Yemen and Afghanistan Face Unprecedented Famine - Crimes of Mass Starvation

Sounding the alarm this December Nicholas Papachrysostomou, MSF head of mission in Yemen made clear that well beyond the many casualties War claimed over the past seven years, famine weighs much heavier on the war-torn nation, a fate Afghanistan unfortunately shares.

“A nearly seven-year long conflict has badly affected the country’s economy and weakened an already fragile healthcare system ... The situation is worsening with every passing day.”

If the world has gotten accustomed to those remarks - such cries of alarm have been so many the world has learnt to look the other way in dismissal, it would be foolish to discount the plight of millions of Afghans and Yemenis on account we cannot grasp the repercussions famine will have on geopolitics, nevermind the region’s broader stability.

Desperation has a way to generate political vacuums we cannot possibly foretell, let alone begin to plan for. And here is where the buck should stop - famine in both Afghanistan and Yemen is not a direct result of war, but rather a weapon of war.

It is widely recognised that famines are caused by political actions, ranging from the deprivation of food, and the pursuit of political, economic and military objectives to culpable neglect. According to the World Food Programme, ten of the 13 largest food crises in the world - including of course Afghanistan and Yemen - are not only driven by conflicts, but are the product of deliberate war tactics that include crippling economies and starving populations.

Afghanistan here serves as a cautionary tale. Whenever populations have been pushed beyond the brink of the
tolerable, they have withdrawn behind dangerous and violent narratives, thus giving groups such as the Taliban or Al-Qaeda (both banned in Russia) fodder to their fires. By manipulating food aid and access to food reserves through various tax and levies, warring parties have not only created new financial support to their cause but boosted their political status, using food security as an incentive.

Back in September the Taliban seized the WFP offices in Kandahar, putting all existing food supplies under the control of its troops rather than allow for its most vulnerable communities to be served.

To ignore such patterns condemn us to relive past history, giving air to movements we know to be dangerous and nefarious.

Numbers do not lie. In two decades Afghanistan has lost an estimated 176,000 people to military interventionism, of which 46,000 civilians. However horrendous, famine, this winter alone will claim many more - several millions to be exact.

The World Health Organization already predicted that unless drastic humanitarian actions are taken 1 million Afghan children under five will die of starvation, and another 2.2 million will suffer acute malnutrition.

"Hunger in the country [Afghanistan] has reached truly unprecedented levels," the UN refugee agency said on 3 December. "Nearly 23 million people – that is 55% of the population – are facing extreme levels of hunger and nearly 9 million of them are at risk of famine."

Famine in both Yemen and Afghanistan is not just a result of food scarcity but rather families’ financial distress. Since the very beginning of Yemen’s conflict political actors have wielded hunger as a weapon of war through acts of commission (attacks on food production and markets), omission (blockade of aids) and provision (selective provision of aid to one side of a conflict).

The link between war and hunger was actually recognised explicitly with the passing of a UN security council resolution in 2018 which prohibited the use of hunger as a weapon of war. And though it is evident that political actors have played deaf to such recommendations, the United Nations was nevertheless instrumental in shining an important light onto such a trend. So much so in fact that the World Food Program has since worked hard to understand the link between food security and conflict and how it can contribute to building peace.

Whether such efforts can save Yemen and Afghanistan remains to be seen.

In both countries many crises are converging towards a ‘perfect socio-political storm’. If Yemen and Afghanistan find themselves at war for many different reasons, they bear too many similarities for us to ignore, and more importantly not conclude that they share architected patterns.

War and its aftermath have left millions of people displaced - in most cases homeless and vulnerable to the whims of local war-lords and/or the international community. Foreign assistance in Afghanistan for example has amounted right up to the time of Washington’s withdrawal to 75% of all public spending. Now that donations have dried up on account nations are reluctant to ‘support’ a Taliban-run Afghanistan, teachers, health professionals and civil servants have not been paid for months - thus pushing hundreds of thousands of families into food insecurity.

Regardless of how many times aid agencies will call countries and private donors to act, we can no longer afford to ignore the underlying structural causes of hunger and malnutrition. Maybe more to the point if we allow our respective governments to hide behind organizations such as WFP and thus absolve themselves from all responsibility we will only maintain vulnerable communities in a state of protracted humanitarian crisis.

I would argue that it is within the remit of the United Nations to act against crimes of mass starvation - as witnessed in Yemen and Afghanistan, under the R2P (Responsibility to Protect) norm it adopted in 2005.

“The Responsibility to Protect – known as R2P – is an international norm that seeks to ensure that the international community never again fails to halt the mass atrocity crimes of genocide, war crimes, ethnic cleansing and crimes against humanity. The concept emerged in response to the failure of the international community to adequately respond to mass atrocities committed in Rwanda and the former Yugoslavia during the 1990s. The International Committee on Intervention and State Sovereignty developed the concept of R2P during 2001.”

Catherine Shakdam is a research fellow at the Al Bayan Centre for Planning & Studies and a political analyst specializing in radical movements. She is the author of A Tale of Grand Resistance: Yemen, the
Wahhabi and the House of Saud. She writes exclusively for the online magazine “New Eastern Outlook”.