

Yemen Safe Passage Group

Rt Hon Jeremy Hunt MP
Secretary of State for Foreign and Commonwealth Affairs
King Charles Street
London SW1A 2AH

26 October 2018

Dear Foreign Secretary

Yemen: the famine of this century is rapidly becoming the crime of this century

The Yemen Safe Passage Group (YSPG) is writing to you as a group of former ambassadors and other diplomats, military officers, academics and aid professionals with a shared experience of working in Yemen. Yemen is back in the news following the renewal of fighting around Hodeidah and the UN's revised estimate that half the population now faces starvation. There is still time to respond effectively to this crisis. The United Kingdom is in a position of exceptional influence. Working jointly with key allies and involving the regional powerbrokers, we can work for a ceasefire to avert complete disaster in Yemen and start to plan the country's long road to recovery. Under your leadership, the Foreign Office has the opportunity for a fundamental rethink of the UK's role.

Fundamental UK policy reset on the Yemen conflict

With the Khashoggi debacle, the veil has been lifted on Saudi Arabia's lack of respect for international law. We have been arguing since our inception about the illegality of economic blockades and the military targeting of civilians. Those implicated in the Khashoggi affair have both initiated and continue to supervise Saudi involvement in Yemen's war with all the breaches of international principles and laws that are so evident. The opportunity now presents itself for a strategic change of UK policy. To regain public confidence there needs to be a thorough review of UK interests, both upsides and downsides, which must be transparent and public. We continue to support the ever-growing calls for the suspension of British arms sales to Saudi Arabia until HMG is satisfied a sustainable peace in Yemen has been achieved.

Our analysis¹, developed through extensive consultation¹ with actors on every side of the conflict, indicates that the Coalition led by Saudi Arabia deploys two strategies in its attempt to prevail in Yemen – to escalate its military operations or to squeeze economically the areas outside its control in the hope that the population will then rise in its favour². However, a military victory is wholly unrealistic, as has been recognised in a succession of HMG statements, and its pursuit is unacceptable given the inevitable level of civilian casualties and wanton destruction. Economic warfare is banned by international law as is the targeting of schools and hospitals, which nevertheless continues. Such tactics leave a toxic legacy of bitterness and hatred towards those inflicting such suffering.

The UK has played a leading role in several positive initiatives in Yemen, including increasing humanitarian aid and supporting the efforts of the UN's Special Envoy. However, HMG has allowed itself to be unduly influenced by the Saudis, and the benefits of our bilateral relationship have been greatly overstated. Rather than giving the UK 'leverage' over Saudi actions, the opposite has been the case. Recent academic research points convincingly in this direction. Specifically, the relationship has been deeply damaging to precisely what you yourself have been highlighting: British values and the rule of law. HMG succumbed to

¹ See YSPG's *Future of Yemen, scenarios for the conflict and key factors influencing its economic outlook* <https://yemensafepassage.org/key-briefings-and-updates/>

² See Martha Mundy, *The Strategies of the Coalition in the Yemen War* <https://sites.tufts.edu/wpf/files/2018/10/Strategies-of-Coalition-in-Yemen-War-Final-20181005-1.pdf>

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pressure in failing to halt the Coalition's military action on Hodeidah in the full knowledge of its massive humanitarian implications. It has sought to defend licences for arms exports when their use against civilians has been well documented and is placing itself increasingly at risk of being implicated in war crimes. You have stressed that Saudi Arabia has helped keep terrorism off British streets, but at the same time we must recognise that, by creating such instability and resentment, the continuing war is feeding the underlying threat to the UK from terrorism.

In addition, HMG is not helping the long-term interests of our primary ally in the region. The bitter truth is that the Yemen war has been a disaster for the Saudis. It has increased rather than curtailed the influence of Iran on their southern border, has provided the Houthis with an excuse for their cross-border attacks on Saudi cities, and due to repeated and well publicised attacks on civilian targets has played a major role in destroying Saudi Arabia's international reputation.

Need to decisively avert Yemen's downward spiral to mass famine

We support the call from the UK's Ambassador to the UN³ for unhindered access for commercial food supplies, especially on the main transport routes being threatened by current military operations, and for an end to Houthi interference with the humanitarian response. On the latter, we urge HMG to use its back-channel contacts with the Houthis to bring this to an end.

We urge HMG to focus on what lies ahead, and to consider where Yemen's calamity is leading – a crippled economy, destitution, political instability and terrorism in a highly strategic location. The lack of governance and rampant corruption that have bedevilled Yemen have contributed to the paucity of basic services, have been major drivers of the resentments fuelling this war and have contributed to the rise of extreme Islamism. The war in turn is leading to a massive loss of human potential, so vital for the rebuilding of the country, with a generation out of school, the de-skilling of youth, and war forcing early marriage of Yemeni girls.

HMG needs to recognise the ever-growing opportunity cost of reconstruction from an ever-lower base and start to plan with others how Yemen will finance a balanced reconstruction reaching all areas, whatever political control they are under. This will allow for a future less dominated by outside interests and could dramatically contribute towards peace efforts.

The UK's role in achieving a sustainable peace

Of the P5, the UK is uniquely placed to sponsor and prioritise an urgent ceasefire on all fronts especially Hodeidah. The recent joint statements made with major European powers are a welcome development and need to be maintained and extended to exert the necessary leverage. Only a ceasefire will allow the proper resumption of the UN Special Envoy's diplomacy, which needs continuing and robust support, but additionally a more vocal and visible commitment from Western leaders, and a readiness to match words with action.

Immediate action to address the threatened famine

Decisive international action is needed to support the Yemeni riyal and address the reasons for its collapse, which include irresponsible currency printing, uncertainties over trade, and major hard currency revenues failing to be deposited at either of the components of the split Central Bank. Credible banking measures need to be put in place to allow unimpeded trading operations, including letters of credit for importers and the urgent reversal of Government of Yemen's 'Decree 75' which in practice restricts the movement of goods. Credible sanctions are needed to thwart individuals, on all sides, who are making massive financial gains from their positions.

³ Statement by UK Ambassador Karen Pierce at the UNSC Yemen briefing 23 Oct 2018

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We urge the UK to play a leadership role by calling for Saudi Arabia and other parties to the conflict to agree a ceasefire and decisively move to bring the war in Yemen to an end. The UK can draw on its key role on Yemen within the UN, while working with European allies and the US to support such a change in Saudi strategy. Given the UK's historical links with Yemen, our alliance with Saudi Arabia and the Gulf states, and our continuing dialogue with Iran, the UK is best placed to bring the international community towards a working consensus to achieve a lasting and meaningful peace. This will start the process of rebuilding Yemen as a functioning State.

Yours sincerely

Yemen Safe Passage Coordinating Group, after extensive consultation within the wider group. See <https://yemensafepassage.org/yspg-membership/> for the full listing.

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Frances Guy (former UK Ambassador to Yemen)
Captain Philip Holihead (former Head of Western Indian Ocean Counter–Piracy)

Copied to:

Rt Hon Penny Mordaunt MP, Secretary of State for International Development.
Rt Hon Liam Fox MP, Secretary of State for International Trade
Rt Hon Gavin Williamson CBE MP, Secretary of State for Defence
Rt Hon Alistair Burt MP, Minister of State for the Middle East at the Foreign & Commonwealth Office
Michael Aron, British Ambassador to Yemen
Simon Collis CMG, British Ambassador to Saudi Arabia
Dame Karen Pierce DCMG, Permanent Representative and British Ambassador at the United Nations
Sir Matthew Rycroft, Permanent Secretary at DFID, former British Ambassador at the UN
Rt Hon Keith Vaz MP, Chairman of the All-Party Parliamentary Group on Yemen
Rt Hon Andrew Mitchell, former Secretary of State for International Development
James Marshall, Head of Number 10 Policy Unit.

About the Yemen Safe Passage Group www.yemensafepassage.org

The Yemen Safe Passage Group was formed in mid-2015 as an informal grouping of senior professionals, all acting in their personal capacity, who have worked in Yemen for substantial periods and who share a concern about the well-being of its people. The group brings together a wide range of expertise – international politics and diplomacy, security, trade and the economy, port operations, infrastructure and development challenges, and humanitarian operations – coupled with an understanding as to how this expertise might realistically be applied to the Yemen situation. The group has now grown to over 50 individuals comprising: former British diplomats and defence personnel, including former ambassadors; prominent British academics working on Yemen; and senior development and aid professionals.