

Yemen Safe Passage Group

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Yemen Safe Passage Group Update 12 Jan 2021

Restrictions on trade and aid into Yemen

The latest development is the recently announced US intended designation of the Houthis as a Foreign Terrorist Organisation (FTO) - see Michael Pompeo press statement [Terrorist Designation of Ansarallah in Yemen - United States Department of State](#). This has been on the cards for a while and it appears that the recent attack (almost certainly Houthi) on the GOY-STC Cabinet in Aden was the final pretext. The designation if it proceeds is a setback for the UN Special Envoy, Martin Griffith's' efforts to bridge the gap between the warring parties. A further major concern is the implications for trade and aid coming into Yemen, already in a critically vulnerable state. Allocations of emergency food for 2021 are way below what is needed. Mark Lowcock recent analysis in the FT is worth reading: [Houthi terror designation would push Yemen closer to famine, UN warns | Financial Times \(ft.com\)](#)

Pompeo's statement does reference the food security implications but talks only generally of measures to reduce the impact. The key problem, as we saw with Iran sanctions, is that banks and providers of credit (a fundamental part of the import business) are risk averse and probably unwilling to risk massive fines. YSPG's key contact on food supply into Yemen described the move as '*devastating and catastrophic*'. Pressure is needed to avoid this becoming an economic blockade by another name. We have sought to influence on this, but institutions, former diplomats and NGOs in the USA are likely to have considerably more leverage. For the moment we understand the UK and Europe have no intention of following the US lead, and the EU has just announced it will seek '*to mitigate the impact of the designation on the delivery of aid and on the economy*' [Yemen: Statement by the Spokesperson on US designation of Ansar Allah as Terrorist Organisation - European External Action Service \(europa.eu\)](#).

Sana'a airport, Hodeidah

Limited medicine and equipment was able to fly into Sana'a at the onset of the COVID pandemic in the country. Air bridges into Sana'a was the subject of a YSPG effort back in June, gaining the support of the ten most senior UK political figures knowledgeable about Yemen and a top slot letter in The Times in follow up. Sadly, earlier promising developments have been overtaken by events and flights are now back to carrying UN personnel only. There are some indications that the new GoY Foreign Minister, Dr Ahmed BinMubarak, had been considering promoting the opening of Sana'a airport without the earlier preconditions. If this commitment remains and politics can indeed be put aside, this must be greatly welcomed.

Meanwhile Hodeidah and Salif continue to operate, with the earlier delays imposed by the coalition now lifted, but supplies are way down. We are informed by our contact who follows the shipping levels into Yemeni ports that '*imports fell off a cliff in Dec / Jan over earlier levels*'.

SAFER, the threatened oil spill and the UN's delayed mission

YSPG has been working on this issue for some time now. From August we worked closely with Fahem (the Yemeni importer based at Salif, close to the oil spill area), oil shipping experts and a major Dutch salvage company. We came up with a realistic revenue-neutral plan that would avoid the contentious issue of either GOY or the Houthis receiving funds from oil and scrap vessel sales, while at the same time replacing the current ancient vessel with a much newer double hulled one. We had to hold back on promoting this plan when it was announced that a UN inspection and maintenance mission had been given clearance by the Houthis to proceed. But this has proved tortuously slow, although a date of 15 Feb has now been announced. YSPG's proposals for solving this must await the outcome of this mission.

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UK arms sales to the Saudi Arabia

YSPG has never majored on this as other groups follow the issues closely and seize opportunities for action when they arise. A second judicial review of British arms sales to Saudi Arabia, following the last one in 2019 that temporarily halted sales, is underway with a High Court decision imminent. Lethal airstrikes continue and it is now revealed that a high proportion of incidents are escaping the formal tracking – see <https://www.theguardian.com/world/2021/jan/03/lethal-airstrikes-in-yemen-left-off-confidential-uk-record> <<https://www.theguardian.com/world/2021/jan/03/lethal-airstrikes-in-yemen-left-off-confidential-uk-record>>. YSPG member, (Brigadier) John Deverell has recently written powerfully on this subject in the Spectator – see <https://www.spectator.co.uk/article/the-uk-must-stop-arming-saudi-arabia>.

Longer term prospects for peace

Looking ahead, the incoming Biden US Administration may help support a sequence of events that could lead ultimately to peace in Yemen. Yemen's situation is dire with the country on the tipping point for a major famine. The war is largely stalemated and certainly 'unwinnable', with little military progress on any front, although Marib remains threatened. The Saudis have achieved a significant success in bringing together and avoiding further conflict between the GOY and STC in the South. They seem finally to want out, to cut their considerable losses in Yemen, to both reputation and treasury, and to be increasingly prepared to confront the resulting loss of face, as they did over Qatar. The GOY certainly needs to be persuaded to move to compromise and only the Saudis can do that.

The central question has become how to induce the Houthis to compromise in the interests of peace. What role can Biden play here. Biden will review US military support for the Saudi's Yemen operations. He is also committed to reinstating the JCPOA nuclear agreement and to a different relationship with Iran. But Iran is wary and will not make concessions without a quid-pro-quo. For the last six years Yemen has successfully played the role for them of a poisoned pawn, to use a chess analogy. We understand the incoming administration is unlikely to place new conditions (such as Yemen) on the revival of JCPOA in order not to introduce new complications, and because time is short before Iran's elections.

But an improved relationship between Iran and the Saudis could come out of the wider political moves, and a tempering of support to the Houthis in Sana'a. This may not in itself deliver peace. The Houthis, in spite of the many who would like to think otherwise, are not a dependent proxy of Iran. However, an ending of technological support to the Houthi missile and drone systems and a drying up of the old arms smuggling routes would in time change the current locked dynamic. This needs to be coupled with clear incentives. Post-oil Yemen is far from an economic basket case and there are significant economic opportunities that could transform the country creating jobs, a fairer allocation of development support, and stability. Private investment can be backed by far sighted support of regional and international agencies. The war may have shown that a stable and more prosperous Yemen is in Saudi interests, even though its recent actions have driven in the opposite direction.

YSPG will be looking for openings here to continue to suggest solutions, perhaps using our most senior contacts in the UK and the US, and expertise that includes Iran as well as Yemen's neighbours. We do not expect Yemen to be an early priority for Biden – he has much to do on the domestic front facing such a severely fractured US. But Yemen must not be allowed to slip down the international agenda at this time of opportunity.

James Firebrace 12 Jan 2021