



YEMEN'S HUMANITARIAN DISASTER:

HALTING THE FAMINE THREAT

SUMMARY

Only several months after the Saudi-led military coalition waged its ongoing campaign against the Iranian-backed Houthi rebels in March 2015, the United Nations began issuing warnings about famine. Today, millions of Yemenis are on the brink of famine, with about half a million suffering from a cholera outbreak. This paper analyzes the causes of Yemen's humanitarian catastrophe and offers the Trump administration recommendations for helping the impoverished Arab state recover from years of violent turmoil.

KEY POINTS

- ◆ All major parties fighting in the Yemeni civil war bear varying degrees of responsibility for the country's humanitarian crisis.
- ◆ The Trump administration's policies vis-à-vis the Middle East have led to more support for the Saudi-led campaign in Yemen, compared to the Obama administration.
- ◆ Without a cease-fire, there is virtually no hope for improving Yemen's worsening humanitarian crisis.
- ◆ Al-Qaeda and Islamic State have exploited Yemen's chaotic violence in recent years, and the spread of disease and famine throughout the country will likely benefit such extremists.
- ◆ The United States should pursue a negotiated cease-fire to allow for humanitarian access and aid.



INTRODUCTION

Since March 2015, Yemen, the poorest Arab country, has suffered from an unprecedented manmade humanitarian crisis that has displaced almost three million Yemenis internally, killed over 12,000, and injured 42,000.¹ ² By June 2015, only three months after the Saudi-led coalition launched its ongoing military campaign against Houthi rebels, imports to Yemen had already fallen 85 percent, prompting the U.N.'s first warnings of a potential famine in the country. At the time, Yemen imported 90 percent of its food.³ Today, Yemen's humanitarian disaster is the world's "largest food security emergency" and places millions on the brink of famine.⁴ As of April, half a million Yemeni children faced "severe acute malnutrition," the highest level in the country's recent history.⁵ Last year, over 14 million Yemenis were "food insecure," with half of them being "severely food insecure."⁶ The most recent development in Yemen's humanitarian crisis was a cholera outbreak in late April, which as of October 11 had spread to 822,000 people in 304 of Yemen's districts, resulting in 2,160 deaths and diverting resources away from other relief efforts.⁷

This paper examines the political underpinnings of Yemen's humanitarian disaster and sheds light on how the involved actors' geopolitical and strategic interests have so far prevented the international community from sparing the Yemenis from further disaster. The authors also set forth policy recommendations for the Trump administration, outlining strategies for preventing this humanitarian catastrophe from reaching a non-reversible point.



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A HUMAN TRAGEDY

Oxfam defines famine as "a widespread food shortage situation where one in five homes experiences 'an extreme lack of food and other basic needs where starvation, death, and destitution are evident.' More than 30 percent of people are 'acutely malnourished' and two out of every 10,000 people die from starvation."⁸ The Integrated Food Security Phase Classification monitors conditions that lead to famine with five phases.



The fifth phase is a famine, while the first four phases track a crisis moving toward the famine stage. Earlier this year, seven out of Yemen's 22 governorates reached phase four.⁹

Oxfam declared in April that “many areas of Yemen are on the brink of famine, and the cause of such extreme starvation is political.”¹⁰ Indeed, failure to reverse the tide of Yemen's deteriorating humanitarian crisis is an outcome of calculations made by the complex array of actors involved in the conflict. Since the country's warring factions have de-



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termined that it serves their interests to continue fighting, actors on all sides of this civil war—Yemeni and non-Yemeni—have disregarded the local population's basic needs. Naturally, the continuation of violence in parts of Yemen hinders humanitarian groups from serving the Yemenis most in need of assistance. NGOs enter Yemen through key ports and airfields, yet ground security remains bleak. Those who transport assistance packages from ports or airfields to affected areas are vulnerable to attack and theft of supplies. Both sides have been guilty of such behavior. The Saudi-led military coalition has blocked

transfer of basic goods to Yemen's population by imposing naval and air blockades since March 2015. Under the pretext of preventing weapons from entering Yemen, the coalition has blockaded Yemen's airport in the Houthi-controlled capital, as well as the country's ports which Houthi rebels control. In 2015, the Saudi-led force destroyed four cranes in the country's main seaport in Hodediah, which severely decreased the port's capacity to function, and the Saudis have resisted international efforts to provide four mobile cranes in substitution.¹¹ There

have been allegations of Saudi-led coalition forces attacking aid facilities and hospitals in the country too.¹²

Simultaneously, Ansarullah (Partisans of God), the country's main Houthi militia, and former Yemeni President Ali Abdullah Saleh's armed loyalists have imposed blockades at

the expense of the local population's food security. The most vivid example of this occurred in Yemen's third largest city, Taiz, located in the Yemeni highlands close to the Red Sea port city of Mocha, when Ansarullah began blockading the city in 2015. According to the International Crisis Group, Houthi/Saleh fighters “routinely interfere with the work of humanitarians, at times demanding the diversion of aid to themselves or denying aid workers' access to populations in need, revoking visas or even detaining them.”¹³ The fighters “heavily tax all imports into their areas in part to finance the war effort and also



run a black market in fuel, enriching military elites while driving prices up for transport of vital commodities.”¹⁴ Both sides blame the other for humanitarian supplies failing to reach the most vulnerable Yemenis, exacerbating the country’s humanitarian crisis.

On October 5, the U.N. added the Saudi-led coalition to a blacklist for its killing and maiming of 683 children and carrying out of 38 verified attacks on schools and hospitals in Yemen last year. The U.N. also added the Houthis to this annual list of shame, alleging that in 2016 the rebels were guilty of the killing and maiming of 414 children in Yemen. Yemen’s internationally recognized government plus al-Qaeda in the Arabian Peninsula (A.Q.A.P.) were added to the blacklist too for their crimes against children in the war-torn country.¹⁵

THE STRATEGIC IMPORTANCE OF HODEIDA

The Saudi-led coalition seeks to break a stalemate in place since the fall of 2015 by wresting control of the Red Sea port of Hodeida from Ansarullah. G.C.C. states maintain that capturing Hodeida is required to stem arms flows to Houthi/Saleh militants and weaken their position at future roundtable talks.

More than 70 percent of Yemen’s imported food enters via Hodeida. Given the extent to which commercial and humanitarian supplies

entering the war-torn country rely on the port city, the U.N. special envoy to Yemen, Ismail Ould Cheikh Ahmed, has called on the parties to refrain from waging military operations in or near Hodeida. Ahmed has maintained that there are no viable alternatives due to the port city’s strategic location

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on the Red Sea and its port infrastructure.¹⁵ Since millions of Yemenis depend on the Hodeida port for food imports, the U.N.H.C.R. and other humanitarian actors have warned that an attack on Hodeida risks causing a mass famine in Yemen.

YEMEN’S SHATTERED ECONOMY

Yemen’s central bank has been unable to pay public-sector employees’ salaries for the past 13 months due to shrinking state finances, a crisis of liquidity, and the challenges of transferring financial resources between Yemen’s different territories, which are under the control of warring factions.¹⁷ The political battles over the central bank’s location (between Sanaa and Aden), and independence from political factions have worsened these dire economic conditions throughout the



country, particularly in near-famine zones. Before President Abd Rabbu Mansour Hadi relocated the central bank from the country's capital to Aden in September, the institution functioned with relative autonomy despite Yemen's political crisis.¹⁸ Until Hadi made this decision, the central bank's impartiality permitted the import of basic commodities, the protection of the riyal's value, and the payment of public employees.¹⁹ Yemen's embattled president alleged that Houthi fighters looted the central bank and this was how he justified relocating it to Aden.

Yet under current circumstances, the country's solvency and liquidity are under tremendous pressure, exacerbated by the cessation of revenue from Yemen's hydrocarbon sectors. Yemen's warring factions must make political compromises that can pave the path for the central bank to regulate the country's currency, fix Yemen's liquidity crisis, and pay the salaries of the country's public-sector employees. The current situation of Yemen's banking system continues to besiege the country's ability to function.

TRUMP ADMINISTRATION SHIFTS CLOSER TO SAUDI POSITION ON YEMEN

With President Donald Trump's administration expected to make draconian cuts in funding for State Department and USAID budgets, the Yemenis are unlikely to receive their desperately needed humanitarian assis-

tance from the United States.²⁰ Instead, security and counter-terrorism interests come first, as the establishment in Washington views Yemen as a hotspot in the Middle East where America and its allies have high stakes. The White House has chosen to step up U.S. military action in the fight against Salafist and jihadist actors in the country, while simultaneously countering Iran's influence by increasing U.S. support for the G.C.C. militaries fighting Iranian-backed Houthi forces. The Trump administration has voiced that Ansarullah is doing to Yemen what Hezbollah did to Lebanon, by creating a heavily armed state-within-a-state that operates on behalf of Iranian interests.²¹

Although the Obama administration signed new deals with Saudi Arabia after the kingdom's forces entered Yemen, last year Washington halted the transfer of cluster munitions following reports of G.C.C. militaries using them in Yemen.²² The Obama administration also withdrew some military advisors, and suspended plans to sell precision guided munitions (P.G.M.s.). On June 12 this year, the U.S. Senate narrowly voted in favor of the Trump administration's proposed \$500 million sale of P.G.M.s. to Riyadh.²³ However, the Trump administration has not reversed Obama's decision to stop shipping cluster munitions to Saudi Arabia as the Arab coalition continues fighting in Yemen.



NOT ENOUGH AID

From June 2013 to June 2015, the United States provided Yemen with roughly \$188 million (\$158 million from USAID) to 18 humanitarian relief groups in the country.²⁴ Washington froze, however, its non-humanitarian aid to Yemen for 90 days as well as \$12 million in development projects, citing dangerous conditions on the ground after the Saudi-led intervention in March 2015. In April 2016, USAID announced \$139 million in humanitarian assistance to Yemen, aimed at providing relief in the country's most vulnerable areas with healthcare, shelter, potable water, and food supplies via the U.N. World Food Programme's operation in the country. In practice, however, last year US-AID only provided Yemen with \$56 million in humanitarian aid.

On July 8, while speaking before a G20 summit session in Germany, Trump pledged \$639 million to four countries facing grave food security crises, including \$191 million for Yemen. This announcement, which followed the administration's calls for drastic reductions in funding for the State Department and American humanitarian missions under the banner of Trump's "American First" foreign policy, received strong praise from the international community. Yet in keeping with Trump's calls for Washington's allies to step up financial contributions to U.S.-led glob-

al initiatives, the president emphasized that other countries must make deliveries of aid to Yemen and other countries suffering from humanitarian crises.

Indeed, the U.N. assesses that the United States is the top donor of humanitarian aid to Yemen. According to the U.N. Financial Tracking Service (F.T.S.), the U.S. government has contributed 32.4 percent of all humanitarian aid to Yemen since March 2015, followed by the British government, World Bank, European Commission, and the governments of Germany and Japan each contributing between 4.2 and 12.3 percent. The G.C.C. member which has contributed the most humanitarian relief is Saudi Arabia. Officials in Riyadh calculate that between April 2015 and April 2017, the kingdom provided

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Yemen with \$8.2 billion in assistance with \$850 million channeled toward humanitarian relief efforts. Saudi Arabia does not coordinate such assistance with the U.N. and/or other international institutions, which would account for the underreporting of its assistance.

Thus far, international donors have not supplied Yemen with enough assistance to



thwart an exacerbation of the country's humanitarian crisis. In 2016, U.N. agencies, namely the World Health Organization (W.H.O.), sought to secure \$182 million to help the Yemeni health sector, yet only received 60 percent of the funding. This year,

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A factor that has recently undermined such efforts to help Yemenis on the brink of starvation is that the aforementioned cholera outbreak in April led to a diversion of resources away from other humanitarian aid efforts. Another reason why the acute diarrhoeal disease is likely to impact more Yemenis in the short-term is the recent cancellation in early July of one million doses of the cholera vaccine. Nevertheless, even had the vaccines reached Yemen, it was questionable how much potential the effort had to succeed. The International Coordinating Group cancelled the shipment due to concerns that the plan would fail, and potentially undermine future efforts to conduct successful vaccination campaigns in Yemen.²⁶ There were three other factors in play. First, the doses would have likely been “too little too

late” given that cholera had already spread to over one-third of a million Yemenis and the vaccine's effectiveness is highest when provided to those in areas at-risk where the outbreak has not yet reached, not those already affected. Second, damaged infrastruc-

ture in the parts of Yemen where the vaccines could have been most beneficial would have made the logistical dimensions of reaching such communities extremely challenging. Third, with fuel and electricity storages, administering the vaccines

would have been difficult provided that they need to be preserved in cold storage units. Various aid agencies have warned that the cholera epidemic may further deteriorate unless urgent action is taken.²⁷

CRITICISMS FROM CONGRESS

This year, members of the U.S. Congress began deliberating the humanitarian crisis in Yemen. At a Senate Foreign Relations Committee hearing on July 18, Senator Todd Young (R-IN) accused Saudi Arabia of possibly violating international law by preventing cranes and food/medical aid from reaching millions of Yemenis. Specifically, Young stated that Riyadh may be in violation of Rule 55 of the International Humanitarian Law, maintaining that Washington and its allies must use “all resources.... at our disposal” to see



to it that the Saudi campaign in Yemen and the country's "horrendous humanitarian crisis" are "mitigated."²⁸ In March, 52 members of Congress sent the State Department a letter that called for greater American pressure on Saudi Arabia to protect Hodeida's accessibility and "to ensure that humanitarian goods can get into the port."²⁹ The following month 55 lawmakers sent another letter to Trump, urging him to receive congressional approval for any actions that escalate Washington's role in the Yemeni civil war. This action followed growing outrage from Senator Chris Murphy (D-CT) and Rand Paul (R-KY), that began during the Obama presidency, over both administrations' decisions to not seek authorization from Congress prior to assisting the Saudi-led military coalition.³⁰ In May, Murphy stepped up his opposition to the U.S.-backed Arab coalition's campaign in Yemen, maintaining that "the Saudis are deliberately trying to create a famine inside Yemen in order to essentially starve the Yemenis to the negotiating table" and "the United States is participating."³¹

POLICY

RECOMMENDATIONS

There are two key policy recommendations for the Trump administration:

First, there needs to be a real push for cease-fire among the belligerents. It is abun-

dantly clear that humanitarian aid in Yemen depends on overcoming the political obstacles to a cease-fire. Without a cessation of violence, humanitarian workers will continue to be in danger, decreasing the international community's ability to assist Yemen's most vulnerable citizens. The Trump administration has recognized that only a diplomatic settlement can resolve the Yemeni civil war, as did the Obama administration. Yet, there is a view in the White House that the Saudi-led coalition must score decisive victories over the Houthis to ensure that the Iranian-backed rebels enter roundtable talks in a relatively weak position.

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Some analysts claim that the intensification of Yemen's humanitarian crisis amid the prolonged stalemate is set to be politically beneficial to the Houthis. Last year, the Houthi fighters began gaining support among communities across Yemen's most badly affected districts, including those where the Houthis did not have support in late 2014 and 2015.^{32, 33} By this calculation, the Arab military coalition's continued bombardment of Houthi-controlled territory and blockade on Yemen have failed to thwart the consolidation of Ansarullah's control of large swathes of land.




As Washington maintains limited (if any) leverage over the Houthis, U.N.-led efforts to bring Ansarullah into acceptance of a cease-fire will depend on working with many parties, including Iran and Oman, which have not backed (or even outright resisted) the Saudi-led coalition, yet maintain varying degrees of influence over the Houthi forces.

Second, and perhaps most importantly, is pushing the Arab Gulf states to assist with

cargos because of pay-off from commercial importers. Nevertheless, it is essential that international pressure remain on the Arab Gulf states to prioritize humanitarian assistance to prevent a major health and food crisis unfolding in Yemen. To be clear, this assistance is only possible after the implementation of a cease-fire, as laid out in the first recommendation, given that the reopening of the airport in Sanaa mandates an agree-

ment between the Houthis, who control most of northern Yemen, including the country's main airport, and the Arab military coalition, which retains control of the airspace. The U.N. has proposed re-opening the airport under third party control.



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humanitarian efforts in Yemen. Washington maintains substantial influence over Riyadh and Abu Dhabi, and can pressure them into ending their blockages on food imports bound for Yemenis at risk of famine. Saudi officials dispute the notion that they are obstructing the delivery of humanitarian assistance, and note that there are nine operational ports in Yemen available for the delivery of aid. King Salman Center Director Abdullah al-Rabeeah told a Washington audience, on September 20, that the Saudis have also offered to facilitate the delivery of assistance to Yemen through the nearby Saudi port of Jizan and via land crossings. The Saudis maintain that deliveries of humanitarian assistance are impeded by the Houthis, who prioritize the delivery of non-essential

Overall, Yemen's humanitarian crisis continues unabated with dire consequences for the region if left in its current morass. Although a moral argument could be made for the United States to step up efforts to help bring relief into the war-torn country, it is also clear that vital U.S. strategic interests in countering terrorism and Iranian expansionism are at stake. Should the international community fail to reverse the human suffering in Yemen, millions of Yemenis will quickly become vulnerable to famine.





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