

Yemen Safe Passage Group

Solving Yemen's Humanitarian Crisis

YSPG Scenario Analysis 15 Feb 2018

We have developed three plausible scenarios looking forward. Note these are less predictions of alternative futures, than a way of teasing out the key issues and implications for the key actors, internal and external.

Scenario 1: 'Urban war and widespread famine' - destitution, major instability

The Coalition's YCHO proves to be a largely cynical ploy. There is more of the same economic warfare and politicisation of aid, with continued prevention / disruption of trade (and aid) into Houthi-controlled areas. No funds are passed to CBY Sana'a, leaving it unable to resume payment of civil servant salaries. Commandeering of funds, eg those intended to support the Central Bank of Yemen (CBY) Aden, by key figures in the Hadi camp, leads to a collapse of confidence in this aspect of the YCHO scheme.

More fracturing occurs in the south with Hadi's position further eroded in favour of the Southern Transitional Council (STC) which continues to be backed by UAE, and the prospects of a breakaway South becomes ever more realistic. Nevertheless, the Coalition itself remains sufficiently united to attempt major military gains, even if on whose behalf they are 'legitimately' acting becomes increasingly blurred. Houthis use the ramped-up airstrikes and toll on civilians to boost public support and to look further to Iran for military support - both for hardware and technical advice.

The horrors of Taiz are duplicated elsewhere and AQAP (Al-Qaeda in the Arabian Peninsula) takes advantage to increase the areas under its control. The rise in the level of 'insurgent' type activity from AQAP, IS and Salafists inflicts greater casualties on Houthi fighters and supporters, whilst also leading to the conflict becoming ever more localised and therefore more difficult to solve. Insurgent 'spectacular' incidents against the Houthis in Sana'a lead to yet more detentions by Houthi military commanders.

Changes to the military balance - such as the greater use of third party states (effectively as state mercenaries) allow a greater ground force without risking Gulf Cooperation Council (GCC) soldiers, or a Coalition breakthrough in Taiz - leads to Coalition military advances northwards up the Red Sea coast (there are recent reports that Hays has now fallen to the Coalition). Holding on to such gains however prove costly in terms of casualties as the Houthis adopt insurgent tactics. Continued Western pressure to avoid a military attack on Hodeidah (or Sana'a) proves insufficient. Bitter fighting in Hodeidah lasts months, and proves inconclusive, with the Houthis capturing significant weaponry.

Critical trade and aid to the northern highlands is suspended with Hodeidah port out of action, and Yemen becomes dependent on smuggling routes and ports in non-Houthi areas with much lesser capacity (Aden, Mukalla especially). The YR exchange rate collapses further, food prices escalate, and much of Yemen is pushed officially into famine (to level IPC 5). Hadi government resists a formal reclassification to 'famine'. Eventually however enough journalists / cameramen get through the attempted media blackout on Hodeidah and on visits to the now burgeoning IDP settlements, and Yemen's tragedy hits the headlines, even in the tabloid press, forcing an emergency debate in Parliament.

This scenario would be highly dangerous for HMG and the US in relation to the scope for legal challenges to military support and the arms trade, for which the defence of 'there is a process in place' becomes untenable. Dangerous also for Saudis and Emiratis, as alliances strain yet further, and a plummeting reputation affects investments (tourism, airlines) as well as international credibility. This is a truly terrible scenario for Yemenis, with even greater levels of suffering,

Yemen Safe Passage Group

military and civilian deaths (note many Yemenis driven by destitution have little option but to be co-opted into a military unit), and economic destruction.

Scenario 2: ‘More of the same’ - famine contained (just), but higher dependency on aid and high vulnerability

Aid and trade continues to flow albeit erratically, with political attacks against UNVIM (United Nations Verification and Inspection Mechanism for Yemen) to justify the alternative/secondary inspections which have been put in place by the Saudis and the Hadi camp. YR exchange rate stabilises sufficiently, mainly backed by continuing remittances, especially Yemenis abroad supporting family at home. UN attracts enough funds at its pledging conferences for its own and INGO humanitarian operations, while YCHO keeps to a good proportion of its humanitarian aid promises. Delays and obstruction to trade continue, but smuggling routes prove effective when supply is most squeezed, with continued collusion between opponents where money is to be made. Health services stagger on, ill equipped and with largely unpaid staff and facing further air attacks. The high proportion of Yemeni children now out of school (already reached 75%) continues to rise.

Nevertheless, this proves sufficient to keep outright famine largely at bay (short of areas where access is most difficult), and Yemen’s suffering still largely remains out of the international news. The military situation remains largely stalemated with no significant gains either way. AQAP, IS and other militarised groups hold on / re-establish in more remote and ungoverned spaces. In Houthi controlled areas there is greater co-option of children into the military, and greater numbers of detentions.

The current Saudi-led air campaign continues, albeit perhaps at lower levels, with regular armed skirmishes across all fronts. Full military pressure on the Houthis fails to materialise. Ali Mohsen Al-Ahmar, leading the coalition-sponsored military, knows very well that any military advance against the Houthis will be hugely costly in casualties. Houthis increase their stranglehold on the north-west. Military equipment destined for the Houthis continues to get through the attempted blockade, albeit taxed by the Ali-Mohsen led military. Decisive activity focuses on the low-level politics and fund flows seeking to switch the tribes in and around Sana’a.

Political fragmentation continues, with tensions growing particularly in the South, and antagonism to Hadi camp corruption giving increasing leverage to its opponents. Yemen’s economic decline continues apace, with increasing numbers needing outside support. The problems and scale of rebuilding Yemen worsen yet further. Yemen continues locked into suffering and decline.

This scenario is effectively more of the same and remains an uncomfortable one for HMG and for the Saudis. News coverage plays a critical role in keeping up pressure towards resolution. Debates on Yemen in Parliament could be critical to changing HMG position. The UN-sponsored international enquiry into human rights abuses (see Update p6) creates embarrassment and attempts by those accused to deflect the associated finger pointing. Nervousness of investors on Saudi (and Emirati) reputation, with increasing concerns about regional stability, start eroding confidence in the reforms.

Scenario 3: ‘Breaking the impasse’ - reconstruction prospect provides new incentives

Note this will need considerable initiative and engagement to make this happen

Political calculation becomes more realistic for all major external players, who begin to factor in the fundamental unattractiveness of other options and to start facing the compromises (and face-saving narratives) needed to end this war. Yemeni factional leaders start looking to their futures

Yemen Safe Passage Group

beyond the war, after the massive corruption of the war economy attracts more publicity and popular reaction (in places where this is not too dangerous).

Imaginative ways are put forward to protect Saudi concerns with regard to Iranian expansionism, particularly on arms transfers (now increasingly documented, but still not at all decisive) and to a lesser extent on Iranian technical support, but sufficient to allow a face-saving withdrawal. Increased engagement with Iran (as suggested recently by two former US Ambassadors to Yemen) helps address this destabilising influence.

Western governments state more clearly than before (even if largely still discreetly) that providing arms is becoming increasingly unacceptable in the context of continued civilian casualties and threats against major population centres. Encouraged by the success of arms sales elsewhere, such as the UK £5bn contract with the Qataris, HMG feels under less pressure to create arms-related jobs in highly sensitive environments 'whatever the consequences'.

Houthis also step back, nervous of the 'collar tribes' around Sana'a turning against them and encouraged by political moves - they are now recognised as a legitimate actor in peace talks (without 'preconditions'), with compromise facilitated by credible guarantees that allow the northern regions security and a high degree of future self-government.

Major steps are taken to control smuggling of arms (while allowing taxed imports, including food and fuel on traditional smuggling routes), especially where arms smuggling provides incentives for spoilers, or for financing 'terrorism'. This is achieved with greatly upgraded and more transparent international marine / satellite monitoring and enforcement, providing an important means of addressing Saudi concerns, including the provision of a face-saving narrative.

The change of UN Special Envoy opens opportunities and generates fresh energy. Building on past contacts with the Houthis and with GPC (General Peoples Congress) elements, a more inclusive approach is taken to peace talks - bringing in important groups currently side-lined, not just Yemen's increasingly fragmented political factions but also representatives of women and youth. A fresh political will develops to stand up to the spoilers on all sides - not just the Hadi group but also hardliners within Houthi ranks.

Yemeni political factions, sensing the change and the hardening of the international mood - including against the arms smugglers and others making money out of the war - start making the hard choices and compromises that historically and without external interference Yemenis have often done so well. Yemeni business starts looking ahead at reconstruction opportunities. Saudis and Emiratis begin to calculate their long-term interests lie in a more stable and more prosperous Yemen.

Best long-term solution for everyone. Saudis find a way out that enables them to focus on their other pressing challenges and their ambitious economic and social reforms. Western governments can re-focus on rebuilding strained relationships with Gulf trading partners. Most of all, the Yemeni nightmare begins to recede, and attention turns to the massive reconstruction effort needed (and the money to be made).