



THE YEMEN TREND

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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

In February, anti-Houthi forces continued to make progress along the west coast, announcing the capture of Hays district of Hodeidah on February 5, and pushing northward to the outskirts of Zabid town. This places the forces, which include a mix of southern and Tehama resistance fighters, and Yemeni, Emirati, and Sudanese military units, less than 100km by road from the vital port city of Hodeidah. Hodeidah port remained open after a 30-day extension given by the coalition expired in mid-February, but in the absence of an official statement from the coalition, leading humanitarian organizations and food security monitors voiced confusion over whether it will remain open.

The Houthi Revolutionary Committee published a six-point initiative, originally submitted to the Security Council in January, proposing steps to end the conflict. At the same time, Houthi spokesman Mohammed Abdulsalam met with the Iranian foreign minister in Tehran and is expected to hold talks in Muscat with the incoming UN envoy. However, there is little indication any of the warring parties are prepared to make concessions, and in his final briefing to the Security Council on February 27, Envoy Ould Cheikh said the Houthis' refusal to make concessions is what led a previous agreement to fall through.

Meanwhile, the UN Panel of Experts on Yemen published evidence of Iranian-designed and manufactured weapons and missile components being used by the Houthis, finding "strong indicators" such weapons were transferred to Yemen after the embargo was imposed. The Panel said Iran is in "non-compliance" with UNSC Resolution 2216 (2015), prompting a loud response from the US and its allies in the Security Council. However, a proposed resolution to condemn Iran and permit targeted sanctions on "any activity related to the use of ballistic missiles in Yemen" was blocked by Russia. Throughout the month, two counter-terrorism operations, Faisal and Decisive Sword, were launched in Hadhramout and Shabwa governorates respectively, with the stated aim of clearing certain areas of AQAP militants.

Timeline

- Feb 05** UAE-led troops declare Hays district of Hodeidah liberated
- Feb 10** Houthi spokesman Mohammed Abdulsalam meets the Iranian foreign minister in Tehran
- Feb 11** Aden-based CBY gets new head, former finance minister Mohammed Zemam
- Feb 16** Operation Faisal launched in Hadhramout to clear Wadi Al-Masini of AQAP militants
- Feb 24** Islamic State claims responsibility for dual car bombing on security building in Aden
- Feb 26** Elite Forces launch Operation Decisive Sword in Shabwa's Al-Saeed district
- Feb 26** Russia vetoes Security Council resolution condemning Iran for weapons transfers
- Feb 27** Ismail Ould Cheikh Ahmed gives final briefing to the Security Council as Special Envoy

Humanitarian and Economic Trends

The status of Hodeidah port continues to remain uncertain. After experiencing a full-blockade in early November 2017, the port was re-opened to commercial shipments in mid-December for a 30-day period. Amid confusion over whether the port would remain open as the deadline approached, a 30-day extension was given by the coalition beginning January 19. On February 27, a US State Department spokesperson said at a [press briefing](#) that Hodeidah port “now remains open,” adding “We urge commercial shippers to continue to use Hodeidah Port and US government-funded cranes to transport vital supplies into the country.”

However, while commercial shipments continue to be processed at Hodeidah port, there does not appear to have been any official decision by the coalition. The latest 30-day extension expired on February 19 “without any statement from the Coalition indicating whether the ports would remain open,” the Norwegian Refugee Council [said](#), leaving the longer-term status of the ports unclear. FEWS Net likewise spoke of the uncertainty surrounding imports to Hodeidah, [saying](#) their closure would make famine likely in areas heavily reliant on imports from the governorate. Even with the status quo, the organization believes “food security for some populations may deteriorate to Catastrophe (IPC Phase 5) as they begin to face an extreme lack of food and other basic needs.”

Former minister of finance Mohammed Zemam was appointed CBY head on February 11, in Hadi’s first presidential [decree](#) of the year. On January 31, Saudi Arabia hosted in Riyadh a meeting of what it termed the “Economic Quartet,” bringing together representatives from Saudi Arabia, the UAE, US, and UK. The meeting was headed by Saudi Ambassador to Yemen Mohammed Bin Saeed Al-Jaber, who visited Yemeni officials in Aden weeks prior. Representatives of the Yemen CBY, multiple Saudi and UAE financial institutions, USAID, the IMF, and World Bank were all present, [according](#) to the state-run Saudi Press Agency. The director of the coalition’s Yemen Comprehensive Humanitarian Operations (YCHO) [told](#) Asharq Al-Awsat that through training and technical assistance, Saudi Arabia is leading the support operations for the CBY within the framework of the YCHO.

The coalition provided further details on its

humanitarian response plan. On February 12, Saudi Arabia and the UAE agreed with the UN on the specifics of the pledges they made as part of the coalition’s Yemen Comprehensive Humanitarian Operations (YCHO) plan, announced in January. [According](#) to the UN Humanitarian Affairs and Emergency Relief Coordinator, Mark Lowcock, by March 31 Saudi Arabia and the UAE will transfer \$930 million to the 2018 UN’s Yemen Humanitarian Response Plan (YHRP), and \$70 million to support the rehabilitation of infrastructure, amounting to around a third of the \$2.96 billion required for the YHRP. The two Gulf states have also committed to raising \$500 million more from regional donors, although the timeline for transferring those funds is not mentioned.

By the end of February, only 3.2 percent of the total [\\$2.96 billion](#) required funds had been transferred. Arguing the coalition’s plan is anything but “comprehensive,” the International Rescue Committee (IRC) [said](#) “the YCHO politicizes aid by attempting to consolidate control over access and transit points,” adding that “creating a parallel process [to the YHRP] undermines current humanitarian efforts.” Marking one month since the launch of its plan, the coalition released an [overview](#) of completed aid deliveries.

The coming rainy season is likely to cause another cholera spike, according to the WHO’s deputy director general for emergency preparedness and response, Peter Salama. “Usually cholera cases increase corresponding to those rainy seasons. So we expect one surge in April, and another potential surge in August,” he [told](#) Reuters. In addition to cholera, a number of other diseases are at risk of spreading, including diphtheria and potentially [bird flu](#). In part, efforts to prevent the spread of diseases have been complicated by a lack of fuel, which is vital for water and sewage systems. In the latter half of February, the Norwegian Refugee Council [said](#) that based on data from the UN Verification and Inspection Mechanism (UNVIM), it estimates “fuel imports have constituted only 32 percent of the estimated amount required this year so far.”

Political Developments

The Houthis announced an initiative to end the conflict, although there is little indication their six-step plan is being considered by the Hadi government or foreign brokers. The Higher Revolutionary Committee, a Houthi body led by former de-facto president Mohammed Ali Al-Houthi, issued a [statement](#) on February 20 to the secretary general of the UN and the Security Council member states, titled “An initiative to end tragedies caused by the aggression on Yemen.” Alongside this, the Houthis made public for the first time a letter dated January 7, 2018, that they gave to Deputy Envoy Muin Shreim on his visit to Sana’a. The Houthis list six points:

1. Establishing a reconciliation committee;
2. Using elections as a mechanism to select a parliament spokesperson and members to represent the people and the country’s political powers;
3. Establishing international guarantees to start reconstruction and compensation;
4. Preventing any aggression on Yemen by foreign countries;
5. Declaring amnesty and releasing prisoners from all parties;
6. Putting any contested issues to referendum.

The Houthis furthermore call on the Security Council “to adapt and support our initiative that includes an inclusive solution from our perspective, then we can draft an implementation mechanism for this initiative, or maybe you would do it.” The statements are unique in that they were issued by the Houthis’ Higher Revolutionary Committee, not the de-facto government which includes the GPC, nor the Houthis’ official delegation to the peace process, led by Mohammed Abdulsalam.

Houthi spokesman Mohammed Abdulsalam met the Iranian foreign minister on February 10. Abdulsalam, who also serves as the Houthis’ delegation head, travelled to Tehran to [meet](#) Foreign Minister Javad Zarif, who reaffirmed Iran has a four-point plan to resolve the crisis. “From the first day of the crisis in Yemen, Iran announced that it has a four-step solution: An immediate ceasefire, humanitarian aid, intra-Yemeni talks and an inclusive government,” Zarif [said](#) during a televised interview the week prior. Later in February, Iran’s ambassador to the UN [voiced](#) readiness to work with the incoming envoy.

Background on the peace process

In January, the office of the UN Special Envoy sought to put the peace process back on track following the December 4 death of Ali Abdullah Saleh. The Houthis further stabilized their political partnership with Saleh’s party, the GPC, which confirmed Sadeq Abu Ras as its new president on January 7. Deputy UN Envoy Muin Shreim visited Sana’a from January 6 to 10 and held meetings with the Houthi leadership and officials from the GPC-Sana’a. While details on the direction of the UN-mediated peace process remain scant, the deputy envoy reported positive cooperation from the de-facto authorities in Sana’a, and Houthi delegation head Mohammed Abdulsalam travelled to Muscat on January 25 for talks with UN officials. Throughout January and February, discussions related to the peace process appeared geared at preparing the warring parties for a renewed push when the incoming envoy, Martin Griffiths, takes office. Outgoing envoy Ismail Ould Cheikh [confirmed](#) to Omani media that Griffiths will be holding talks with the Houthis and GPC-Sana’a in Muscat.

The above marked a positive trend following the escalation in November and December, although it remains unclear whether the warring parties have become any more receptive to making concessions. Ould Cheikh has long proposed a mutually agreed upon military committee be formed to manage Hodeidah port, and in parallel a financial committee to develop a mechanism to have state funds collected from all parts of Yemen and disbursed to public servants on both sides. In January, the coalition spokesman renewed his call for the UN to manage Hodeidah port, while the Supreme Political Council president said partial plans, like those regarding Hodeidah, were “wasting time.”

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

Southern Transitional Council (STC) officials met with the UN envoy. Following the clashes in Aden in late January between the Hadi government and a collection of separatists and security forces supported by the UAE, several members of the STC, including leader Aidarous Al-Zubaidi, travelled to Abu Dhabi. There, on February 14 they [met](#) Envoy Ould Cheikh and his deputy, Muin Shreim. Few details of the meeting were released, but the STC [said](#) “both sides agreed upon continuing the meetings [between the STC and UN envoy’s office] during the upcoming period.”

Relatedly, On February 17 the administrative body of the STC's National Assembly held its first meeting after the unrecognized southern parliamentary body was inaugurated in December 2017. The meeting was held in Aden and chaired by the president of the National Assembly, former Hadhramout governor Ahmed Saeed Bin Buraik. In a [statement](#) released following the meeting, the Assembly pinned the blame on Hadi's Presidential Protection Forces for the January clashes, and on the "corrupt government" for failing to distribute salaries.

The Houthis "were not prepared to make concessions," Ould Cheikh said in his [final briefing](#) to the UN Security Council on February 27. The outgoing envoy reflected on the peace talks in Biel in 2015 and Kuwait in 2016, saying that together with the warring parties a clear roadmap and timeline covering all the details was discussed. "Today, I would like to announce, for the first time, that we did reach an agreement on a peace proposal developed in consultation with the parties, but they refused to sign in the last moment," he said. "In the end of the consultations it became clear that the Houthis were not prepared to make concessions on the proposed security arrangements or even get into details about a comprehensive security plan." Ould Cheikh said this issue has prevented a negotiated peace deal from being achieved, but he positioned the discussions held between the warring parties and his current proposals as the continued basis for discussions.

Military and Security Developments

Hays district of Hodeidah was declared liberated on February 5. An [infographic](#) posted by military forces aligned to the Hadi government says the capture of the district is strategically important because it enables them to cut the Houthis' supply line to Taiz; it connects Taiz, Ibb, and Hodeidah governorates; and it paves the way for further expansion northward into the Hodeidah districts of Al-Garahi and Zabid. By mid-February the Hadi and coalition forces had begun pushing into Al-Garahi district. In an appeal for the armed actors to avoid damaging the town of Zabid, the Red Cross [said](#) "the frontline is only kilometers from Zabid." The

town is a UNESCO World Heritage site based in the district of the same name, which borders Al-Garahi to the north, and it is less than 100 km by road to Hodeidah city.

Indicative of the pace and scale of the fighting along the west coast, [according](#) to the UN Refugee Agency (UNHCR), from December 1, 2017 to early February around 61,000 people were displaced in Hodeidah and Taiz alone – amounting to 71 percent of all internally displaced persons (IDPs) during this period. Major clashes causing this ongoing displacement are taking place in the Hodeidah districts of Al-Khawkhah, Al-Garrahi, and Al-Hays, and the Taiz districts of Mocha and Mawza.

Tariq Saleh met the Hadi-appointed governor of Hodeidah, as the nephew of the late president reportedly sought to lead the west coast front. Amidst the rapid advancement in Al-Garahi district, Colonel Nasser Al-Redhami, the spokesman of the operation along the west coast, [said](#) he was expecting more anti-Houthi forces to be added to the front because Tariq is opening a new front in Hodeidah. However, his involvement in the fighting remains unclear. In Mocha town on February 16, Tareq met the Hadi-appointed governor of Hodeidah, Hassan Taher, as well as a number of military and resistance forces involved in the operation. Yemeni media [reported](#) that Tariq sought the resistance leaders' support for him to take command, but was denied because of their loyalty to the Hadi government.

Although not necessarily related, the following day on February 17 Hadi issued a presidential [decree](#), appointing Yahya Hussein Salah as commander of the Fifth Military Region, which is formally charged with overseeing the Yemeni military in Hodeidah and Hajjah governorates. In the same decree, Hadi appointed Hashim Abdullah Al-Ahmar commander of the Sixth Military Region, which oversees Sa'ada, Al-Jawf, and Amran. Local commentators have [suggested](#) the appointments are an effort by Hadi to prevent Saleh's relatives from empowering themselves in the late president's wake, and more broadly to prevent the UAE from increasing their influence through such figures.

There is substantial evidence weapons manufactured in Iran have been transferred to the Houthis during the war, the UN Panel of Experts has found in its [2017 report](#). Perhaps the

most important sentence in the 329-page report is as follows:

“As the Islamic Republic of Iran has not provided any information to the Panel of any change of custody of the components for the building of extended-range short-range ballistic missiles, the country is in non-compliance with paragraph 14 of resolution 2216 (2015) in that it failed to take the necessary measures to prevent the direct or indirect supply, sale or transfer of such technology to the Houthi-Saleh forces, an entity acting at the direction of listed individuals.”

The Panel did not find evidence of direct coordination between the Iranian government and the Houthis, and did not determine the supplier(s) of such weapons. Instead, the Panel determined that Iran could reasonably be expected to have prevented some of the components of ballistic missiles, aerial drones, naval mines, and other equipment manufactured in Iran from reaching the group. Moreover, the Panel said it found “strong indicators” many of these weapons transfers, including those used to advance the Houthi/Saleh alliance’s ballistic missile program, happened after the arms embargo was established in April 2015.

The panel confirmed that four ballistic missiles fired into Saudi Arabia travelled over 900 km. Assessing the known pre-war stockpile, they said it is not possible the Houthi/Saleh alliance could have extended the range of the missiles (with a maximum of 600km) to such an extent, and that a modified version of an Iranian-designed and manufactured missile was used. Based on the remnants examined by the Panel, they found “the technology was almost certainly transferred” to the Houthis in components, which missile engineers loyal to the Houthi/Saleh alliance would have assembled prior to usage. “It is highly probable that the route used to supply the Borkan-2H components was the main land supply route into Houthi-Saleh-held territory following a ship-to-shore transfer to the ports in the area of Nishtun and Ghaydah in Mahrah governorate,” the Panel said, although in a change of course adding that it is possible – though unlikely – missile components were shipped in through a Red Sea port in shipping containers or bulk cargo.

Russia vetoed a Security Council resolution to condemn Iran, as the US and other western states sought to take action against the country following the release of the Panel of Experts’ findings. “This report highlights what we’ve been saying

for months: Iran has been illegally transferring weapons in violation of multiple Security Council resolutions... It’s time for the Security Council to act,” [said](#) Nikki Haley, US ambassador to the UN. On February 16 Britain submitted a draft resolution, with American and French backing, that would permit the Security Council to impose [targeted sanctions](#) for “any activity related to the use of ballistic missiles in Yemen,” and “condemns” Iran. The vote took place on February 26, and as a permanent Security Council member Russia [blocked](#) the resolution. The Council instead passed a Russia-drafted resolution which excluded the Iranian issue but likewise extended the mandate of the panel of experts and the embargo on weapons transfers to the Houthis and their allies. In the lead up to the vote, Russian Ambassador Vasily Nebenzya [said](#) the Council should concentrate on extending the Panel’s mandate first, arguing that is what the resolution is about, and after the vote [said](#) his government vetoed “because we did not reach consensus on some individual wording.”

The ceasefire held in Aden, but the city remains plagued by insecurity. Following the arrival of a “high-ranking military delegation” from Saudi Arabia and the UAE to Aden, the coalition [announced](#) on February 1 that the situation was stable and both leading coalition partners were on the same page. The same day, the Yemeni ministry of foreign affairs released a [statement](#) again labelling the events “a failed coup” and claiming “the rebelling militias” had earlier violated a deal brokered by Saudi Arabia. In early February, STC president Aidarous Al-Zubaidi travelled to the UAE, along with many STC members and figures within the UAE-sponsored Security Belt Forces, and no clashes occurred between Hadi and UAE-aligned forces in February.

However, the city continued to suffer from insecurity. A senior Criminal Investigation Department officer was [gunned down](#) at the beginning of February, and Shawki Kamadi, a local Islah Party leader and preacher, was [assassinated](#) mid-month. Both attacks went unclaimed. Then, on February 24 the Islamic State claimed responsibility for a dual car bomb attack on a counter-terrorism camp in Tawahi district of the city, [reportedly](#) killing at least 14 and injuring 40 others.

Counter-terrorism efforts in Hadhramout and Shabwa were expanded in February, with UAE-sponsored local paramilitaries and Yemeni security

forces reportedly capturing territory from longtime AQAP strongholds. In Hadhramout, Governor Faraj Al-Bahsani, who also serves as commander of Second Military Region and the UAE-sponsored Hadhrami Elite Forces, [said](#) that beginning on February 16 his forces launched an operation, dubbed “Faisal,” against remaining pockets of AQAP. Emirati state media [said](#) the operation sought to liberate the entire area of Wadi Al-Masini, west of the governorate capital Mukalla, and said ground troops were being backed by “massive carpet-bombing.”

In neighboring Shabwa, UAE-sponsored Elite Forces launched Operation Decisive Sword on February 26. The local forces are backed by the military of the UAE, and Emirati state media [said](#) the operation is aimed at purging AQAP from Al-Saeed, the native district of Anwar Al-Awlaki, the Yemeni-American assassinated by US drone. The commander of the Shabwa Elite Forces, Mohammed Al-Qumaishi, was [reported](#) as saying “We have received orders from the commander of the Second Military Region [Al-Bahsani] in Hadhramout to start the offensive today to cut off AQAP’s major conduit through Al-Sayed mountains,” in an attempt to foil attempts by AQAP to regroup or re-locate after Operation Faisal. Pro-UAE media [reported](#) the same claim – that the local forces had “seized full control” of the district from AQAP – earlier in January.

Pakistan is to deploy around 1,000 more troops to Saudi Arabia. [According](#) to the Pakistani defense minister, around 1,000 troops are to be deployed to Saudi Arabia on a training and advisory mission. Already around 1,600 Pakistani troops are stationed in Saudi Arabia under a 1982 agreement between the two countries to protect the territorial integrity of the Kingdom. The development has been controversial in Pakistan, as the Parliament voted in 2015 to remain uninvolved in the Yemeni war, and [some](#) civilian officials view the new deployment as a decision taken by the military leadership which could draw Pakistan into the Saudi-Iran rivalry. “The areas bordering Yemen are mountainous, and as Pakistan’s army is highly trained in mountain warfare, we will train and advise them,” Defense Minister Khurram Khan [said](#). Given the frequency of cross-border attacks by the Houthis, however, some fear Pakistani troops may engage in hostilities.

Recommended reading:

- As part of the “Rethinking Yemen’s Economy” initiative, DeepRoot, the Sana’a Center for Strategic Studies (SCSS), and the Center for Applied Research in Partnership with the Orient (CARPO) released a policy brief about [Restoring Central Bank Capacity and Stabilizing the Rial](#). The brief is based on discussions held in Amman, Jordan from January 14 to 16, with over 20 of the leading socioeconomic experts on Yemen, including newly appointed CBY head Mohammed Zenam.
- Tackling the complex and often over-simplified dynamics between AQAP and Yemeni tribes, tribal specialist Nadwa Al-Dawsari writes on the history and current status of relations between extremists and tribesmen, in a report for the Project on Middle East Democracy titled [Foe Not Friend](#).
- In an interview podcast with Jamie McGoldrick, the UN News Center hears why the humanitarian coordinator for Yemen has stepped down and discusses the role he has played in [Giving voice to Yemen’s voiceless](#).
- [Yemen’s Cratered Economy: Glimmers of Hope?](#) A report by the Arab Gulf States Institute in Washington (AGSIW), based on a roundtable discussion on Yemen’s economy that took place in late 2017.

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