



# THE YEMEN TREND

**MAY**  
**2018**



RESEARCH . ANALYSIS . ADVISORY

The Yemen Trend is a monthly digest that highlights Yemen's key economic and humanitarian trends and political and military developments, providing context and analysis where necessary in order to facilitate informed discussion deeply rooted in the facts.

# Executive Overview

Rapid ground advances throughout May brought a collection of anti-Houthi forces as close as 13km from the vital port city of Hodeidah. As UN Envoy Martin Griffiths prepares to present to the Security Council in June his plan to revive political negotiations, the question remains whether the now tangible threat of a ground offensive to wrest the city will pressure the Houthis to the table, or whether continued military activity will further delay talks. UN relief chief Mark Lowcock warned that a further ten million people in Yemen risk becoming severely food insecure, which would more than double the current 8.4 million people falling under this classification, in a country where a total 22 million require some form of humanitarian assistance.

Amid fears an operation to retake Hodeidah port would plunge the country into an even deeper humanitarian crisis, trade-related developments in April and May – whether an unintended consequence of or intentional tactic in the west coast front – are already cause for heightened concern. In late May, Lowcock said imports “remain well short of pre-blockade averages,” and UN OCHA data for the complete month of April shows imports for that month dropped to “the lowest since the start of UNVIM operations” in 2016. Furthermore, a Turkish vessel carrying 50,000 tonnes of wheat destined for Saleef port experienced an explosion 110km (70 miles) off the coast of Hodeidah, which the US and coalition pinned on the Houthis. The attack marked the second consecutive month the Houthis are believed to have successfully attacked commercial vessels in international waters.

Meanwhile, the Houthis launched major air attacks into Saudi territory on a greater than weekly basis. In addition to launching missiles toward Riyadh, the group attempted to strike an Aramco oil facility and conducted a foiled drone attack on an airport inside the Kingdom. Far from the battlefield, a military deployment by the UAE in Socotra was labelled an “unjustified military action” by the internationally recognized Yemeni government. The dispute wound down after Saudi Arabia sent its own forces to the island, where Prime Minister Bin Dagher was engaged in Saudi-led mediation.

# Timeline

**May 06** First-ever cholera vaccination campaign in Yemen is launched

**May 07** Coalition targets Presidential Office in Sana'a, causing heavy civilian casualties

**May 10** Turkish vessel carrying wheat suffers explosion off Hodeidah, blamed on Houthi missile

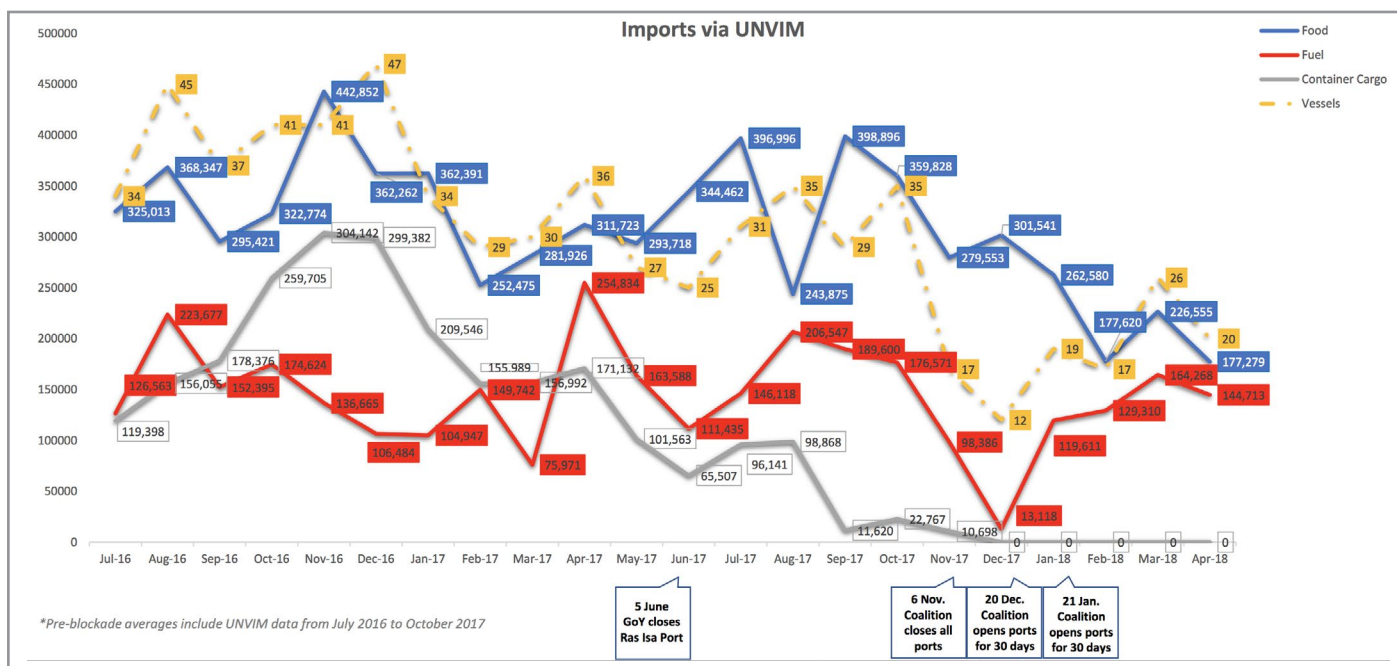
**May 13** UAE conducts "Red Thunder" amphibious assault on Houthi control center south of Hodeidah city

**May 13** Saudi forces arrive in Socotra as part of mediation effort between Yemen and UAE

# Humanitarian and Economic Trends

**Imports through Hodeidah are still well below the pre-port closure average.** “I am particularly concerned about the recent decline of commercial food imports through the Red Sea ports,” [said](#) Mark Lowcock, the UN under-secretary general for humanitarian affairs and emergency relief, on May 24. Including fuel, imports “remain well short of pre-blockade averages,” he said, referring

to the coalition’s temporary closure of the ports in November 2017. Import [data](#) from UN OCHA shows that commercial food and fuel imports both declined in April, with food imports only accounting for 51 percent of the national food requirement, “the lowest since the start of UNVIM operations.” Containerized cargo was not allowed into Hodeidah for the sixth consecutive month.



In his statement, Lowcock said commercial shipping companies fear further disruptions to the ports, adding that he is “concerned that key humanitarian supplies including items required to address the cholera outbreak remain on the prohibited list of imports.” Currently, 22 million people in Yemen are considered to require some form of humanitarian assistance. The OCHA head warned that ten million more people risk being pushed into severe food insecurity, which would more than double the 8.4 million people currently falling under this classification.

**The Houthis are accused of attacking a Turkish vessel carrying wheat**, which experienced an explosion off the coast of Hodeidah on May 10. The commercial ship, named Ince Inebolu, was [carrying](#) 50,000 tonnes of milling wheat from Russia, and the incident occurred while it was anchored around 110km (70 miles) off of Saleef port. The ship was towed to Jizan port in Saudi Arabia by the coalition, and a coalition spokesman [said](#) “Coalition forces

conducted a survey of the incident and visited the ship and found an explosion from the inside to the outside.” The Sana’a-based Ministry of Transport [claimed](#) the ship was targeted by a coalition warplane, and the same [claim](#) was made by the Houthi-aligned Red Sea Ports Corporation, which manages the port.

After observing the damage at the port of Jizan, the company that owns the ship [said](#) it was breached by a missile, which exploded inside, a claim the coalition backed. Later the head of intelligence and security with the European Union’s counter piracy mission, EU Navfor, [said](#) “the assessment at the moment is it was almost certainly non-state Yemen based actors firing a land-based missile or rocket at the vessel.” On May 25, the White House [stated](#) it was a Houthi missile strike. Relatedly, the UAE [announced](#) that on May 23 it destroyed two boats belonging to the Houthis in international waters “who were threatening one of the commercial oil tankers in the Red Sea, while two other boats

managed to escape.” The previous month, the Houthis successfully struck an oil tanker off the coast, although the damage was minor.

**The first-ever cholera vaccination campaign in Yemen was launched** as part of the effort to prevent another resurgence of the disease, The WHO, UNICEF, and local authorities [launched](#) the campaign from May 6 to May 15, vaccinating 270,000 people. This initial vaccination phase prioritized “hot spots” where there is a high-risk of the disease spreading. Reuters [reported](#) that the WHO did not yet have permission from the Houthis to launch a nationwide campaign, and that aid workers said some senior Houthi officials opposed vaccinations being conducted, resulting in the campaign being delayed by almost a year. A [paper](#) published in the Lancet Global Health journal in early May warned that “In Yemen, with the return of the 2018 rainy season, a potential third wave could occur, which would further weaken a very vulnerable population.”

**Since the beginning of 2018, Saudi Arabia has expelled 17,000 Yemeni migrants.** “IOM can categorically say that between January and now 17,000 Yemenis have been turned back, simply because of their immigration status in Saudi Arabia,” the International Organization for Migration (IOM) [told](#) Reuters. According to IOM, there are around 700,000 Yemeni migrants currently working in Saudi Arabia.

## Political Developments

**UN Envoy Martin Griffiths reaffirmed his promise to deliver a framework for negotiations** to the Security Council by mid-June, and [said](#) the UN is “gravely concerned by the negative impact of the recent escalations of attacks on the political process.” Although he did not make his scheduled trip to Sana’a in May, at the beginning of the month Griffiths [reportedly](#) met with Houthi delegation head Mohammed Abdulsalam in Muscat, Oman, where the Houthi delegation is based. “[Griffiths] wishes to correct any impression that the postponement of his visit to Sana’a has in any way impeded his access to Ansar Allah leaders to better understand their own perspectives on his framework for negotiations,” the above statement by his office reads, without mentioning the reason for delaying his visit to Sana’a.

**Interior Minister Ahmed Al-Maisari visited Abu Dhabi in late May**, after criticizing the UAE over its control of state institutions in Aden. In Mid-May, PBS News Hour aired an [interview](#) (see Recommended Reading below for the full series) with Al-Maisari, who is from Abyan like Hadi and is one of the president’s closest allies. “We don’t regret that Emiratis are here. They helped us. But you can’t go to the port without permission from UAE. You can’t go to the airport without permission from UAE. You can’t enter Aden from without the permission of UAE,” Al-Maisari said. “I — as the minister of interior, I don’t even have authority over the prisons. What is my value as the minister of interior?” Al-Maisari also called the southern separatists who fought his government in late January “puppets of the UAE.” The minister’s response to the following question was especially notable, and received heavy coverage from anti-UAE news outlets:

Marcia Biggs (PBS interviewer): Do you feel occupied?

Ahmed Al-Maisari: It’s undeclared. We have a lot of indicators on the ground that support what you just said, but we still think good of UAE. And the answer to your question will come in the next few months. It’s either that the coalition countries prove that they came to support the legitimate government, and they enable us to do our work, or they will prove the thing you just said, and I myself will go and say it in a press conference, but not now.

In a series of Tweets following his comments, UAE Foreign Minister Anwar Gargash [criticized](#) Al-Maisari, telling him instead to “aim your bullets at the Houthis.” Al-Maisari visited Abu Dhabi on May 30 at the UAE’s invitation, where he met with his counterpart, Saif Bin Zayed Al-Nehyan. [According](#) to the Hadi-aligned Saba news, the two interior ministers were to hold security talks and Al-Maisari was seeking to have his ministry assume full responsibility over local security in Aden and other governorates nominally under Hadi control.

**Talks between European states and Iran are making progress toward a ceasefire in Yemen**, [according](#) to Reuters. The secret talks, which have been ongoing since February as part of the larger negotiations surrounding the Iran nuclear deal, are also said to involve discussions on easing the humanitarian situation in Yemen. “Three European diplomats said the talks had progressed significantly

and were going in the right direction,” the agency wrote, also quoting a senior Iranian official as saying “we have agreed to work with Britain, France and Germany to end the conflict in Yemen.”

**Hadi appointed Khaled Al-Yamani as foreign minister, replacing** Abdulmalik Al-Mekhlafi, who was made an [adviser](#) to the president. Ahmed Awadh Bin Mubarak replaced Al-Yamani as ambassador to the UN, while also maintaining his position as ambassador to the US.

## Military and Security Developments

**Unprecedented ground advances toward Hodeidah city were realized in May**, bringing a collection of anti-Houthi forces near the outskirts of the port city. By the end of the month, AP [reported](#) the forces were as close as 13km away, and according to a brigade commander on the ground were amassing fighters in anticipation for a military assault on the city. “First, we will cut off supply lines, especially between Sana’a and Hodeidah, then we will place the Houthis under siege and bring them down, perhaps without a fight,” [said](#) the spokesman for the National Resistance Forces. The clashes in Hodeidah were particularly fierce, with the Associated Press [reporting](#) on [hundreds](#) of combat deaths on either side throughout the month, including 115 deaths in a single two-day period.

### Background: The west coast offensive

The west coast front includes at least five major anti-Houthi groups: The Al-Amalika (Giants) Brigades, a triad of UAE-sponsored military brigades led by southern Salafi commanders; the National Resistance Forces, which are led by Tareq Saleh and operate directly under the UAE; the Tihama Resistance, comprised of locals mostly from Hodeidah; and the militaries of Sudan and the UAE. In December 2017, several of the above ground forces challenged the Houthis’ control of Hodeidah governorate for the first time during the war, entering the southern districts of Khawkhah

and Hays. Moderate progress northward was sharply escalated in May after the National Resistance Forces, formed the month prior, moved from Taiz into Hodeidah.

The push up the west coast was put in motion in December 2016, under the banner of Operation Golden Spear. In January 2017 the Houthi/Saleh alliance lost swathes of territory in Taiz along the coastal districts of Dhubab and Mocha. By the summer of 2017, the offensive appeared to have slowed, in part due to differences between Hadi and UAE-aligned forces in Aden, and also because the forces sought to capture Houthi reinforcement routes in the interior of Taiz before progressing into Hodeidah. The month after the death of his uncle, in January 2018 Tareq Saleh appeared in the south, where he began building up an armed group with funds and equipment from the UAE.

*See the [April 2018](#) issue of the *Yemen Trend* for a look at US policy toward the potential offensive on Hodeidah port.*

Early in May, the town of Al-Bareh, in the western interior of Taiz governorate, was retaken. This was [said](#) to be an important strategic location in terms of blocking a major route the Houthis use to send reinforcements between Taiz and Hodeidah. On May 11, Abdu Raham Hajari, commander of the Tihama resistance, [said](#) that with coalition support his forces seized Al-Hayma seaport in Al-Tuhayta, which borders Zabid and Al-Jarahi along the coastline and is 80 km from Hodeidah city. The commander said the ongoing effort to fully control these districts is setting the stage for a large offensive on the city of Hodeidah. Shortly after, on May 13 the UAE military carried out an amphibious assault, dubbed Operation Red Thunder, on what state news WAM [said](#) was “a Houthi-controlled command and control center in the Al-Faza region.” Progress along the coast was accompanied by an advance on the parallel interior road in the governorate through Al-Jarahi and Zabid districts.



A May 5 [letter](#) from the Yemeni government to the UN called the deployment “an unjustified military action,” and said the disagreement with the UAE over this issue is a reflection of the larger issue, “the essence of which is the misunderstanding over national sovereignty and the party entitled to exercise it, as well as the absence of a solid level of joint coordination which seemed to have vanished recently.” On the other hand, Emirati media [characterized](#) the deployment as being in support of a population long neglected by the Yemeni government, with Emirati Foreign Minister Anwar Gargash [saying](#) the UAE has “historical and familial connections with Socotra and its people.” On May 13 the coalition [said](#) Saudi forces had arrived on the island in coordination with the Yemeni government “for training purposes and assistance.” Bin Dagher held meetings with local and Saudi officials, and on May 14 he made a Facebook [post](#) titled “Socotra crisis ended,” where he said the Saudi mediation was successful.

**The Houthis launched major cross-border air attacks more than once per week.**

Several of the attempted attacks were against economic targets, including an oil facility and civilian airport, the latter of which was unsuccessfully targeted by drone. These attacks included:

- The Houthis launched several missiles into Saudi territory on [May 9](#), including at the capital Riyadh. The Saudi military claimed to have intercepted the missiles, and Reuters [reported](#) that “at least four blasts were head in the city center, but there were no immediate reports of casualties or damage.” The next day, the Saudi government [tested](#) its new siren system to alert residents “in case of emergency.”
- On May 14, the Houthis [announced](#) the firing of a ballistic missile “fired toward Aramco distribution tanks in Jizan [region].” The missile [reportedly](#) fell in the desert.
- On [May 19](#), the Saudi military claimed to have intercepted another ballistic missile, with a second landing in the desert, both en route to the southern city of Khamis Mushait.
- On May 21, the Houthis [stated](#) they fired a missile at Jizan airport. Likewise, the Saudi military [said](#) it was intercepted. The same thing happened on [May 24](#).

Toward the end of May, the forces [reached](#) a major coastal intersection in Bayt Al-Faqih district, 42km away from Hodeidah city. They progressed on the final stretch of highway to the city’s outskirts. On May 28, speaking to residents and a military spokesman, Reuters [reported](#) the troops reached a rural area in Al-Durayhmi district about 18km from Hodeidah port.

**Following a UAE military deployment on Socotra Island, Saudi Arabia mediated a withdrawal.** On April 30, the UAE deployed around 300 soldiers, in addition to tanks and artillery, to the island. The Associated Press, [quoting](#) a senior official in the Hadi government, said “the government had no idea whatsoever” the UAE was planning this, and reported that the UAE had taken control of the major transport and government facilities of Socotra, was forming a local militia, and clearing land for construction. On [May 4](#), Saudi general Ahmed Abdulrahman Al-Shiri led a high-level Saudi military delegation that met in Socotra with a UAE official and Prime Minister Ahmed Bin Dagher, who had arrived to the island two days prior.



- On May 26, the Houthi-controlled Saba News [reported](#) that a military drone attacked Abha Airport in Asir region, claiming the attack shut down air traffic at the airport, and saying the “Yemeni army has recently developed dozens of combat drones.” Saudi Arabia [said](#) it has “foiled an attempted terrorist drone attack,” destroying the pilotless plane as it approached the airport.

**The coalition targeted the Presidential Office in Sana’a on May 7**, killing at least six people and wounding 72 others, [according](#) to MSF. It was not clear which senior Houthi or GPC-Sana’a officials were killed, as the coalition claimed, and the airstrikes drew heavy criticism. The UN Office of the High Commissioner for Human Rights [reported](#) that eyewitnesses said “the same building was hit again about seven minutes after the first strike, causing additional casualties among the first responders to the first strike.” Suze van Meegen, acting country director of the Norwegian Refugee Council, [said](#) “We abhor the ongoing use of violence to intimidate civilian populations under the guise of efforts to protect them. Yemeni people are not collateral. Adherence to the laws of war is not optional.”

Following the strike, the UN Secretary General said, [according](#) to his office, voiced deep concern “about the recent and sharp escalation in the Yemen conflict, namely the coalition air strikes on 7 May that hit a Government building in the Tahrir district, a densely populated area of Sana’a City, and the firing of ballistic missiles by the Houthis on 6 and 9 May towards different targets in Saudi Arabia, including Riyadh.” More accurately, these incidents marked a continuation of the intensity witnessed in April, as a [press briefing](#) from the UN Human Rights Office made clear two days later. “The month of April was the deadliest month for civilians in Yemen so far this year, with a sharp increase in casualties,” the briefing states. A total 474 civilian casualties were confirmed by the Human Rights Office, more than double the month prior.

**A missile fired on Marib city killed at least seven and wounded 25 others on May 22.** [According](#) to a Hadi-aligned military source, “The Houthis targeted the neighborhood of Al-Mujama near the Athban mosque in the center of the city with a Katyusha missile in the early hours of Tuesday.”

**US military involvement in the war came under closer scrutiny**, while the House voted in favor of an investigation into whether the US may be implicated in any breaches of the law. The New York Times [reported](#) that since December 2017 about a dozen US Special Forces (known as Green Berets) have been “helping locate and destroy caches of ballistic missiles and launch sites” the Houthis are using to attack Saudi Arabia. Although the US troops are not believed to have crossed the border, the article notes their actions “appear to contradict Pentagon statements that American military assistance to the Saudi-led campaign in Yemen is limited to aircraft refueling, logistics and general intelligence sharing.”

Meanwhile, the US House voted in favor of an [amendment](#) for the defense secretary to “conduct an investigation to determine if coalition partners of the United States or members of the Armed Forces or intelligence personnel violated Federal law, the laws of armed conflict, or Department of Defense policy while conducting operations in Yemen.” The bill’s sponsor, Ro Khanna, [said](#) “It requires a public report – not a confidential report or a classified report – about the findings of what role the UAE had in these torture prisons, and if any American personnel were involved in any way.”

**Sudan confirmed its ground forces will remain engaged in the war in Yemen.** After heavy casualties in April in Hajjah governorate drew [criticism](#) from Sudanese opposition politicians, in early May Sudanese Defense Minister Ali Mohamed Salim said his country’s continued participation in the war was being evaluated. At the end of May, the ruling National Congress Party (NCP) reached the decision to remain in the war, [according](#) to the Sudan Tribune. Reporting on the decision, Reuters [said](#) Sudan has “at least 3,000 ground troops and several fighter jets fighting in Yemen as part of the Saudi-led alliance.”

## Recommended reading and viewing:

### Local

- A paper by Khaled Hamid sets out a vision for [An Institutional Framework For Post-Conflict Reconstruction in Yemen](#). The report was written as part of the Rethinking Yemen's Economy initiative DeepRoot is conducting in collaboration with the Sana'a Center for Strategic Studies and the Center for Applied Research in Partnership with the Orient (CARPO).
- PBS News Hour aired a series of 10-minute videos on Aden and surrounding areas, focused on the humanitarian catastrophe that continues to plague areas liberated from the Houthis: [Part 1](#), [Part 2](#), [Part 3](#), [Part 4](#).
- Writing about his [Reflections from Southern Yemen](#), Scott Paul from Oxfam America describes the suffering he witnessed on a recent trip to the country, explaining that "import restrictions are hurting Yemenis everywhere," even in Aden.
- International Crisis Group researcher April Longley Alley provides commentary on her [Eight Days in Aden – a Forgotten City in Yemen's Forgotten War](#).

### Regional/Global

- The London School of Economics-Oxford Commission on State Fragility, Growth and Development released its final report, [Escaping the Fragility Trap](#), which includes recommendations relevant to Yemen. DeepRoot partner Rafat Ali Al-Akhali headed the secretariat of the Commission, which was established under the auspices of the International Growth Centre (IGC).
- A BuzzFeed News [investigation](#) into Stephen Toumajan, a former US army officer who is now a general and commander of the UAE's Joint Aviation Command, discusses the connections between past and present US military personnel and the UAE military. Following up on this article, Just Security writes "The UAE has been credibly implicated in international humanitarian law violations and war crimes in Yemen," and questions if it is [Time to Dust Off the War Crimes Act?](#)
- A report by the Institut Francais Des Relations Internationales (IFRI) analyses [The Gulf Monarchies' Armed Forces at the Crossroads](#) (English and French).

**Compiled by:** Brett Scott - DeepRoot Consulting  
**Cover Photo Credit:** Nariman El-Mofty  
All rights reserved **DeepRoot Consulting** 2018



[www.deeproot.consulting](http://www.deeproot.consulting)

