

Yemen Safe Passage Group

YSPG Update (3 months to early Feb 2018)

Key Recent Developments on Yemen peace, and prospects for Yemenis

Summary

The humanitarian situation progressively worsens. Ordinary livelihoods (in agriculture, fisheries and retail) continue to be squeezed, while a few make large profits from the war. Civil servant salaries remain largely unpaid - we hear reports of intermittent payments only, but some better news on social welfare fund payments being picked up by international agencies. A major Saudi announcement on aid and 'safe passage', Yemen Comprehensive Humanitarian Operation (YCHO - see below) has yet to prove itself, but attracted early criticism from international aid agencies concerned that it's real purpose was to side-line Hodeidah.

On the health front the situation remains dire. Acute malnutrition levels continue to rise. The cholera epidemic appears at last under control, but not before affecting over a million (the largest such epidemic ever recorded). In recent weeks, diphtheria has become a major issue.

The military situation has seen some changes. With the killing of Ali Abdullah Saleh in December, his power and military base is split between Houthi and anti-Houthi forces (but still unclear how this is to fall). Subsequently Coalition forces push up the Red Sea coast to Khokha, and into Bayhan making small changes to the overall areas under Houthi control - which had hitherto remained relatively stalemated for some 2 years. In December, the Houthis launched further missile attacks against Saudi cities, leading to Saudi retaliation through tightening the blockade on sea ports. For the first time the UN has now confirmed these missiles at least contained Iranian components. Most recently the Houthis claim some success in shooting down at least one fighter jet. This combination of events has reduced the short-term prospects for a political settlement - both main sides in no mood to make compromises.

Political fragmentation within Yemen continues. Breaking news from Aden that Hadi loyalists and UAE-backed Southern Transitional Council have been fighting for control of key areas and building in Aden. At time of press an uneasy truce prevails. Recent months have also seen a growing momentum for autonomy for Hadhramaut.

On the UK domestic front, the December tightening of the blockade, which has led to significant increases in food prices, major fuel shortages and a sudden worsening of food security, led to an international outcry. Both the UK and US governments condemned this in unprecedented language. The UK claimed to have secured agreement on lifting the blockade and even the reinstatement of the bombed cranes in Hodeidah. It remains to be seen how this agreement holds - Fahem (the main food importer into Hodeidah / Salif) reported a bombing of their Sana'a warehouse shortly after this announcement. as well as continued denying of permission to unload vessels.

A. Food security, livelihoods and the Yemeni economy

Headlines

Early Feb 2018. Coalition launches its Yemen Comprehensive Humanitarian Operation (YCHO) - a plan to contribute \$1.5b to UN Humanitarian operations in Yemen, expansion of ports under Coalition control (Hodeidah only to receive the 4 blocked WFP cranes), \$2b into the Central Bank of Yemen (CBY) 'to promote economic stabilisation', an air bridge to Marib, and 17 'safe passage corridors to be established (there are no details as yet on these corridors might work, beyond that they will be added to the no-strike list), and Sana'a airport to re-open for humanitarian flights.

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UN-OCHA latest Humanitarian Summary (Dec 2017) to be found at:

https://reliefweb.int/sites/reliefweb.int/files/resources/yemen_humanitarian_needs_overview_hno_2018_20171204_0.pdf

‘More than two and a half years since the escalation of the conflict, Yemeni people continue to bear the brunt of ongoing hostilities and severe economic decline. People are increasingly exhausting their coping mechanisms, and as a result the humanitarian crisis remains extremely widespread: an estimated 22.2 million people in Yemen need some kind of humanitarian or protection assistance, including 11.3 million who are in acute need - an increase of more than one million people in acute need since June 2017’.

Salaries and social security

Throughout 2017 many of Yemen’s 1.2m public sector workers, particularly in health and education received no wages or at best partial payments on an ad hoc and irregular basis. A commodity voucher scheme set up by the Houthi-Saleh administration collapsed some months later.

Social Welfare Fund

Some 1.5 million Yemenis were registered with this Fund but have been without support since Dec 2014. In 2017 the World Bank made grants to UNICEF and UNDP to restart SWF on a cash-for-work basis

Health and Malnutrition / Threat of Famine

UN-OCHA: ‘The overall number of food insecure Yemenis has increased from 17 million to 17.8 million (5 per cent increment compared to 2017). Additionally, 8.4 million individuals are now estimated to be severely food insecure compared to 6.8 million in 2017, translating to a worrisome increment of 24 per cent. This effectively means that a significant proportion of the population have virtually exhausted all coping strategies available to them, consequently plummeting from moderate food insecurity to the brink of starvation’.

Blockade of essential supplies, and starvation as weapon of war

UN Leaders (WHO, UNDP, UNHCR, UNICEF, WFP, IOM, UN-OCHA) jointly call for end to the Coalition blockade of Red Sea ports. The joint statement highlights people reducing food consumption while ‘Yemen remains on the cusp of one of the largest famines in modern times’. (Dec 2018)

Urban water networks in 7 cities have run out of fuel, leading to rising costs of water trucking and people turning to contaminated sources to meet basic needs. (UN Media Centre 2 Dec)

HMG increasing concern on the continuing war (press reports at time of May’s visit to Riyadh end Nov). This follows May’s insistence on a ‘reset’ of British policy on the Yemen war earlier in the year (discussions with diplomats and civil servants), but which have yet to lead to a change in direction from the Coalition (except most recently with the establishment of YCHO).

Internal dissent within the Conservative party led by Andrew Mitchell (former DFID Minister) who has highlighted that UK was dangerously complicit in a Saudi policy that was ‘directly promoting a famine and the collective punishment of an entire population’ (Quoted in Guardian 28 Nov)

Saudis impose blockade on humanitarian and commercial goods into Hodeidah, following first Houthi missile attack on Riyadh, while attacking UNVIM inspection system as inadequate (4 Dec),

Boris Johnson insists Yemen is his number one foreign policy priority, while warning that the Saudi refusal to respond to Western pressure was beginning to cause a major diplomatic rift (reported in Guardian 21 Dec).

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Earlier Boris Johnson had warned the Saudis against using starvation as a weapon of war and a breach of IHL (mid Dec)

Coalition announce 'the port of Hodeidah will remain open for humanitarian and relief supplies and the entry of commercial vessels including fuel and food vessels for a period of 30 days' (Statement on Saudi-government-run news agency 20 Dec). The 30 days was later extended for a further month.

Penny Mordaunt (new Minister at DFID) visits Riyadh and reports on 'personal assurances' given that Coalition would lift the blockade and replace cranes destroyed at Hodeidah (Dec 23). This follows her suggestion that UK could take 'punitive action' if the blockade was not resolved quickly (Telegraph 18 Dec).

However, reports continue to arrive - ships continuing to be being help up at Hodeidah and bombing of the food distribution infrastructure (eg Fahem wheat warehouse on outskirts of Sana'a Dec 23).

Food Security, Prices and Livelihoods

With the difficulty of reporting it has been difficult to collect information and publicise attacks against the food producing sectors. One exception has been the work of Martha Mundy of LSE, who writes that combining the evidence of attacks against rural production with the bombing of food processing, storage and transport in urban areas 'one sees strong evidence that Coalition strategy has aimed to destroy food production and distribution in the area in which Ansarullah [the Houthis] and the GPC control' (Martha Mundy in *The World Food Crisis: The Way Out* Sept 2017).

Specifically, Professor Mundy's research for the Yemen Data Project lists the targets of bombing in the first 15 months of the war as: '53 government agricultural and irrigation offices; 77 animal flocks and poultry farms; 180 farm and agricultural lands; 45 rural markets; 43 rural transportation infrastructure; 30 water infrastructure and 36 other vital services such as agriculture\ credit banks and technical schools.' (Martha Mundy in *The World Food Crisis: The Way Out* Sept 2017).

Publication of report on impact of war on food security in the Tihama region reveals alarmingly high levels of food insecurity (defined as no food at home / go to sleep hungry / high acute malnutrition) high impact on agriculture of much increased water pumping costs, sharp declines in cultivated areas and yields (destruction of irrigation infrastructure, cessation of government support and lack of maintenance, high prices of inputs) (*The War Impact on Food Security in the Tihama Region*, FBLNF Nov 2017)

In the private sector, many businesses have been forced to close (estimated 70% decline in sales), large scale layoff of employees (estimated 70% in some cases), severe disruption of business activities from supply chain disruptions and lack of security, and erratic provision of electricity and water. Significant impact on SMEs and informal sectors which employ most Yemenis (EECR Cluster Report 28 Jan 2018)

Continuing attacks against fishermen (including from helicopter gunships) and Yemen's fishing industry detailed by Iona Craig (Guardian 12 Dec)

The Yemeni Riyal continues its decline in value (215YR/\$ pre-crisis to 460YR/\$ in December) - driving up the price of imports (especially food and fuel). This is driven by the collapse of economic activity and government services, widespread insecurity, the cessation of oil exports and the inability of CBY to intervene given its depleted hard currency holdings. On the other side, the most important factors supporting the riyal have been foreign remittances from Yemenis working abroad, and international humanitarian aid funds.

B. Peace prospects

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Internal Political

UAE support for Aidrous Al-Zubaidi's Southern Transitional Council and Separatist tribes in south.

End Jan / early Feb 2018 conflict in Aden sees STC (backed by UAE) pushing Hadi loyalists out of many government buildings in Aden, citing corruption and demanding the replacement of the entire Hadi cabinet.

Ali Abdullah Saleh announces a 'turning the page' on relations with Saudis, leading to fighting between Houthis and Saleh loyalists (early Dec); 7 'collar' tribes near Sana'a decide to stay out of the conflict. Houthis reassert control over Sana'a within days. Subsequent killing of Ali Abdullah Saleh on Dec 4 leads to entrenchment of Houthi control in Sana'a and other Houthi-controlled areas

Ali Mohsen Al-Ahmar (VP in Hadi government, key associate of Islah) positioning himself as Saudis best (or least bad) hope of winning a military victory against the Houthis. But Ali Mohsen has shady past, accused of contacts with Osama bin Laden, of cultivating the groups that became AQAP, and of being a ringleader in fuel smuggling networks (Salisbury, The Last Sanhan Standing, AGISW 15 Dec + YSPG network)

Chatham House publishes analysis showing fragmentation of internal politics and territory controlled by different groups with generally low incentives for cooperation a peace process (only 7 of the 13 groups listed), High incentives to spoil (6 of 13) and high incentives to maintain the status quo (10 of 13). Both Hadi forces (described as a 'bit player') and Houthis are assessed as low cooperants with peace and high spoilers. (Salisbury report Yemen, National Chaos, Local Order, Dec 2017)

External Political

Saudi and UAE lead embargo against Qatar (for supporting 'terrorism') and attempt to silence Al-Jazeera. Qatar thrown out of the pro-Hadi Coalition (mid 2017)

UAE new assertiveness in Arabia and Horn of Africa, including over control of key ports (UAE, the Middle East's power broker flexes its muscles, FT 25 Oct and various shipping sector news reports)

More recently UAE shift from condemnation towards cooperation with Islah (David Roberts, AGSI, Jan 2018)

Human Rights Watch accuses UAE (who have an estimated 1,500 special forces in Yemen) of serious abuses and torture during operations in Yemen (late 2017)

Iranian support for Houthis assessed as becoming more substantial, and the war deepening Houthi reliance on Iran (Economist leader 2 Dec + various sources in Dec).

end Feb 2018, UN Special Envoy, Ismail Ould Cheikh Ahmed stands down, to be replaced by Martin Griffiths with a strong background in political mediation.

Early Feb. PM May announces visit of MBS to London - details and dates to be confirmed.

Military

UAE and Hadi loyalists clash over Aden airport, before Hadi forces withdraw (c.3m ago)

Increased evidence emerging of role of overland / eastern region smuggled arms, not only fuelling the war, but creating powerful disincentives to ending it - in contradiction of UN Arms Inspectors assessments (Sept onwards, YSPG members, Iona Craig, Chatham House Dec Report)

Following Houthi - Saleh split and killing of Saleh, Hadi and Coalition attempt to rally GPC fighters against Houthis, including using Ahmed Ali (Saleh's son) currently under house arrest in

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UAE (Dec). GPC has split, some remaining with Houthis (now led by Sadeq Amin Abu Rass), others defecting to the Coalition / Hadi.

Reports of Coalition use of Sudanese Janjaweed militia (previously of the ethnic cleansing in Darfur) and Eritrean troops in the advances up the Red Sea coast (Iona Craig, Prospect Magazine 9 Dec + APPG Yemen 13 Dec). Fresh push up coast by UAE-backed forces towards Hodeidah, and taking of Khokha, north of Mokha (mid Dec)

Saudi bombing continues to take its toll. 'Latest attacks take total civilian death toll to 109 in past 10 days alone, prompting UN to lament 'absurd and futile war'... The UN accused the Coalition of showing 'complete disregard for human life' in an unusually direct criticism of the war'. (Report in Independent 28 Dec)

Houthis launch 3rd missile in two months against Saudi. Saudis retaliate with air attacks against Sa'ada (Al-Jazeera 5 Jan). Houthis claim shooting down of Saudi fighter jet over Sana'a (6 Jan)

C. Arms sales, human rights abuses, Western complicity in Yemen's tragedy

Iranian arms

US (Nicki Haley, US Ambassador to UN) display of 'Iranian' components to the missile fired against Riyadh International airport on 4 Dec (NBS News 15 Dec). A further missile was fired, target claimed to be a palace of King Salman, on Dec 18. Both were claimed to have been shot down by Saudi anti-missile defences (NY Times 19 Dec).

This followed report from UN monitors that the missiles were transferred to Yemen in pieces and assembled there by missile engineers, while stating that '*the panel had not seen any evidence of external missile specialists working in Yemen in support of the Houthi-Saleh engineers*'. '*Design characteristics and dimensions of the components inspected by the panel are consistent with those reported for the Iranian designed and manufactured Qiam-1 missile*' (Reuters 30 Nov)

The UN weapons inspectors assessed that the missiles were most likely smuggled into Yemen along '*the land routes from Oman or Ghaydah and Nishtun in Al-Mahra Governorate, after ship-to-shore transshipment to small dhows, a route that has already seen limited seizures of anti-tank guided weapons*' (Reuters Report *Yemen Rebel Missiles Fired at Saudi Arabia Appear Iranian* - UN 30 Nov)

Nevertheless, there has been continued push back by analysts against the concept of the Houthis as agents of Iran, and analysis of Houthis as a home-grown Yemeni group with popular support and independent leadership (eg *Trump and the Yemen War: Misrepresenting the Houthis as Iranian Proxies*, Adam Baron et al, *Sana'a Centre for Strategic Studies* 20 Dec 2017)

UK (and European) Arms sales

UK arms sales to Saudi Arabia continue - now totalling more than £4.6bn in fighter jets and other arms sales since the beginning of the war, with British officers also providing targeting training to the Royal Saudi Airforce (many reports, but most recently Iona Craig '*Britain's involvement in the Yemen is making the situation worse*' Prospect 9 Dec).

The recent £5bn BAE Systems contract for 24 Typhoon fighter jets to Qatar (reported 14 Dec in The Independent, i.e. since Qatar left the Coalition) supports the argument that UK arms jobs can be diversified elsewhere.

Typhoon jets (the bulk of UK arms sales to the Saudis) are 'Euro-fighters' with components coming from different countries in Europe, particularly from Germany, and Spain, following France's withdrawal from the consortium. UK has the responsibility to issue the final sales

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licences, but European co-manufacturers could in principle intervene in support of suspending this trade.

EU reported to be under pressure from four political groups in the European Parliament to ban arms sales to Saudi. (Letter to Frederika Mogherini, Head of EU Foreign Policy from MEP leaders, reported in Guardian 26 Oct)

Norway announces suspension of arms and ammunition export to UAE, citing concerns about potential use in Yemen (Jazeera, 3 Jan 2018). Germany continues its own ban (reported Jan 2018)

US hardening position re concern on Coalition actions

The US White House issued a statement urging all parties to cease hostilities, re-energise political talks and end the suffering of the Yemeni people. While condemning the 'Iranian Revolutionary Guards Corps and its partners for arming, advising and enabling the Houthis' violent actions.' the statement also called on 'the Saudi-led coalition to facilitate the free flow of humanitarian aid and critical commercial goods, including fuel, through all Yemeni ports and to restore commercial flights through Sana'a airport..' (White House Press Secretary 8 Dec)

Yemen Peace project (YPP) and several humanitarian organizations met with senior representatives from Department of State and USAID. US officials have lobbying KSA to guarantee continued access to Hodeidah beyond the 30-day window.

US officials have seen KSA's new unilateral humanitarian response plan and have expressed concerns including regarding the Saudi-sponsored "safe passage corridors," which they see as a dangerous idea. (YPP mid Jan 2018)

Former US Ambassadors Seche and Feierstein speak out on the Yemen crisis. Feierstein urged Secretary of State Rex Tillerson to "*be more directly engaged in trying to push*" a negotiated end to the war in Yemen. "*Iran might be willing to play a larger role in pushing a political resolution to the Yemen conflict. It would be, without a doubt, the most direct way for them to reduce tensions with Saudi Arabia.*" (Washington Diplomat 31 Jan 2018)

Important Senate legislation on Yemen is expected in Jan / Feb, but too early at this point to announce details.

Western complicity in the war and specific risks ahead

Increasing coverage in UK press of this dimension. For example: Economist Dec 2 Leader and front-page story: 'The longer the war goes on, the more Saudi Arabia's western allies are complicit in its actions. President Trump has given Saudi Arabia carte blanche to act recklessly...'

Alex de Waal, Head of World Peace Foundation, academic and author on famine: 'The UK and the US and others on the Security Council risk becoming accessories to the worst famine of this decade... Britain is in danger of becoming complicit in the use of starvation as a weapon of war in Yemen.... Yemen is really the most shocking case of our generation of a famine crime because the lines of culpability are so clear and there's no denying them' (Guardian 24 Nov)

Over 350 high profile figures including 6 Nobel peace prize laureates, former military generals, politicians, diplomats and celebrities issue call for US / UK / France to act as peace brokers and 'stop stoking the flames of war' (Guardian 19 Dec, marking 1,000 days of the war)

Many (including it would seem Western diplomats) see an attack on Hodeidah, as inconceivable without serious loss of life and disruption to the critical trade routes needed to stave Yemen from widespread famine would be in clear violation of Arms Trade Treaty Article 7. There is a clear risk that weapons supplies could be used to commit a serious breach of international law

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without mitigation measures being deemed possible. HMG has responsibility to suspend or revoke existing arms export licences where a breach of the 'Consolidated Criteria' (for assessing risk) may occur (Correspondence with legal opinion and YSPG members, YSPG letter to The Times 19 Dec)

International investigation of abuses against civilians

UNSC finally reach compromise on the investigation of human rights abuses by both Coalition and Houthi-Saleh alliance - to be conducted by an independent panel (Oct 2017)

The three international members of this panel have now been appointed (all experienced reviewers) and this not only provides hope of a serious impartial investigation, but also raises the cost of future abuses of IHL.