

Seeds of destruction: Yemen civil war ripping society apart

Southern port city of Aden is ravaged by months of fighting, with residents fleeing and infrastructure crumbling

Al Jazeera, June 18, 2015 by [Iona Craig](#)

ADEN, Yemen — The crows and their haunting screams are pervasive. They scavenge through mountains of rubbish lining the streets and tear at rotting bodies lying in the no man's land separating the two warring sides in a conflict that has decimated this once bustling seaport.

Yemen's southern port city of Aden was, until recently, a popular if slightly dilapidated holiday retreat for throngs of Yemenis. Amid rising tension on March 19, Houthi militiamen, along with renegade military units loyal to the country's former president Ali Abdullah Saleh, launched an assault in the city that quickly escalated into civil war.

The widespread destruction caused by months of relentless fighting has torn the heart out of Aden, including the historic old town known as Crater that nestles in the dramatic backdrop of a dormant volcano.

The most densely populated area of Aden is now ghostly quiet, save for the crows and the distant pounding of artillery indicating the latest location of the shifting front line. Burnt out tanks and armoured personnel carriers stand amid the concrete skeletons of apartment blocks, hollowed out by weeks of shelling and gun battles.

Most residents have fled as street-to-street fighting or air strikes have seen electricity lines cut and water pipes damaged. Thousands now live in hotels, schools and previously empty apartments in the northern and western suburbs, just behind the front lines. Others have escaped the city entirely, going east to the province of Hadhramaut or taking the treacherous journey by boat to the Horn of Africa.

All of Aden's 140 schools are now closed. In a western suburb, Safa School is now home to 100 children and their families who live in 17 rooms. With no cooking gas available, the women prepare meals over a wood fire.

Moaar Ali Mohammed is one of thousands of the displaced now scattered across the city and relying entirely on food aid.

"Older people can adapt but the children can't," she said, sitting in the shade of a tree in the school's grounds. "Without the food donations, we have nothing. No flour, no rice. There's nothing otherwise."

The tit-for-tat shelling, along with bombs being dropped by fighter jets of the Saudi-led coalition in their attempt to push back the Houthi-Saleh forces, are not the only tools in this war. Food is also being used as weapon.

The latest United Nations figures say half Yemen's population is now food insecure in the wake of a naval blockade imposed by the U.S.-backed, Saudi-led coalition in a country that usually imports 90 percent of its food. But in Aden, residents are facing a double siege. The Houthis and military units aligned to former president Saleh are blocking food and medical supplies from entering the city by road.

Now the flour needed for bakeries across the city has run out, and the city's vegetable markets are bare. The health care system is also on the verge of collapse, with hospitals struggling to cope with dwindling drug supplies and as a dengue fever outbreak takes hold.

A few in the conflict-affected areas have defiantly refused to leave their homes, despite being cut off from the outside world. Phone networks have been shut down and families have been living for weeks in the sweltering heat without electricity. Surviving on a diet of rice and biscuits while collecting water from dripping pipes, 70-year-old Abdul Rahman al-Shuqri and his wife Amera decided to stay behind with one of their daughters, Safa, in their once luxurious home. Now they live in a hall way in the center of the house, away from the windows that have all long since been blown out by the shock waves from air strikes.

"It's terrifying," said Amera, breaking into tears. "Maybe I will die here. I am afraid I will never see my children and grandchildren again."

The drastic reduction in goods has been matched by a similar decline in services as the state collapses. Employees of government institutions have not been paid since the war began, leaving rubbish to pile up in the streets, as cleaners no longer operate. In an unrelenting heat, the stench fills the city, and the risk of disease rises.

The local water authority is also struggling. Down to 150 workers from 2,000, Najeeb Mohammed Ahmed, general director of the Aden water authority, says he no longer has the fuel to drive the truck needed to take diesel to the center of the city — where water needs to be pumped — after pipelines were destroyed in the fighting.

"This war is a curse," says Ahmed. "The situation is very dangerous. Now I am afraid of drought, even in the non-fighting areas."

Fuel queues snake for miles behind the front lines. Seventy-year-old taxi driver Abdul Hashem has slept on the roof of his car waiting for fuel for eight days and nights in temperatures of 100 degrees. His income as a taxi driver usually feeds 13 people in his family, but he cannot afford the black market fuel prices that would in turn force him to charge exorbitant prices for a taxi ride.

Aden's largest public hospital was closed at the end of April, passing the burden of treating trauma patients to just four hospitals in the city. The initial outbreak of war saw international staff being evacuated, leaving hospitals desperately short of doctors, surgeons and nurses. After the fighting spread and the siege took hold, hospital staff started living at their workplaces. Many of the doctors are now working unpaid as volunteers in a desperate attempt to keep the healthcare system functioning.

Mohammed Ali, 23, is waiting for his second operation after a sniper shot him on his way home from dawn prayers. He describes how his 21-year-old friend, who was walking from the mosque with him, was shot in the chest and died upon arrival at the hospital.

As the holy month of Ramadan begins, Aden's residents are desperate for a respite in the fighting and a lifting of the punishing siege of the city.

"The safety net, fragile before the war, has now gone," said Bertrand Lamon, head of the International Committee for the Red Cross sub-delegation in Aden, who were also forced out of their offices amid the fighting. "The situation now exceeds our capacity."

With the Government Health Office in Aden already reporting an uptick in dengue fever cases, the number of people dying from disease and malnutrition is likely to soon exceed those being killed by the conflict. In all of Yemen, [more than 1,400 civilians have been killed](#) since the beginning of the conflict, with over 3,400 injured, according to the United Nations.

"We can't cope," said Dr. AbdulHakim al-Tamimi, a surgeon at Al-Waly hospital, as he stood over two patients in the intensive care unit suffering from cerebral malaria. "Please tell the world we need their help. We are begging for help," he added, as a man with a gunshot wound to the face was rushed through the door.

YEMEN'S HIDDEN WAR

HOW THE SAUDI-LED COALITION IS KILLING CIVILIANS

(The Intercept, 1 September 2015)

In the Islamic concept of qadar, your divine destiny is inescapable. If you try to cheat death it will find you. For two women on a dusty road in mid-June on the southwest corner of the Arabian Peninsula, their repeated attempts to dodge fate ended in tragic failure.

Leaving the war zone of Yemen's southern port city of Aden on June 10, the women headed north in a Toyota Cressida driven by a male relative. The pair were escaping the violence that had already turned entire streets in Aden to rubble, left hundreds dead and thousands of civilians under siege, struggling to find food, water and medical care.

Driving ahead of them was a family of four in a Hilux pick-up truck, slowing at the numerous checkpoints along the road and weaving around potholes in the asphalt. Between 4:30 and 5 p.m., seemingly from nowhere, the first missile struck. The Hilux flipped into a cartwheeling fireball, killing the two children and their parents inside.

Before the women in the Toyota had a chance to compose themselves an ominous whistle preceded a second missile, which smashed into the ground beside them and sent their car careering off the road into the dusty scrubland. Twice in the space of just a few minutes the women had stared death in the face.

Dressed in black abiyas – the uniform dress code of women in Yemen — they clambered out of their sand-bound car. Seeing the two stranded women, Mohammed Ahmed Salem pulled over in his bus. Salem was taking his 25-year-old daughter to the province of Lahj and had filled his bus with passengers to help pay for the fuel. The passengers made room for the two women, who left their male relative to wait for a family member to help recover the crashed Toyota. But as they thanked God for their narrow escape, the third and final missile came out of the sky. The bus and some 10 passengers were obliterated.

The names of the dead did not even make news in the local press in Aden. This form of death is now commonplace amid a war so hidden that foreign journalists are forced to smuggle themselves by boat into the country to report on an ongoing conflict that the U.N. says has killed more than 4,500 people and left another 23,500 wounded.

On one side of the conflict is the U.S.-backed coalition of nations led by Saudi Arabia supporting Yemen's president-in-exile, Abd Rabu Mansour Hadi. Their adversaries are the predominantly Shiite Houthi fighters who hail from the northern province of Saada that abuts the Saudi border, along with soldiers from renegade military units loyal to the country's former president, Ali Abdullah Saleh.

In March, the Saudis – aided by U.S. and British weapons and intelligence – began a bombing campaign in an attempt to push back the Houthis, who they see as a proxy for Iran. Since then, from the northern province of Saada to the capital Sanaa, from the central cities of Taiz and Ibb to the narrow streets at the heart of Aden, scores of airstrikes have hit densely populated areas, factories, schools, civilian infrastructure and even a camp for displaced people.

From visiting some 20 sites of airstrikes and interviews with more than a dozen witnesses, survivors and relatives of those killed in eight of these strikes in southern Yemen, this reporter discovered evidence of a pattern of Saudi-coalition airstrikes that show indiscriminate bombing of civilians and rescuers, adding further weight to claims made by human rights organizations that some Saudi-led strikes may amount to war crimes and raising vital questions over the U.S. and Britain's role in Saudi Arabia's war in Yemen.

(The number of civilian casualties has not been officially collated or recorded by NGOs or aid agencies. Only a handful of humanitarian and independent human rights organizations have had a presence on the ground in Aden, while nationwide just a small fraction of the strikes have even been independently documented. The death tolls for the eight strikes, which include five on public buses, were given by witnesses, or those who collected the dead after the strikes, and are necessarily imperfect; the total ranges from 142 up to 175.)

"The Obama administration needs urgently to explain what the U.S.'s exact role in Saudi Arabia's indiscriminate bombing campaign is," said Cori Crider, strategic director at the international legal group Reprieve. "It very much looks like there is a case to answer here — not just for the Saudis, but for any Western agencies who are standing behind them. International law shuns the intentional targeting of civilians in war — and in the United States it is a serious federal crime."

These civilian deaths occurred in strikes that account for just a handful of the thousands of bombing raids carried out by the Saudi-led coalition since its aerial campaign began. Of particular concern are the U.S.-style "double tap" strikes — where follow-up strikes hit those coming to rescue victims of an initial missile attack — which became a notorious trademark of covert CIA drone strikes in Pakistan. On July 6, for instance, at least 35 rescuers and bystanders were killed trying to help scores of traders hit in a strike five minutes earlier on a farmers market in Fayoush, in Yemen's Lahj province.

Abdul Hamid Mohammed Saleh, 30, was standing on the opposite side of the road when the first missile hit the gathering of more than 100 men who had been arriving since before 6 a.m. to trade goats and sheep at the daily market. The initial blast, he told me, killed around a dozen men and injured scores more. Body parts flew through the air, and an arm landed next to Saleh. He said he began to flee, but hearing the screams of the injured he turned back and crossed the road to try and help. The second strike landed less than 30 yards from him, sending shrapnel flying into his back.

Mohammed Awath Thabet, a 52-year-old teacher who helped collect the bodies of the dead after the twin strike, said at least 50 people, all civilians ranging from teenagers to men in their 60s, were killed in total. "After 50 it was hard to tell," Thabet said. "The rest were all body parts. People cut to pieces. What parts belonged to who? We couldn't tell. Some were animal parts. Some were human," he added, pointing to a brown stain on a nearby cinderblock wall left by a man's head that had been stuck to it by the force of the blast. He and other witnesses said that there were no conceivable military targets or Houthi fighters in the area.

On June 12, six days after an airstrike split a large public transport bus in two on the edge of Aden's Dar Saad district, Lami Yousef Ali, 23, found the decomposing body of his 28-year-old brother, Abdu, still entangled in the wreckage. Lami and Abdu had been chatting via WhatsApp moments before the bus was bombed, and their father, Yusef Ali, also died in the strike, which killed at least 16 civilians. According to witnesses, this bombing also hit two

cars carrying Houthi fighters. (This is the only case of the eight strikes investigated in which Houthi fighters appear to have been the target rather than civilians.) Although no remnants of the cars are visible at the strike site, the twisted metal of the bisected bus still lies in the sand, rusting in the scorching heat of Aden's summer sun. In the background the familiar sound of distant bombings resonates from the shifting front lines as the battle moves on.

On April 25 a fighter jet bombed a public bus towing another bus carrying Somali refugees from the isolated Kharaz refugee camp, 93 miles northwest of Aden. Forced to take a winding back route to Aden because of fighting on the main road, the shambling convoy was hit around 11 a.m. by at least two strikes in the remote desert scrublands of Lahj.

Mustafa al-Abd Awad said he lost his brother, Mohammed, a father of seven. When Awad went to the site to recover his brother's body, he counted more than 30 others in the ashes of the two burnt-out buses. Other relatives who went to collect their dead said the total killed was as high as 52. "They take everything from us," shouted Awad, gesturing toward a cloudless sky. "Why? Tell me why."

Mohammed Hussein Othman, 23, was also killed that day, leaving behind his 4-year-old son, Rashid, who had already lost his mother at birth. "My Dad went to heaven to be with my Mum," said the little boy, sitting in the lap of his grandmother, Itisam, while the older woman smiled at selfies taken by her son shortly before his death.

These erroneous Saudi-led strikes have not just hit remote desert roads. In the Crater district of Aden, nestled in the heart of a dormant volcano, at least 18 civilians were killed on April 28, including a family of seven. The crumbling buildings and carcasses of cars left behind suggest that multiple strikes hit the narrow residential street. The facade of one house torn open by bombs exposes furniture and family possessions like a child's doll house; just a few yards away a school, mosque and maternity clinic all lie in ruins. Along with the Saudi coalition's bombing campaign, American warships have also helped to enforce a naval blockade that the Saudis say is necessary to prevent weapon shipments to the Houthis, whom they claim are supported by Iran. According to the U.N., this collective punishment has left the country "on the brink of famine," with desperate shortages of food, medical supplies and fuel — vital not only for transportation but for pumping increasingly scarce water from the depths of the country's depleted water tables. Four out of five Yemenis are now in need of humanitarian assistance.

To add to the worsening humanitarian crisis, on August 18 Saudi-led fighter jets bombed the port in the northern city of Hodeidah, a main supply route for aid agencies, while on the outskirts of Aden white sugar spills into shredded sacks of flour. Hundreds of pounds of vital food supplies lie ruined in bombed-out warehouses.

While protesters have taken to the streets of the capital, Sanaa, in the thousands to demonstrate against the bombings, in Aden green Saudi flags flutter in the sea breeze at checkpoints, and street vendors sell posters of Saudi Arabia's King Salman in acknowledgement of the Kingdom's support in the battle to remove the Houthi Saleh forces from their city. Unlike northern Yemen, where sympathy for the Houthis is strongest, many southerners are reluctant to blame their Saudi neighbors for the civilian casualties.

Some observers, such as Human Rights Watch, say evidence shows many of the Saudi-led strikes appear to be "serious laws-of-war violations," while others stress that the many civilian deaths are a result of error. In Aden, where scores of civilians have also been killed

in a ground war that raged for over four months, Southern Resistance fighters place blame for the deaths on the poor coordination between the anti-Houthi militias and their coalition partners in Riyadh. "It was not organized," said tax director and Southern Resistance supporter Mohammed Othman of the Saudis' first attempt at managing a modern war. "Those calling in the strikes were old commanders who don't know the recent layout of the city." (A day after our meeting, Othman was shot dead by a Houthi sniper.)

Brig. Gen. Ahmed Assiri, spokesperson for the Saudi-led coalition forces, denied air strikes had targeted civilians and rescuers, or civilian infrastructure. When asked to comment, he said that "It is not a good story to talk about," and also that he welcomed any United Nations investigation into the strikes.

But some on the ground in the south still find it difficult to absolve the Saudi-led coalition. Shukri Ali Saeed said he was driving his flatbed truck from Lahj into Aden on June 18, the first day of the holy month of Ramadan, when it was hit by an airstrike. Two men sitting alongside him were killed. With both his legs broken and suffering from third degree burns, Saeed dragged himself out of the upturned truck. He lay on the side of the road for more than two hours before someone came to help him. Two months later Saeed is still in the hospital. At night the sound of the incoming missile haunts him when he tries to sleep. "I can't blame the Houthis," said Saeed from his hospital bed. "It's clear who is responsible." Last week, 23 human rights organizations called on the United Nations Human Rights Council to create an international commission of inquiry to investigate alleged violations of international laws by all sides in the ongoing conflict. This includes the U.S. and Britain. Some 45 U.S. advisers are currently assisting the Saudi coalition from joint operations centers in Saudi Arabia and Bahrain, while the American government has also supplied intelligence, in-flight refueling of fighter jets, and weapons, including, according to rights organizations, banned U.S. cluster munitions.

America's continued support of Saudi Arabia's war in Yemen comes as Saudi-U.S. relations have been strained by President Obama's pursuit of a nuclear deal with the Kingdom's regional nemesis, Iran. Adam Baron, a visiting fellow with the European Council on Foreign Relations, suggests that the U.S. has been more eager to conciliate Saudi Arabia than usual, "because they want them and the other Gulf States to at least not actively oppose the Iran deal."

A U.S. Department of Defense spokesperson responded: "We take all accounts of civilian deaths due to the ongoing hostilities in Yemen seriously. We continue to provide logistical and intelligence support to the Saudi-led coalition in response to ongoing aggressive Houthi military actions. We have asked the Saudi government to investigate all credible reports of civilian casualties and to undertake urgent steps in response if these reports are verified."

Meanwhile, the U.S.-backed bombing campaign continues into its sixth month and Yemen's largely hidden war endures; its civilians struggle to survive, with little influence over their fate. "We don't know when or where death will come, where the next bullet or bomb will drop," said Itisam, staring at a picture of her dead son's gray, dismembered body wedged under the undercarriage of a bus. "Only God knows."

Reporter Ryan Devereaux contributed to this report.

The Agony of Saada U.S. and Saudi Bombs Target Yemen's Ancient Heritage

(The Intercept, 16 November 2015)

Shards of blue, red, and green stained glass, remnants of an intricate crescent window that is a 4,000-year-old Yemeni art form, glitter in the sunlight before crunching underfoot. Atop a mound of dust and mud stands the shell of an ancient tower-house, sliced in half like a cake by an airstrike.

In addition to the growing number of civilian casualties in the country's seven-month-long war, U.S.-made bombs dropped by fighter jets from a Saudi Arabian-led coalition are pulverizing Yemen's architectural history, often referred to as a living museum. These airstrikes are tearing villages apart, forcibly displacing thousands and erasing the country's inimitable heritage, possibly in violation of international humanitarian law, according to the world heritage body, UNESCO.

Entire villages in the Yemeni highlands appear to defy gravity. Remote high-rises cling precariously to cliff edges. Inside, the character of the fortress-like homes changes with the sun as it moves through the sky. Light filters through the stained glass of patterned windowpanes, called qamaris, illuminating the white gypsum plaster. At night, candles or rare supplies of electricity send dapples of color into the twilight.

Yemen's time-honored homes are part of the country's rich social fabric, embodying the culture of the families who have lived in them for centuries. The Middle East's poorest nation is famous for constructing the world's first skyscrapers, often up to 100 feet high, with as many as 11 stories designed to keep extended families and their livestock safely under one roof.

The violent assault on the country's history over the past seven months began in March after a political power struggle between incumbent president Abdu Rabbu Mansour Hadi and Houthi rebels backed by soldiers loyal to the former president, Ali Abdullah Saleh, descended into civil war.

But Yemen's internal conflict has also landed the country's 26 million people in the middle of the regional struggle between Sunni Saudi Arabia and Shiite Iran, already at loggerheads over the war in Syria. After the predominantly Shiite Houthi rebels seized control of the capital, Sanaa, last year, Saudi Arabia and a coalition of nations supported by the United States launched an unrelenting aerial bombing campaign. There have been near-daily air raids ever since.

The Saudis say they intervened in Yemen for two reasons: to restore the Hadi government forced into exile by Saleh's loyalists in the military collaborating with the Houthis, who they claim are an Iranian proxy, and to counter what they view as a growing threat by Iran to seize power and influence in the region. The level of Tehran's support, however, is disputed.

At least 5,604 people, including 2,577 civilians, have died since the conflict began in March, according to a United Nations tally of figures from local health facilities. That number is probably an undercount of the real figure, because many of the dead or injured never reach medical treatment centers and bodies are often buried unrecorded.

A joint report by the U.K.-based charity Action on Armed Violence and the United Nations' Office for the Coordination of Humanitarian Affairs concluded that airstrikes were responsible for 60 percent of civilian casualties in the first seven months of this year. One of the worst hit areas has been Yemen's northern province of Saada, the birthplace and homeland of the Houthi movement. Saada City, the provincial capital, was founded before the fourth century B.C., as the hub of the Minaean Kingdom of Main.

On May 8 the Saudi-led coalition declared Saada City, home to some 50,000 people, a "military zone," which Human Rights Watch says is a clear violation of international humanitarian law, and gave civilians a few hours' notice to leave.

Many of those who did not heed the coalition's warning were forced to flee their homes by the ensuing airstrikes. The village of Rahban, on the outskirts of the city, was razed. It consisted entirely of historic, centuries-old multistory homes with thick rammed-earth walls, rainbow-colored stained-glass windows and hand-carved wooden doors. Timber joists that supported families for tens of generations now protrude from piles of rubble. More than 30 homes were wiped out.

Ibrahim al-Sabra, 23, and his relatives were one of more than 100 families who fled their homes to escape an apparently deliberate tactic of forced displacement of civilians that could amount to a war crime under Article 53 of the Fourth Geneva Convention. The bombardment that destroyed his home started just after 3 a.m. and killed two of al-Sabra's cousins.

"Now we have no home, it's gone forever," said al-Sabra, who is struggling to rent a house for his family in the city. "Rahban is where the poorest people in Saada City lived. The only thing of value that we had was our homes." The newest houses there were more than 100 years old.

On May 9, a day after the coalition's ultimatum for civilians to leave, multiple airstrikes hit the heart of Saada City's historic old city. Abu Tah, 28, witnessed three bombings that hit the market in front of the ninth-century al-Hadi mosque, killing two patients along with a doctor, who practiced out of his house next door to the mosque. Four others, including a second doctor, were also killed, he said.

The mosque is the final resting place of Imam al-Hadi ila'l-Haqq Yahya, the first Shiite Zaydi imam of Yemen, who died in 911 A.D. Local legend has it that the site of the mosque is where the Prophet Mohammed's camel once rested. But today, the mosque's prominent green dome is cracked like an eggshell and its doors blown out. Repeated ground-shaking strikes just a few feet from the high walls surrounding the structure have crumbled its ceilings. For the first time in its 1,200-year history, the Hadi mosque is now closed.

"We want peace; we call for peace. We don't want our people divided," said Abdullah al-Mutamaze, a cleric, historian, and caretaker of the abandoned mosque. He sat among the rubble in a broken chair at the edge of a 10-foot-deep crater in front of the main entrance and fretted that the community's essential cultural and religious heritage would be lost.

The fact that Sunni Saudi Arabia, whose king has the title "Custodian of the Two Holy Mosques" of Mecca and Medina, is bombing a town once famous as a seat of Shiite Zaydi scholarship is not lost on al-Mutamaze. "This is just a title, they still target the people they hate," he said.

The destruction of historical sites and Shiite mosques is not unique to Yemen. One of Saudi Arabia's coalition partners, Bahrain, demolished or vandalized at least 35 Shiite mosques during the country's political uprising against minority Sunni rule in 2011, according to the Bahrain Center for Human Rights, all with Saudi backing. The Saudi Kingdom has shown very little, if any, regard for its own historical sites. The former director of the Mecca Hajj Research center previously stated that by 2008, more than 300 ancient sites had been destroyed in Mecca and Medina alone.

In the past, Yemenis have not defined themselves, or their places of worship, by sect. But the country's social structure is now being ripped apart by new divisions created and stoked by the ongoing war.

American and British support for the bombing campaign continues despite calls from human rights organizations to halt weapons supplies to the Saudi-led coalition in the wake of what Amnesty International called "damning evidence of war crimes." Democratic members of the U.S. Senate Foreign Relations Committee, however, managed to delay the latest planned transfer from the U.S. to Saudi Arabia of precision-guided weapons.

In response to the Amnesty report, the Saudi Ministry of Foreign Affairs released a written statement on October 7 denying all allegations of intentionally bombing civilians. "Any accusation of such intentions is a false claim spread by those who support the rebels attempting to wreak havoc in Yemen," the statement read, adding that the airstrikes in Saada were aimed at the Houthi rebels.

Saudi Brigadier General Ahmed Asiri, spokesman of the Saudi-led coalition forces, speaks to the media next to a replica of a Tornado fighter jet, at the Riyadh airbase in the Saudi capital on March 26, 2014. Speaking to reporters in the Saudi capital, spokesman Ahmed Assiri also said that there were no immediate plans for a ground offensive but that the coalition would not allow any supplies to reach the rebels.

In September, the spokesperson for the Saudi-led coalition, Brig. Gen. Ahmed Assiri, told *The Intercept* that the coalition was using Western precision-guided weapons "to avoid collateral damage." But that's still happening. These days, the market's narrow streets, normally bustling with traders and rippling with the echo of the call for the afternoon prayer, lie ghostly quiet. The bombed-out spice market, clothes shops, and ancient caravanserai that welcomed travelers and traders over the centuries lie in ruins. Both the past and present are reduced to the same dust and rubble.

The devastation serves as a disturbing portent of what may yet befall the UNESCO World Heritage site of the old city in Sanaa, which has been continuously inhabited for more than 2,500 years. Folklore has it that the walled city, on a highland plateau more than 7,200 feet above sea level, was founded by Shem, son of Noah.

At risk are the picture-postcard houses of old Sanaa. The labyrinths of cobbled streets twist and turn around scores of hidden gardens, steam bath houses, busy markets, and densely packed terraced homes that stretch up toward the sky. The Grand Mosque, believed to have been built during the life of the Prophet Mohammed, stands as a haven of serenity at the heart of this vibrant city.

"We have to see the houses as part of an integrated urban fabric, which is also a social-cultural fabric," said Michele Lamprakos, architectural historian at the University of

Maryland and author of *Building a World Heritage City: Sanaa, Yemen*. “They provide a window onto Sanaa’s long urban history.”

The old city has already been bombed twice. On June 12, five members of the same family were killed when four homes crumbled to the ground after being hit with a 2,000-pound bomb. A further strike on September 19 destroyed a traditional four-story home, killing 10 members of the al-Ayani family — eight were children. More than 130 densely packed, terraced homes of old Sanaa were damaged by the blast.

As of October 15, according to the U.N., up to 82,300 people have been internally displaced in Saada, and 2.3 million in all of Yemen. It is not clear how many are permanently homeless due to forced displacement, in contravention of international laws of war, by apparent deliberate bombing of houses.

“We left our homes before, but we went back,” said Fatima, who did not want to give her full name. She now lives in a school in Sanaa with her four children. “But this time, our home and half our village was destroyed, for what?” she asked. “They are not just buildings, they’re part of us, the heart of our families for hundreds of years.” She tried to count on her fingers the number of generations that had lived in her demolished house.

“The Saudis and their American bombs are erasing us from history.”

The annihilation of Yemen’s cultural heritage extends far beyond air raids on the famous ancient skyscrapers of the northwestern highlands; other areas of the country’s pre-Islamic history have also fallen victim to the coalition’s bombing.

The world-famous Great Marib Dam was bombed for the first time in May. Dating back to the eighth century B.C., the dam was 50 feet high and 2,100 feet wide, almost twice the width of the Hoover Dam. It was a wonder of the ancient world, watering the region for 1,000 years. Marib was the capital of the Sabaean Kingdom, ruled by the Biblical Queen of Sheba. Last month the province became the latest front-line battleground for coalition troops and the Houthi forces.

In the remote desert of Al-Jawf, more than 100 miles northeast of Sanaa, Baraqish, the country’s most impressive pre-Islamic metropolis, reached its zenith in the fifth century B.C. and remained inhabited up until the 19th century. On August 18, the imposing 40-foot-high, unbroken stone curtain that had protected the city for some 2,500 years was bombed by the coalition, destroying a section of the ancient wall.

Anthropologist and historian Francesco G. Fedele, who worked in Yemen for almost a decade — including three years in Baraqish — as a member of the Italian Archaeological Mission to Yemen, says the city’s temple to the god of healing, Nakrah, was destroyed by the Saudi-led bombing. Pictures of the site after further strikes on September 13 confirmed his worst fears.

A second ancient temple to the god of thunderstorms and rain, Athar dhu-Qabd, was also mostly lost to the aerial assaults. The joint Italian-Yemeni team excavated and painstakingly restored both temples as part of a 25-year project that ran from 1990. The shrines were cultural treasures for the whole Arabian Peninsula.

The Houthi-run state news agency, Saba, reported further airstrikes hit the northern wall of Baraqish and the temples on October 14, although the claim could not be immediately verified.

A small museum housing the most precious finds from the team's excavations was similarly reduced to piles of shattered stone in September, says Fedele. On September 17, Irina Bokova, director general of UNESCO, deplored "the senseless destruction of one of the richest cultures in the Arab region."

One of the great religious centers of ancient Arabia, Sirwah, just 75 miles east of Sanaa, was damaged earlier in the conflict, and is under renewed threat from waves of intensive airstrikes carried out since Saudi-coalition troops pushed into the district in early October. While deliberate demolition by ISIS of ancient artifacts and historic sites in Iraq and Syria has been widely reported and denounced, the reaction to the Saudi-led coalition laying waste to Yemen's cultural history, in what some archaeologists say is a pattern of systematic targeting of the country's heritage, is comparatively subdued.

"We are dealing here with unnecessary and possibly wanton destruction ... by the Saudi Arabian army," said Fedele. "It is sad that such a conduct by the Saudis is not being condemned and, worse still, is kept under silence by conniving governments particularly in North America."

Meanwhile in the besieged city of Taiz, the Houthi-Saleh forces seized the prominent Al-Qahira Citadel, perched on a mountain spur hundreds of feet above the city, before it was repeatedly bombed. Now, those fighters are blocking water, food, and medicine — already in short supply due to a coalition-imposed naval blockade of the county — from entering parts of the city not under their control. Staring up at what little remains of the 1,000-year-old castle from outside a hospital, unable to treat patients due to a lack of medical supplies, one manager admitted concern for the country's heritage could seem irrational.

"We can't think about the past, or the future," the manager said. "We're too busy trying to survive the present."