



THE YEMEN TREND

**MARCH
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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

Against the backdrop of a failing education system and fears the coming rainy season will bring another cholera outbreak, cautious optimism was expressed at the injection of funds to the Humanitarian Response Plan and Central Bank of Yemen (CBY), and the beginning of UN Envoy Martin Griffiths' mandate. Griffiths assumed the position of UN envoy on March 19. He met President Hadi in Riyadh before arriving in Sana'a on March 24 for a week-long visit. Few details of his discussions with the Houthis were revealed, and his visit was in part overshadowed by a major ballistic missile attack by the Houthis.

Late on March 25, seven ballistic missiles were fired into four different regions of Saudi Arabia, including three targeting the capital Riyadh. While no targets appear to have been successfully hit, falling debris killed one civilian in Riyadh and the Houthis' stated targets – mostly airports – included multiple civilian locations. Following the attack, Saudi Arabia said that 104 missiles had been fired into the Kingdom to date, and warned "Saudi Arabia reserves the right to respond to Iran at an appropriate time and place defending its land and people." Earlier in the month, the US Senate voted 55-44 against a resolution that would have forced Congress to vote on the US military's participation in the war in Yemen.

Also in March, the UN received the \$930 million pledged by Saudi Arabia and the UAE for the 2018 Yemen Humanitarian Response plan, which requires a total 2.96 billion. Saudi Arabia also signed the agreement to deposit \$2 billion in the CBY led by the newly appointed governor Mohammed Zemam. A large-scale Diphtheria vaccination campaign targeting nearly 2.7 million Yemenis under 16 was conducted in March, but UNICEF regional director Geert Cappealaere said that without major progress, when the coming rainy season arrives "cholera will hit the children of Yemen once more." Imports arriving via Hodeidah port have not recovered to the levels witnessed prior to the port closures in late 2017, and despite insistence from the coalition that the port is "fully open," the status of the port remains unclear and humanitarians have stated restrictions remains in place.

Timeline

- Mar 06** Week-long counter-terrorism operation, dubbed "Sweeping Torrent," launched in Abyan
- Mar 17** Hadi appoints half-brother of former president Saleh to head the Strategic Reserve Forces
- Mar 19** UN Envoy Martin Griffiths takes office
- Mar 19** Deputy Prime Minister Abdulaziz Jobari resigns, joined by a second minister next day
- Mar 20** US Senate votes down bill that would have forced vote on US participation in the war
- Mar 24** UN envoy arrives in Sana'a for week-long visit, meets Houthi and GPC-Sana'a officials
- Mar 25** Seven ballistic missiles launched at four regions of Saudi Arabia, one civilian killed

Humanitarian and Economic Trends

Hodeidah Port continues to operate at a severely reduced capacity. “For whatever reason, the amount of food and fuel required to meet needs in Yemen is not coming in through Hodeidah and it is likely there are some deliberate actions being taken to cause it,” a representative of the Norwegian Refugee Council (NRC) [told](#) the AFP after a visit to the port. According to the news agency, Coalition spokesman Turki Al-Maliki said in late March that the port is “fully open,” but the NRC employee said “the de-facto blockade is still in place.” The latest UN Verification and Inspection Mechanism (UNVIM) [snapshot](#) shows that in the month of February 2018 a total 303,965 tons of cargo was imported through Hodeidah, whereas in October 2017, before the temporary port closures, a total [615,999](#) tons was imported.

The official status of the port has remained in limbo since February 19, when the coalition’s latest 30-day extension expired. As a sign the port is likely to remain open, following a meeting with his Saudi counterpart earlier in March, British Foreign Minister Boris Johnson [said](#) “we have agreed to strengthen the UN inspection of shipping in order to ensure that all Yemeni ports remain open to the humanitarian and commercial supplies that Yemen’s people so desperately need. He did not name which changes are to be made.

The UN received \$930 million from Saudi Arabia and the UAE, which will cover almost a third of the \$2.96 billion required for the 2018 Yemen Humanitarian Response Plan (YHRP). UN Secretary-General Antonio Guterres [announced](#) the contribution after meeting the Saudi crown prince at the end of the month. The two coalition partners have also [pledged](#) to raise \$500 million from the other coalition member states. At the same time, criticism over the Saudi-led humanitarian campaign received additional criticism in March. The Guardian branded the Coalition’s plan, Yemen Comprehensive Humanitarian Operations (YCHO), “[A cynical PR exercise](#),” stating in stronger terms what many of the leading humanitarian organizations on the ground in Yemen jointly [stated](#) previously: “the YCHO has been developed without consultation with the majority of operational aid agencies on the ground in Yemen,” and the plan does not explain how imports to Hodeidah will be increased.

A massive Diphtheria vaccination campaign was completed in March, but an upswing in cholera cases is expected with the coming rainy season. The vaccination campaign targeted almost 2.7 million Yemenis under the age of 16, and was carried out by the WHO and national health authorities. Since October 2017, Diphtheria has killed over 70 people and infected over 1,300, the WHO [said](#). However, on March 25 UNICEF’s Middle East and North African regional director, Geert Cappealaere, fresh from a trip to Yemen, [stated](#) that “in a few weeks from now, we have the rainy season starting again, so without huge and immediate investments, cholera will hit the children of Yemen once more.” Between April 27, 2017, and March 25, 2018, a total of 1,084,191 suspected cholera cases have been [reported](#), including 2,267 associated deaths.

Two million children are out of school and more than 2,500 schools have become unusable, according to a UNICEF [report](#) titled “If Not In School: The paths children cross in Yemen.” This marks a nearly half-a-million increase in out-of-school children since the war escalated in 2015. The report further notes that the education of 4.5 million other children remains at risk because nearly three-quarters of all public school teachers have not received their salaries in over a year.

Saudi Arabia signed the agreement to deposit \$2 billion into the CBY. The agreement was [signed](#) on March 15 by the Central Bank of Yemen governor, Mohammed Zemam, and Saudi Finance Minister Mohammed Al-Jadaan.

Labor reforms in Saudi Arabia have caused a mass return of workers to Yemen. Since November of last year an [estimated](#) 100,000 Yemeni workers in Saudi Arabia have been sent home, and 130,000 others could be forced to return to Yemen. Mostly wage workers providing much needed remittances to their extended families back in Yemen, it is feared the lost jobs will exacerbate the humanitarian catastrophe, and that some of the returnees may turn to armed groups for a source of income.

Fuel shortages worsened considerably in Sana’a, where the price to refill a propane tank for cooking reached an exorbitant \$26 in early March, and residents were [reportedly](#) waiting days to refill their tanks.

Political Developments

The UN envoy held week-long talks in Sana'a beginning on March 24. Martin Griffiths [assumed](#) the role of Special Envoy of the Secretary-General for Yemen on March 19. He met President Hadi and senior members of the internationally recognized government in Riyadh the following day, then arrived in Sana'a on March 24. Griffiths [reportedly](#) spoke to Abdulmalik Al-Houthi by phone, and upon leaving Sana'a on March 31 he [said](#) "All the people I met, both in Riyadh and Sanaa, spoke about their strong desire to move ahead with a political solution."

However, the Houthis were strongly criticized by their opponents during the visit. Foreign Minister Abdulmalik Al-Mekhlafi [said](#) the missiles launched against Saudi Arabia (see next section) "while the UN Envoy is still in Sana'a, are a clear message to the world that this militia does not want peace and is not ready to respond to its demands." The Whitehouse, in a "[Statement](#) by the Press Secretary on the Efforts by Yemen's Houthis to Destabilize The Arabian Peninsula," said the missile launches "call into question the Houthis' commitment to a peace process," and criticized Iran's Republican Guard for enabling the Houthis.

Ould Cheikh provided further details on the past breakdown of the peace talks. In a [UN News interview](#) posted March 1, the former UN envoy said while both parties bear responsibility for the continuation of the war, after 105 consecutive days of meetings in Kuwait in 2016 it was ultimately the Houthis who were unwilling to discuss making military concessions. Noting that UNSC Resolution 2216 (2015) states that no military group outside of the state's authority can maintain heavy weapons, he said:

"What we have been proposing to the Houthis, is in compensation for them making concessions on the military side [in line with Resolution 2216] there will be an inclusive government where they will be represented. But clearly, they were very happy to see a new vice president, a new government, but they were not ready to discuss the military element. And this happened from day one. From the beginning, despite the intervention of the emir of Kuwait, despite the intervention of many actors – we had support from many countries, most of the Gulf countries had intervened at that moment, even Qatar at that moment also had a very positive role. So all of this couldn't bring us to any resolution of the conflict."

Background on the UN-led Peace Process

Since the peace talks in Kuwait collapsed in August 2016, the warring parties have yet to convene again. In the year-and-a-half that followed, Ismail Ould Cheikh Ahmed sought to advance a peace plan he believes can serve as the foundation for any future agreement. In his [final briefing](#) to the UN Security Council, Ould Cheikh positioned his proposals as the continued basis for discussions. The following points highlight the most crucial developments related to the former envoy's effort to revive the peace process, from the end of the Kuwait talks to the beginning of Martin Griffiths' mandate in March 2018:

October 23, 2016: During a visit to Sana'a, Ould Cheikh presented a [plan](#) to the Houthi/Saleh government. The plan called for Vice President Ali Mohsen to step down, the Houthis to withdraw from Sana'a and hand over their heavy and medium weapons, and for Hadi to appoint and transfer his presidential powers to a new vice president, who would form a Cabinet. Hadi [said](#) the envoy's plan "rewards the coup leaders" and "is a gateway to more suffering and war," ultimately rejecting it.

December 18, 2016: The ministerial Quad (the foreign ministers of the US, UK, Saudi Arabia, and UAE) and Oman, now collectively referred to as the Quint, released a [statement](#) "reaffirming" the envoy's October 23 proposals and providing a degree of clarity on the sequencing of proposed steps. The Quad also called for representatives of the warring parties to convene in Amman and for the De-escalation and Coordination Committee (DCC) to go to Dhahran Al-Janoub, southern Saudi Arabia, but this never materialized.

May 2017: Throughout the month Ould Cheikh met with President Hadi and travelled to Sana'a. However, in his May 30 [briefing](#) to the Security Council, the UN envoy said representatives from the Houthis and the GPC did not meet with him to discuss his proposals. While still technically operating under the framework of his October 23 plan, Ould Cheikh shifted his attention to keeping Hodeidah port functional (at this point there appeared to be an imminent risk of a military operation to retake the port, and in addition to shifting policy objectives from the new Trump administration, this may have guided the envoy's strategy). At a [media stakeout](#) that same day he explained his new proposals, which have two main components:

1. A military committee made up of officers who have not participated directly in the conflict and who are respected by both sides, which would “manage the security and the military aspects of Hodeida,” and
2. A financial committee focused more directly on the chamber of commerce and Yemeni businessmen, which would develop a mechanism to have state funds collected from all parts of Yemen disbursed to government employees on both sides.

June 2017: Saleh Al-Sammad, president of the Supreme Political Council, [said](#) Ould Cheikh is “not welcome” anymore and that neither the Houthis nor the GPC would be engaging with him.

January 2018: The coalition spokesman renewed his [call](#) for the UN to manage Hodeidah port, while the Supreme Political Council president [told](#) Deputy Envoy Muin Shreim during his visit to Sana’a that partial plans, like those regarding Hodeidah, were “wasting time.” On January 22 Ould Cheikh [announced](#) he would not extend his mandate past February.

*For more background, see the [February 2018](#) issue of the *Yemen Trend*.*

Prime Minister Bin Dagher spoke about the future of the GPC in an [interview](#) with Egyptian newspaper Youm7. He said that in his capacity as the (self-declared) deputy chairman of the GPC, he does not support sanctions on any member of the party, including Ahmed Saleh, and that all of the former president’s relatives and supporters are welcome in the party. When asked whether a decision has been made for President Hadi to lead the party, Bin Dagher said “if we are able to convene the leadership of the Congress soon I think that Abdu Rabu Mansour will participate and engage, and we’ll see the announcement of the result.” He said the party’s Standing Committee, comprised of 1,200 members, elects the party’s leadership, and thus the decision ultimately lies with this body. “Therefore, I think that convening the Standing Committee during the coming period will be a major leap for the party.”

The US Senate voted against a resolution to debate US military participation in the war. The bipartisan bill, introduced by Bernie Sanders and two other senators on February 28, [sought](#) to force a vote in Congress on whether to end America’s military support for the coalition against the Houthis. On March 20, the resolution was

defeated by a vote of 55-44. “The US military is making the crisis worse by helping one side in the conflict bomb innocent civilians,” the three senators [argued](#). “That is why we are introducing a joint resolution that would force Congress to vote on the US war in Yemen. If Congress does not authorize the war, our resolution would require US involvement in Yemen to end.” The argument that was put forth is that the US military is participating in the conflict by providing mid-air refueling to warplanes engaged in targeting the Houthis, as well as by providing targeting assistance, and that this is unconstitutional because the US constitution grants Congress the sole power to declare war. To back this claim, supporters of the proposed bill pointed to the War Powers Resolution, a Vietnam War-era federal law defining the legal procedures for US military engagement in war.

Opponents of the resolution, including the Department of Defense, [argued](#) US military activity related to the Yemen war takes place outside the “hostilities” as defined in the War Powers Resolution. Opponents also argued their country’s support to Saudi Arabia includes providing advice on the law of armed conflict and minimizing civilian casualties. In mid-March, CENTCOM commander Joseph Votel [stated](#) to the Senate Armed Services Committees that the US military does not record the actions of the specific Saudi and Emirati warplanes it refuels, and is thus not able to know if any given airstrike – including those that result in civilian casualties – was carried out by an aircraft that had been refueled by the US.

Two ministers resigned from the Hadi government. Abdulaziz Jobari, the deputy prime minister and minister of civil service and insurance, [resigned](#) on March 19, stating that “the relationship between the legitimate government and the Arab Coalition has to be corrected so it is no longer a leader-follower relationship.” He also added that “we did not accept to be humiliated by the Houthis and it is impossible that we accept to be humiliated by any other entity or person, we respect our dignity.” Minister of State Salah Al-Sayyadi [announced](#) his resignation the following day, and both ministers made their announcements from Riyadh. Among several other reasons, Al-Sayyadi [stated](#) he resigned because the original goals of the coalition intervention to reinstate the internationally recognized government had been deviated from by some members of the Arab Coalition, resulting in militias being empowered rather than the Hadi government; and the failure of the government to return to liberated areas of the country.

Military and Security Developments

Seven ballistic missiles were launched at Saudi Arabia on March 25, resulting in the [death](#) of one person in Riyadh from falling debris. The missiles were targeted at four different regions of Saudi Arabia: Three on Riyadh region, where the capital Riyadh is located, and the rest on the southern regions of Najran, Asir, and Jazan. Houthi-controlled Saba News [reported](#) the missiles were launched at the “beginning moments of the fourth year of Yemeni steadfastness,” referring to the coalition air campaign. The statement claims the missiles were targeted at various airports in Saudi Arabia, which include civilian targets. Saudi mouthpiece Al-Arabiya [quoted](#) coalition spokesmen Turki Al-Maliki as saying all seven missiles were intercepted. While it does not appear any targets were hit (a large explosion in the Saudi capital [appears](#) to have been caused by a US-made Patriot missile doing a U-turn and returning to the ground), the coalition’s claim that it intercepted all the missiles was [questioned](#) by [several](#) experts.

At least 104 missiles have been launched into Saudi Arabia, the coalition spokesperson said on March 26. In response to the missile attacks, the Saudi embassy in Washington DC released a [statement](#) and follow up [report](#). “The Houthis are the first terrorist group in history to possess ballistic missiles,” the Saudis said, adding that “Saudi Arabia reserves the right to respond to Iran at an appropriate time and place defending its land and people.” Other notable claims made in these documents include:

- Of the total 104 missiles fired into Saudi Arabia, 78 percent have been launched from either Sa’ada or Amran governorates, and Sana’a airport has also been used to launch missiles.
- Hodeidah Port is being used to smuggle ballistic missiles to the Houthis, and Iran is supplying such weapons.
- The coalition intercepted the shipment of an Iranian [Sayyad-2](#) surface-to-air missile en route to the Houthis. The unused missile was displayed during the press conference, but details were not provided on where the missile was intercepted.

Further evidence of Iranian technical support to the Houthis was revealed. With focus on improvised explosive devices (IEDs) concealed in synthetic rocks, Conflict Armament Research (CAR) released a report saying some of the specific types of

concealed explosives used by the Houthis in Yemen “closely resemble – in design and construction – devices recovered in Iraq and Lebanon, which parties have previously linked, forensically, to Iran.” The [report](#), “Radio-Controlled, Passive Infrared-Initiated IEDs: Iran’s latest technological contributions to the war in Yemen,” also details how many of the specific components used, like circuit boards, are identical to other equipment of Iranian origin found in Yemen and elsewhere.

Hadi appointed his predecessor’s half-brother as head of the Reserve Forces. President Hadi issued a [decree](#) on March 17 appointing Major General Ali Saleh Ali Abdullah Afash Al-Himyari head of the Strategic Reserve Forces. He is the half-brother of former president Ali Abdullah Saleh, and he fled Sana’a in December 2017 as the Houthis consolidated control over the city. When President Hadi took office in the wake of the 2011 uprising, as part of his military reforms he disbanded the Republican Guard and replaced it in part with the Reserve Forces. Al-Himyari was the powerful commander of the Republican Guard through the 1980s and 90s before Saleh replaced him with his son, Ahmed, and empowered the younger generation of his relatives, including his nephew Tareq. Given that Tareq is currently forming a UAE-backed armed group in Aden outside of Hadi’s control and Ahmed may also be looking to take on a leadership role with UAE backing, Hadi’s appointment of Al-Himyari is seen by some as an attempt to absorb at least part of the Saleh network.

Aden continued to endure assassinations, suicide attacks, and attacks on news organizations. On March 13 a suicide car bomber [killed](#) at least six troops near a security center in Al-Mansura district. [According](#) to Reuters, the Islamic State claimed responsibility for the attack. Multiple hit-and-run [assassinations](#) on security officials by unknown gunmen also took place in March. Furthermore, a newspaper office belonging to the Al-Shomou Foundation was set on fire on March 1 in an attack that was caught on [video](#). The foundation is supportive of the Hadi government and Vice President Ali Mohsen, [according](#) to the Committee to Protect Journalists (CPJ). The armed attackers “arrived in vehicles and wore uniforms consistent with the ‘Security Belt’ forces ... armed, funded, trained, and work as part of a coalition led by the United Arab Emirates,” the CPJ wrote based on the account provided by the foundation’s director. On March 23 the Al-Shomou Foundation was again targeted. Seven staff members were abducted, and the director’s house was also looted the same day, [according](#) to the CPJ.

UAE-backed Security Belt Forces launched an operation in Abyan on March 6. Operation Sweeping Torrent was launched “to cleanse pockets and strongholds of Al-Qaeda members from Al-Mahfad and Wadi Hamara districts, the last terrorist stronghold in Abyan governorate,” UAE state media [reported](#). The operation ended a week later, with a local military commander [stating](#) that the area had been cleared of AQAP militants. This was the third counter-terrorism operation conducted by UAE-backed armed groups in a one-month period, following Operation Faisal in Hadhramout and Operation Decisive Sword in Shabwa, both of which were carried out in the latter half of February. On March 28, ten fighters belonging to the Hadhrami Elite Forces were killed in an attack in Mukalla city [suspected](#) to have been conducted by AQAP.

Fighting continues to rage in Nehm district of Sana’a governorate, around 48 km from Sana’a city. In a single 24-hour period at the beginning of March, clashes in Nehm left at least 55 dead and dozens injured, the Associated Press [reported](#). The media center of the Hadi-aligned military [claimed](#) that on March 5 the forces made significant progress in Nehm, capturing a strategic mountain range. In preceding days, coalition-aligned [media reported](#) gains in neighboring Arhab district of Sana’a, although this could not be confirmed.

The US launched at least seven airstrikes in Yemen throughout March. Six strikes were conducted in Hadramawt, which [according](#) to Reprieve and The Intercept killed at least seven civilians belonging to displaced families, including a 13-year-old. Another strike at the end of the month was in Al-Baydha, which the US [said](#) killed four AQAP militants, adding “no civilians were present and therefore none were injured or killed as a result of the strike.” As of March 13, “US forces have conducted twenty-two (22) strikes against AQAP and ISIS-Y terrorists in Yemen in 2018,” a US Central Command employee [told](#) the Long War Journal.

Recommended reading:

- Author Ali Azaki discusses the links between Yemen’s private sector and international humanitarian organizations, arguing in favor of [The Need to Improve Coordination in Humanitarian Crisis Response](#). The brief paper is part of the Rethinking Yemen’s Economy initiative being implemented by DeepRoot, the Sana’a Center for Strategic Studies, and the Center for Applied Research in Partnership with the Orient (CARPO).
- A Chatham House paper, [Yemen’s Southern Powder Keg](#), takes a closer look at the tension and competing ambitions of the Hadi government and separatist forces in southern Yemen.
- From Djibouti, IRIN profiles [The African migrants who defy Yemen’s war](#) and hears from many migrants on their efforts to reach Yemen, usually in an attempt to transit to Saudi Arabia for relatively higher paying work.
- Yemen experts discuss [Charting a response to state fragmentation](#) in a talk co-hosted by the European Council on Foreign Relations (ECFR), and the Sana’a Center for Strategic Studies.
- A ten-minute documentary by ABC News, [‘Forgotten War’ in Yemen has the country on the verge of man-made famine](#), highlights the humanitarian impact of the war.



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