Radhya Almutawakel, Chairperson Of Mwatana For Human Rights. Photo Courtesy Of Mwatana For Human Rights

THE BATTLE FOR YEMEN

'Yes, our work is dangerous, but it's more dangerous not to have this platform'—Radhya Almutawakel explains why she will never stop defending the human rights of her country people and holding global powers to account for the humanitarian crisis they have helped to create in her homeland.

By Sarah Fones

It's been called "the world's worst humanitarian crisis" countless times by activists, journalists, and advocates across multiple platforms in numerous languages. Yet, the reality of the war in Yemen continues to largely fall on deaf ears. Too few people outside the country even acknowledge the disparate, multifactional conflict that's roiled the nation of approximately 30 million since late 2014.

To better understand the war's ramifications, and what's being done to hold all parties to account, Mission spoke with Radhya Almutawakel, the cofounder of Yemeni advocacy organization Mwatana for Human Rights, who in 2019 was included in the *Time* 100 list of the most influential people of the year. "It's not easy to be an independent human rights NGO in the middle of a war," Almutawakel concedes. "But we are protected—not 100 percent, because no one is protected 100 percent. We protect ourselves by being independent and professional."

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Almutawakel and her colleagues serve as record keepers of a sort, documenting indiscriminate attacks on civilian neighborhoods, the sales of arms and ammunition, and the coalition air strikes that maim and kill. Getting to the need for the kind of autonomy Almutawakel espouses, including what's happened and why, requires some background.

Yemen's civil war took root with the failed political transition of Abdrabbuh Mansour Hadi, a former deputy to authoritarian president Ali Abdullah Saleh, himself ousted following the Arab Spring uprising. In addition to the rampant corruption, job scarcity, and food insecurity that had long plagued Yemen, Hadi also found himself contending with a separatist movement in the south, jihadist attacks, and security personnel who remained loyal to Saleh.

Negotiations between Hadi's Sunni government and Houthi rebels—Shia insurgents with ties to Iran—ultimately failed. Seeking new leadership and lower fuel prices, the Houthis first seized the Yemeni capital, Sana'a, in 2014, then took over the presidential palace the following January. Hadi and his leadership were forced to resign, and soon after, a group of Gulf states commandeered by Saudi Arabia commenced both an anti-Houthi economic isolation campaign and a series of air strikes. The U.S., the U.K., and France began offering the Saudis logistical and intelligence support.

Since then, the conflict has been likened to a proxy war among competing powers in the Middle East, with a Saudi-led coalition fighting Iran-backed rebels. Years of death and devastation, including widespread famine, have resulted. As of March 2020, the United Nations had verified at least 7,700 civilian deaths, but other monitoring groups have said the death toll is significantly higher—closer to 100,000 fatalities.

Large-scale death, this time attributable to the global pandemic, at first seemed a foregone conclusion in Yemen. "We were very scared because the medical system, the health system, really collapsed," Almutawakel recalls. "In Yemen, they couldn't survive cholera, which is a very preventable disease." Persistent malnutrition, coupled with the resurgence of contagious diseases such as diphtheria and dengue fever in children, continues to ravage the population.

Getting an accurate read on the actual number of deaths from Covid-19 has proven extremely difficult due to a lack of government transparency, with Houthi authorities in Sana'a, for example, denying that hundreds and maybe even thousands of Yemenis have died at home. Such opacity is emblematic of both a severely disjointed health infrastructure and a lack of credible local media outlets. For her part, Almutawakel is working to create an independent news website where Yemenis and other Arabic speakers can go to find consistently reliable information, on the conflict and beyond.

Rather than ascribing blame to a particular faction, nation, or side, Almutawakel suggests it's never really that black or white. "I actually believe that in every war there is no bad side and good side—that's a lie," she says. "Specifically in Yemen, I keep saying that we don't have heroes, we have only criminals and victims." Everyone in the former camp is armed, Almutawakel points out, including those belonging to Yemen's internationally recognized government. "And they are all complicit when it comes to human rights, they are all complicit in horrible violations against civilians," she adds.

Initially, Almutawakel believed that many in the broader global community simply weren't aware of the conflict, or perhaps its severity. The truth, however, has allowed her to take a more cynical position. "At the beginning, we thought that what the world needed in order to stop selling weapons to Saudis and Emiratis is just to know what's happening in Yemen," she explains. Working with Mwatana's international partners, Almutawakel and her colleagues documented violations, published papers, and continued the advocacy work they had been doing since 2007. That's when they

Photo By Ralf Schlesener

realized it wasn't simply a matter of a lack of visibility. "We discovered that the war in Yemen—it's not forgotten, it is ignored. And it is very clear that the financial interest was one reason behind all of this," she says. The war in Yemen has persisted most conspicuously, at least, in part due to the wealth and power of Saudi Arabia. Annual arms sales to the country tally in the billions, with evidence linking coalition-led air strikes against the Houthis directly to civilian casualties.

After a year-long pause, in June 2020, the U.K. announced it would resume arms sales to Saudi Arabia. This past December, the U.S. Senate overrode President Trump's veto of legislation that aimed to cut off arms sales to Saudi Arabia and other Gulf nations. Yet later in the month, the U.S. State Department approved the sale of 3,000 precision-guided munitions, or smart bombs, to Saudi Arabia in a deal worth $290 million. While negotiations of the sale were still ongoing, there was optimism that once U.S. President-elect Joe Biden was sworn in, he could take action to halt the agreement.

In October 2020, Biden had issued a statement saying that his administration would reassess the relationship between the U.S. and Saudi Arabia and end Washington's support for the Saudi-led war in Yemen. He also claimed that, going forward, the U.S. wouldn't "check its values at the door to sell arms or buy oil." This February, Biden publicly declared an end to U.S. support for Saudi Arabia's role in Yemen. Meanwhile, his national security advisor, Jake Sullivan, said that the Biden administration had already stopped two sales of precision-guided munitions.

Almutawakel retains hope, which she says is vital. She also sees concrete evidence of work on the ground directly resulting in positive change. She mentions a prisoners' release of nearly 1,100 people by the Special Envoy to Yemen, Martin Griffiths, and the International Committee of the Red Cross, which was completed last October; a criminal complaint Mwatana filed in Italy outlining the government and arms manufacturers' potential culpability for war crimes; and the fact that Mwatana now has a legal unit of male and female lawyers working in 18 Yemeni governorates (there are a total of 21 in the country, as well as one municipality) following cases of detention, forced disappearance, and torture.

"So many people, they say that our work is dangerous. Yes, it's dangerous, but it's more dangerous not to have this platform," Almutawakel explains. "If you don't have a tool to fight this peacefully, then it's going to be much harder than all the obstacles and the risk we are facing. So we have to have hope—and we're trying to face all of this craziness through our work."

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