality and coherence of Helen Lackner's recent publication *Yemen: Poverty and Conflict*.

Breaking the Silence

The author is no beginner when it comes to Yemen. Lackner has been following and analyzing developments in the country for five decades as an independent scholar. Her initial focus on the socialist experience of South Yemen, which she covered in an important book published in 1985, give her an interesting insight into the country's affairs, and she possesses undeniable authority (including in the eyes of many Yemenis).

Lackner has consistently put Yemeni society at the core of her approach, rather than issues of geopolitical interests or elite bargaining. This gives her publications a special quality characterized by concern for ordinary people and their livelihoods. In particular, she has delved into issues of rural and urban microeconomics, standards of living, water scarcity, and development.

In her new book, by presenting poverty and inequality as central factors that help explain the lasting crisis and instability in Yemen, Lackner develops an approach that is both balanced and politically engaged. Her analysis can inform the public of the complexities and intricacies of the war in that country.

The author displays a remarkable capacity to contextualize these matters in an accessible way as she sets out the main aspects of Yemen's complex history. Her book is an essential contribution to breaking the silence that surrounds the Yemeni conflict.

Yemen: Poverty and Conflict shows how the country's recent history has been plagued by poor allocation of resources, mismanagement of state institutions, neoliberal economic policies, and high-level corruption. Yemen's former president, Ali Abdullah Saleh, had amassed a multibillion-dollar fortune over the course of his thirty-three-year long reign by the time a popular uprising deposed him in 2012.

Neither international sanctions nor Saleh's political demise and eventual assassination in 2017 have led to the return of these vast sums to the Yemeni population. The ousted ruler's sons and nephews now manage his fortune. The land and property his family members control in Western capitals as well as in the UAE are just the tip of an iceberg. This symbolizes one of the many problems with

which Yemenis are confronted when it comes to the distribution of wealth, the national budget, and the Yemeni economy.

History of Conflict

Yemen is situated in the southwestern corner of the Arabian Peninsula, sharing a land border with Saudi Arabia and Oman, and lying across the sea from Djibouti, Eritrea, and Somalia. It remains the poorest country of the contemporary Arab world. The country's thirty million or so inhabitants have experienced more than their fair share of conflicts in modern history.

Frequent tribal warfare at the local level has unfolded in parallel to broader episodes of violence. There were struggles against the Ottoman military presence in the seventeenth and early twentieth centuries. British colonization around the port of Aden from the mid-nineteenth century was ended in 1967 after a campaign of guerrilla warfare that gave rise to the state of South Yemen. A civil war erupted in the North during the 1960s between republicans and monarchists, with Egyptian soldiers directly involved for several years.

There were several limited conflicts between the two Yemeni states, North and South, before they united in 1990, only for an armed confrontation to break out again in 1994 with an attempted southern breakaway. The first decade of the new millennium saw violent repression directed against political and religious movements ranging from Southern separatists and jihadis to the Houthis, a group that emerged among the Zaydi-Shiite minority.

The Houthis are the main enemy of many involved actors of the current war — in particular Saudi Arabia — and the target of international sanctions. Their control over the capital, Sana'a, and Yemen's most densely populated areas has only increased since the beginning of the current war. This underlines how the military strategy of the Saudi government and its allies, local or international, has failed.

The capacity of the Houthis to launch attacks beyond Yemeni territory through missiles and drones strikes, thanks to the technical support of the Iranian government, has exposed the fragility of the Gulf Arab monarchies. The Yemeni conflict has also illustrated once again the inability of international and regional powers to win the "small wars" they wage.

Much like the United States in Vietnam, Iraq, and Afghanistan, or France in Algeria and the Sahel region, Saudi Arabia has proved incapable of accomplishing a mission that seemed feasible on paper. The imbalance between the Houthis and the Saudi-led coalition in terms of military

equipment, funding, and control of airspace has not enabled the latter to achieve anything more tangible than the destruction of human lives and infrastructure.

Resource Struggles and the War Economy

Throughout *Yemen: Poverty and Conflict*, Lackner presents the country's history as a case of failed state construction and the dislocation of a nation, in part due to misconceived economic policies. She documents the history of Yemen's inclusion in international politics as well as the responsibility of the country's elites for an ongoing crisis that began well before the current war.

Lackner shows that in the course of a long historical process of nation and state formation, domestic leaders and international powers made several faulty diagnoses of the situation in Yemen that came at a high price for its development. The most damaging of all was probably the way Yemen was absorbed into the so-called war on terror launched by the United States and its allies after 9/11. This encouraged draconian security policies and increased the rift between the Yemeni people and their government.

The book also describes the effect of neoliberal economic policies on communities and livelihoods in the countryside as well as urban centers. The development of parastatal institutions, which the World Bank and International Monetary Fund encouraged in the 1990s, undermined the existing state structures, while a focus on export-oriented irrigated crops such as mangoes and bananas weakened the Yemeni economy and made it more dependent on imports. This situation has had a terrible impact on Yemenis in the context of the war and the rise in global food and energy prices linked to the conflict in Ukraine.

As Lackner rightly emphasizes, the issue of resource allocation is central, although those who analyze the conflict in terms of identity politics — especially sectarian fragmentation between Sunnis and Shias — have often neglected it. Her own book does not ignore sectarian divisions or the power struggles fueling the war. However, it tries to present a hierarchy of different variables, showing how important the livelihoods and conditions of existence for ordinary Yemenis are in explaining the war's development.

This approach is all the more relevant as the problem of how to distribute resources in Yemen is sure to become even graver. The war itself has generated its own economy with a gang of warlords who benefit from the fighting as much as from supplies of humanitarian aid. A six-month truce recently expired and there is no end to violence. Poverty and the destruction of social infrastructure is only getting worse.

Lackner highlights the challenge of water management with the potential depletion of ground water in a number of regions, including the capital and its surrounding area. Climate change is thus a central concern that will impose further constraints on the possibilities open to Yemenis.

In this context, it is difficult to remain optimistic about Yemen's prospects. Nevertheless, the book's conclusion offers a few paths for constructive action, stressing the importance of local initiatives and the need for a new generation of Yemeni leaders (as well as regional and international partners) to engage constructively with them. For those who want to get a clear picture of where the country may be going, *Yemen: Poverty and Conflict* is essential reading.

CONTRIBUTORS

Laurent Bonnefoy is a CNRS researcher at Sciences Po in Paris. He specializes in contemporary politics in the Arabian Peninsula and is the author of various books, including *Yemen and the World: Beyond Insecurity* (Oxford University Press, 2018).

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