



BRIEFING PAPER

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Yemen update autumn 2018

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Summary

In October 2018 [humanitarian agencies warned](#) that Yemen could by early 2019 tip into the biggest famine in a century with fully half the population, some 13 million people, at risk.

The conflict on the ground has increased in intensity recently, largely because of the campaign for the crucial port of al-Hodeidah, which is presently responsible for about [half of casualties](#). Houthi rebel forces have lost some territory in the north and pro-government forces are making some progress in Hodeidah. Nevertheless the conflict is often still described as a stalemate. There is a different and unpredictable battle going on in the south, involving separatists and al-Qaeda in the Arabian Peninsula as well as the Saudi-led Coalition and other pro- and anti-Government forces.

The UN [reported in September](#) that individuals on all sides of the conflict had committed acts that might constitute violations of international law.

The UN's Special Envoy tried to get talks going in Geneva in September but the Houthi representatives did not attend, saying that the pro-government side had prevented them from flying from Sanaa airport.

On 30 October US Defense Secretary Mattis called for a ceasefire and negotiations within 30 days. The US State Department [released a statement](#) shortly afterwards. The [UK supported](#) the call for de-escalation.

There is [considerable opposition](#) to the UK's policy of selling arms to members of the Saudi-led coalition in the context of Yemen. The Government argues that it would not license exports if there was a danger of serious violation of international law. The UK supports a political solution. UK humanitarian aid to Yemen amounts to £570 million since 2015, including £96 million to tackle malnutrition announced in October 2018.

Worst famine in a century?

On 23 October, the UN's Emergency Relief Coordinator, [Mark Lowcock](#), warned the UN Security Council of the danger of famine in Yemen:

...a clear and present danger of an imminent and great big famine engulfing Yemen: much bigger than anything any professional in this field has seen during their working lives.¹

Elsewhere, the UN said that the famine could be the biggest in 100 years, involving 13 million people.²

The [Famine Early Warning System Network](#), a facility sponsored by the US Agency for International Development, says that most of the Yemeni population is already in food Crisis and dependent on humanitarian aid. FEWS predicts that by January 2019 many of those

¹ ["A clear and present danger of an imminent and great big famine is engulfing Yemen" - UN Humanitarian Chief](#), UNOCHA press release, 23 October 2018

² ["Yemen could be 'worst famine in 100 years'"](#), *BBC News Online*, 15 October 2018

regions will have moved to Emergency status,³ with a clear risk of Famine if commercial imports are insufficient or areas get cut off from humanitarian aid by the conflict.

Currency

The Yemeni rial depreciated sharply in August and September 2018, causing wheat flour prices to increase by 20%, as well as fuel price rises.⁴

On the ground

On 9 August at least 29 children were killed and 30 wounded in a strike by the Saudi-led Coalition on a bus in Saada, in the Houthi-controlled north. The Coalition denied targeting the bus intentionally. The Houthi side continued to fire missiles into Saudi Arabia and have increasingly targeted Saudi and UAE economic interests including oil infrastructure.

In October 2018, Saudi-led Coalition airstrike on a market in Bayt Al-Faqih, south of Hodeidah, reportedly killed at least 20 civilians.⁵

The intensity of fighting has increased, particularly since the Coalition's campaign began in June to take control of the port city of al-Hodeidah, the crucial port for supplies to conflict-stricken areas. There was a pause in hostilities in July for the political process, although clashes continued in August and fighting resumed in September, after the failure of the Geneva meeting (see below). The Hodeidah campaign is being waged by Yemeni militia backed by UAE, which is reported to be controlling the campaign, and Saudi-led Coalition air support.

The Hodeidah campaign is currently responsible for about half of all the casualties in the war and has led to a massive increase in the rate of civilian deaths, which increased by 164% in the period June – September 2018.⁶

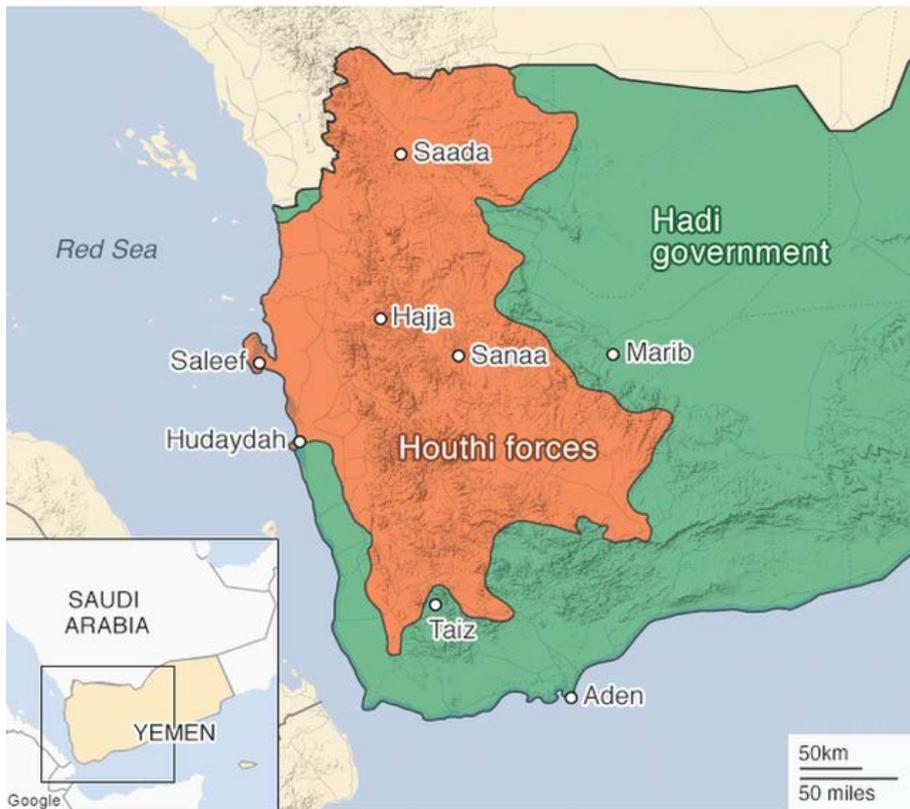
³ Crisis, Emergency and Famine are used in this context as steps in the [Integrated Phase Classification](#), agreed by the UN to define food insecurity situations

⁴ FEWS Net, [‘Staple food prices increase sharply following in further currency depreciation and increased conflict’](#), September 2018

⁵ [Regional Overview – Middle East](#), ACLED, 30 October 2018

⁶ [‘YEMEN: Civilian casualties soar in Hodeidah since devastating offensive that began in June’](#), Save the Children press release, 24 September 2018

Areas of control in Yemen



Source: IHS Conflict Monitor, 12 June 2018

BBC

Source: [BBC News Online, 13 June 2018](https://www.bbc.com/news/world-middle-east-45811111)

The situation on the ground is still widely described as a “stalemate”, although Government forces have made progress against Houthi forces in the Saada governorate in the north. The other main battleground is around the port of Hodeidah, where the Saudi-backed Coalition is battling Houthi militias in Hodeidah suburbs. The Saudi-led Coalition is reported to be making some progress in driving the Houthis back, taking control of some routes in and out of the city.

Aid and commercial imports are being hampered because of the conflict. Overland access to Hodeidah, is still limited by continuing fighting. Agencies are concerned that the port’s facilities may be damaged by fighting. The UN High Commission for Refugees warehouse in Hodeidah remains temporarily closed due to the security situation and a World Food Programme warehouse has been damaged.

Southern Yemen

Southern Yemen, separate from North Yemen until the creation of the modern state in 1990, is increasingly restive. Pro-independence militia there have been heartened by what they see as the backing of the UAE. The UAE denies that it wants to see southern Yemen break away, but has distanced itself from the Hadi government, unlike the Saudis. Secessionist militias have increasingly been fighting against militias supporting the internationally-recognised Hadi government. The UAE is largely in control of the southern capital of Aden and has worked to rebuild its infrastructure.

At the same time, al-Qaeda in the Arabian Peninsula retains a significant presence in the south, where the UAE and associated militias have worked with US special forces, to force AQAP out of the port of Mukallah, for example.⁷

If the south does try to break away, it would undermine the UN-led peace process, as it would be a whole new facet in the already complicated conflict.

Violations of International Humanitarian Law

In September 2018 the UN Human Rights Council discussed the [most recent Experts Group report](#) on the situation in Yemen. It found that individuals in the Government of Yemen, from Coalition members, including Saudi Arabia and the United Emirates, and from the Houthi *de facto* authorities had committed acts "that may have amounted to international crimes". The Experts Group named certain individuals who may have been responsible for violations.

On 28 September, the Council voted to extend the work of the Experts Group, overriding the objections of Saudi Arabia and allied countries.

UN Special Envoy and political consultations

The UN's envoy to Yemen is [Martin Griffiths](#), a Briton with extensive experience in conflict mediation; he replaced predecessor Ould Cheikh Ahmed in February 2018.

Griffiths invited the parties to Geneva in September for peace talks. After three days of waiting for the Houthi representatives to appear, the meeting was abandoned on 8 September. The Houthi news agency said that the pro-government side had prevented an Omani plane that was due to take them from leaving Sanaa airport.⁸

Martin Griffiths said, however, that the political process had at least begun and that useful conversations had been held with the Hadi government side.

The special envoy said on 29 October that he hoped to get the parties together for political consultations very soon and said that the economic situation is a particular concern.⁹

US calls for a ceasefire

Martin Griffiths briefed Trump Administration officials in Washington in October, warning of the gravity of the situation. On 30 October US Defense Secretary James Mattis said in a conversation at the US Institute

⁷ [Yemen: Civil War and Regional Intervention](#), Congressional Research Service, 24 August 2018

⁸ ['Yemen's Houthis say their delegation prevented from flying to Geneva peace talks'](#), *Xinhuanet*, 7 September 2018

⁹ ['Martin Griffiths to Al Arabiya: "A Political Solution is the sustainable response to the humanitarian situation in Yemen"'](#), Office of the Special Envoy of the Secretary-General for Yemen press release, 29 October 2018

of Peace that the combatants in Yemen should agree a ceasefire within 30 days. The minister said:

The longer-term solution, and by longer-term, I mean 30 days from now, we want to see everybody sitting around the table, based on a ceasefire, based on a pullback from the border, and then based on ceasing dropping of bombs, that will permit the special envoy — Martin Griffiths, who's very good, he knows what he's doing — to get them together in Sweden and end this war.¹⁰

Mike Pompeo, Secretary of State, [released a statement](#) shortly afterwards, saying that Houthi attacks on Saudi Arabia should stop first:

The time is now for the cessation of hostilities, including missile and UAV strikes from Houthi-controlled areas into the Kingdom of Saudi Arabia and the United Arab Emirates. Subsequently, Coalition air strikes must cease in all populated areas in Yemen.

He added that substantive consultations must begin in November, and that heavy weaponry would be placed under international supervision. On 31 October, Prime Minister Theresa May was asked in the House of Commons whether the UK would press for a new resolution at the UN Security Council to implement the US proposals.

The Prime Minister said:

We certainly back the US's call for de-escalation in Yemen. He references our role in the United Nations Security Council. In fact, in March we proposed and co-ordinated a UN Security Council presidential statement, which called on the parties to agree steps towards a ceasefire. That remains our position, but as the Minister for the Middle East, my right hon. Friend the Member for North East Bedfordshire (Alistair Burt), said in the House yesterday,

“a nationwide ceasefire will have an effect on the ground only if it is underpinned by a political deal between the conflict parties.” — [Official Report, 30 October 2018; Vol. 648, c. 775.]

My right hon. Friend the Foreign Secretary discussed that matter last night with Martin Griffiths, the UN special envoy. They agreed that the UK will continue to encourage all parties to agree to de-escalation and to a lasting political deal that will ensure that any ceasefire will hold in the long term.¹¹

Yemen and the UK

There has been growing disagreement about the UK's supply of weapons to the Saudi-led coalition. The Government argues that it will not license arms exports to Saudi Arabia if there is a clear risk that they might be used in a serious violation of international humanitarian law.¹²

When asked in October 2018 how many civilian deaths had involved UK-supplied arms, Middle East Minister Alistair Burt said that the UK does not have information on which weapons were used when:

¹⁰ US Institute of Peace, A Conversation with Secretary of Defense James N. Mattis, 30 October 2018

¹¹ [HC Deb 31 October 2018, c908](#)

¹² For more information about arms sales see the Commons Briefing Paper [UK arms exports to Saudi Arabia: Q&A](#), 25 October 2018

We assess all export licence applications on a case-by-case basis against the Consolidated EU and National Arms Export Licensing Criteria. The British Government does not have information on which weapons have been used for specific air strikes. The UK is not a member of the Saudi-Led Coalition and we do not have any role in setting Coalition policy, or executing air strikes in Yemen.

The UK will not issue an export licence to Saudi Arabia, or any other country, if we assess there is a clear risk the items might be used in the commission of a serious violation of International Humanitarian Law. We keep the situation in Yemen under constant review, and will suspend or revoke licences if the circumstances required.¹³

On ending the conflict, the UK's policy was set out in a Parliamentary Answer on 29 October:

The UK's view remains that there can be no military solution to the conflict and we fully support the UN Special Envoy for Yemen in facilitating a credible peace process. On 15 March, the UK proposed and coordinated a UN Security Council Presidential Statement which reiterated the Council's call on the parties to agree on the modalities for a durable cessation of hostilities.

We are extremely concerned at recent reports of the growing risk of famine to millions of Yemenis. The UK plays a leading role in combatting hunger in Yemen and on World Food Day (16 October) we announced a package of £96.5 million which will help UNICEF tackle malnutrition in Yemen over the coming three years.¹⁴

A PQ answer from 22 October said that the total UK humanitarian aid to Yemen amounted to over £570 million since 2015:

The UK has been at the forefront of the humanitarian response in Yemen, helping secure vital access for food, fuel and medicine to enter the country and consistently being one of the largest donors to the crisis.

On 3 April, the UK announced an additional £170 million in response to the humanitarian crisis in Yemen for this financial year (2018/2019). This funding will meet immediate food needs for 2.5 million Yemenis and will bring the total UK bilateral support to Yemen to over £570 million since 2015.

To date, donors have pledged a total of US\$ 2.01 billion towards the United Nations 2018 Humanitarian Response Plan in Yemen.

Scale of the crisis

UN agencies outline the scale of the human crisis:

- 22.2 million people in need (75% of the population)
- 2 million internally displaced people (IDPs)
- 89% of IDPs displaced for more than a year
- 665,000 IDPs have been assisted in 2018, of whom 104,000 were reached through the al-Hodeidah response
- 280,000 refugees and asylum seekers
- \$198.7 million requested in 2018

¹³ [HC Written question – 182722](#), 30 October 2018

¹⁴ [Written question - HL10736](#), 29 October 2018

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- \$131.5M received as of 23 October 2018¹⁵
- Up to 14 million people at risk of severe food insecurity
- 400,000 children are already suffering from severe acute malnutrition
- 1.8 to 2.8 million more children could become severely food insecure.¹⁶

Although many reports suggest that 10,000 people have been killed during the war, several experts think that it an underestimate, and that the true figure could be as high as 50,000.¹⁷ Accurate data on deaths are particularly hard to find in Yemen because of the chaotic situation.

Cholera

Cholera cases are surging because of the failure of water and sewage systems. 1.2 million were infected and 2,510 people died in the last outbreak in 2017.

Yemeni medical staff worry that this year's outbreak will spread even more quickly because of higher levels of malnutrition; 9.7 million need vaccination against cholera; 1.1 million have had it.¹⁸

Further reading

Commons Briefing Papers:

[UK arms exports to Saudi Arabia: Q&A](#), 25 October 2018

[Yemen at war](#), 28 April 2017

Committee reports:

[The Middle East: time for new realism](#). International Relations Select Committee (HL) second report, HL 159, 24 April 2017

[Committees on Arms Export Controls inquiry into the Use of UK-manufactured Arms in Yemen](#), November 2016

House of Commons International Development Committee [4th Report - Crisis in Yemen](#), HC 532, 4 May 2016. [Government Response](#), HC 557, 14 July 2016

¹⁵ [Yemen UNHCR Update](#), 13 - 26 October 2018

¹⁶ UN Office for the Coordination of Humanitarian Affairs, [Yemen Humanitarian Update Covering 7 October – 21 October 2018](#)

¹⁷ 'The deadly war in Yemen rages on. So why does the death toll stand still?', *Washington Post*, 2 August 2018

¹⁸ '[Cholera returns to Yemen, with powerful allies](#)', IRIN, 23 October 2018

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