



# THE YEMEN TREND

**APRIL  
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

Several developments that took place in April could have further reaching implications on UN-sponsored negotiations, which Envoy Martin Griffiths plans to present “a framework for” by mid-June, he told the Security Council during his first briefing on April 17. Most of these developments were concentrated in Hodeidah and the two neighboring west coast governorates of Taiz and Hajjah. In western Taiz, Tareq Saleh, the nephew of the former president, began leading a front. He is commanding a group that his supporters and the coalition are referring to as the Yemeni National Resistance Forces, which are funded and overseen by the UAE and do not fall under the authority of President Hadi. In Hajjah, with the backing of Sudanese and Saudi troops the Hadi military raised the Yemeni flag in Midi town on April 11. Shortly before this, Sudanese troops in Midi district took a major hit on April 6, when “dozens” were killed in a surprise attack by the Houthis.

The ultimate goal of these Hadi and coalition-aligned forces in both Taiz and Hajjah is to recapture the port city of Hodeidah. It was there that Supreme Political Council head Saleh Al-Sammad was killed in an airstrike on April 19 and replaced by Mehdi Mohammed Hussein Al-Mashat, who was sworn in by the Sana’a-based portion of the Parliament later in the month. The targeted killing came shortly after Al-Sammad vowed to launch daily attacks across Yemen’s northern border. The Houthis maintained their high rate of attacks against Saudi Arabia throughout April, including with an April 3 attack on a Saudi oil tanker off of Hodeidah in international waters. The attack resulted in only minor damage, but, in combination with other unsuccessful ballistic missile and drone attacks on Saudi Aramco facilities, added to the growing concern in the oil market that sooner or later the Houthis may successfully target Saudi oil infrastructure.

Likely as a result of the above activity in Taiz and Hajjah, in his Security Council briefing Griffiths voiced concern that “the prospect of intensive military operations in Hodeidah, long heralded, may soon be forthcoming.” However, at a US Senate Foreign Relations Committee hearing on Yemen that same day, the acting assistant secretary of state for near eastern affairs said the US has “made clear that the port is to remain fully operational.” In these three coastal governorates, several mass-casualty coalition air attacks on civilian targets were reported, including on a wedding in Hajjah, IDPs in a residential neighborhood in Hodeidah, and a commuter bus in Taiz. Meanwhile, it was announced at the April 3 High-Level Pledging Event for the Humanitarian Crisis in Yemen that over \$2 billion has been pledged for the \$2.96 billion 2018 Humanitarian Response Plan, although only 45 percent of the plan has been funded as of April 30.

# Timeline

- Apr 02** Airstrikes in a residential housing area in Hodeidah kill at least 14 displaced people
- Apr 03** High-Level Pledging Event for the Humanitarian Crisis in Yemen held in Geneva
- Apr 03** Saudi oil tanker suffers minor damage in Houthi attack in international shipping lane off Hodeidah
- Apr 06** Dozens of Sudanese fighters killed in a surprise attack in Hajjah governorate
- Apr 11** Pro-Hadi forces announce recapture of Midi port town in Hajjah
- Apr 17** Martin Griffiths briefs Security Council, plans to present peace talk framework within two months
- Apr 19** Supreme Political Council head Saleh Al-Sammad killed in airstrike in Hodeidah (exact date unconfirmed)
- Apr 19** Tareq Saleh begins leading UAE-backed “Yemeni National Resistance Forces” in Taiz
- Apr 21** At least 20 civilians killed when commuter bus hit by airstrike in Taiz
- Apr 22** Air attack on a wedding in Hajjah kills at least 20, injures 45
- Apr 25** Mehdi Al-Mashat sworn in as president of the Supreme Political Council

# Humanitarian and Economic Trends

## **UNVIM's inspection capacity was increased, as imports via Hodeidah remain insufficient.**

In early April, Saudi Ambassador Mohammed Al-Jabir [spoke](#) to reporters in Geneva about the UN Verification and Inspection (UNVIM). "We met with the UNVIM director and his team in Riyadh and we agreed on improved and enhanced capability," he said in early April. The ambassador said UNVIM would increase the number of inspectors from four to ten, and its monitors from six to 16, in addition to improving the technology used to inspect ships. The UN Humanitarian Coordinator's office confirmed this to Reuters. Dr. Nevio Zagaria, the World Health Organization's country representative in Yemen, said "bureaucratic impediments" still slow the flow of aid that his organization had at the time a backlog of thousands of pallets waiting to be transported.

Data from UNOCHA for the full month of March [shows](#) that fuel imports have surpassed the average prior to the November 2017 port closure, but remain less than a third of the national requirement. Food imports are still far below the average for that period, and in March amounted to 65 percent of the national requirement. Part of the reason food imports have not recovered fully is that no containerized cargo had been imported through Hodeidah since the blockade was put in place in November. "In March 2018, commercial imports via UNVIM recovered slightly since the November and December blockade. No containerized cargo was imported for the fourth consecutive month," UNOCHA wrote. In the first half of April, no food at all was imported via Hodeidah or Saleef ports, as over a quarter million tonnes was awaiting coalition permission to enter the anchorage area. Though food was offloaded in the latter half of the month, at least as of April 24 no [containerized cargo](#) had been recorded.

**Over \$2 billion has been pledged for the 2018 Humanitarian Response Plan**, but it remains less than half funded. On April 3 in Geneva, the annual "High-Level Pledging Event for the Humanitarian Crisis in Yemen" was held. By the end of the event, [\\$2.01 billion](#) had been pledged by 40 different pledgers. However, as of April 30 the \$2.96 billion plan was about 45 percent funded (in contrast to 68 percent pledged), [according](#) to the Financial

Tracking Service, with most of the provided funds having been given by Saudi Arabia and the UAE the month prior for their previously pledged \$930 million donation.

## **Saudi Arabia claimed vessels are being 'held hostage' near Hodeidah by the Houthis.**

The Saudi embassy in Washington released a [statement](#) alleging the Houthis "are holding hostage 19 ships, carrying over 200 thousand tons of petroleum byproducts in the anchoring zone outside of the port of Hodeidah, which is under the militia's control." The statement says all of the vessels have been given permits from the coalition to dock in Hodeidah, and some of them have been detained for nearly a month but are being prevented from approaching the port despite it being free of other ships. "There is a strong fear that the Iranian backed Houthi militias intend to destroy these ships, which would create an environmental disaster in the Red Sea in addition to depriving the Yemeni people of intended aid." In response, the Yemen Red Sea Ports Corporation, based in Hodeidah and under Houthi/GPC-Sana'a authority, released a [statement](#) saying that it is abiding by international maritime laws and the UN and coalition inspection mechanisms, and that it is the coalition which is impeding the flow of vessels into the port.

Public Radio International (PRI) [investigated](#) the issue and found no evidence to back the Saudi government's claim. A spokesperson for a Greek company with several ships among those waiting to dock said no issue has been reported by its vessels and "there is congestion at port, but waiting time is normal for Hodeidah." Furthermore, a maritime transparency project, TankerTrackers, located all the ships via satellite and said the vessels are not being physically blocked or surrounded, and there are vessels which are moving into port and leaving. A spokesman for Save the Children acknowledged the story in Saudi newspapers, saying "Save the Children has not had any of our aid supplies blocked entry via Hodeidah recently and as far as we are aware, neither have other INGOs."

**Coalition airstrikes killed at least 14 internally displaced persons (IDPs) in Hodeidah.** The April 2 attack, on a house on the outskirts of Hodeidah city where IDPs were settled, killed at least 14 and

injured nine others, the [New York Times](#) and [Xinhua](#) reported. The building was inside a residential housing area where many people have been displaced from the recent fighting along the coast. Though not stating the total death toll, UNICEF [said](#) the UN “has verified the killing of several children” in what the UN agency called “one of the deadliest attacks on children since the conflict in Yemen escalated in March 2015.”

**Airstrikes on a wedding in Hajjah left at least 20 people dead and 45 injured.** The coalition attack, which took place in the governorate’s Bani Qais district on April 22, was the third major air attack on civilians in a two-day period. The Associated Press [reported](#) that on the same day, an airstrike killed a family of five in Hajjah, according to the top health official in the governorate. On April 20, all 21 civilians, including five children, travelling in a bus in Mawza district of Taiz were killed by an airstrike, [according](#) to the UN human rights office. The UN Secretary-General [condemned](#) the airstrikes on the wedding in Hajjah and bus in Taiz, saying “at least 50 civilians” were killed between the two attacks. Following the spate of high-casualty airstrikes, international NGOs working in Yemen released a [joint statement](#) of condemnation, which lists additional attacks in April that did not receive international media coverage, including a strike on a petrol station that killed at least 18 people, and a strike on a house in Ibb that killed at least 15.

**Evidence of rape and torture in detention centers by officials nationwide** has come to light in a Human Rights Watch report, [Yemen: Detained African Migrants Tortured, Raped](#). The report details a slew of abuses at a detention center in Aden’s Buraiqah district, including executions, child rape, theft of money and documents, and forced deportation in unsafe conditions. “Inhumane” conditions were reported in other facilities, including a Houthi-controlled facility in Hodeidah. Colonel Khaled Al-Alwani, who served as the commander of the detention center in Buraiqah, a position within the Ministry of Interior, was implicated in the abuses and the Yemeni government fired him in March.

In a [letter](#) to Human Rights Watch, the Hadi-aligned Minister of Interior explicitly states that Al-Alwani and the center itself received no support from his ministry, and that the migrants and displaced people in the center were put there by the Security Belt Forces, which are also outside the ministry’s control. Days after the HRW report was published, Interior Minister Al-Maisari [ordered](#) the “immediate

arrest” of Al-Alwani. A wealth of other articles on the abuses facing migrants in Yemen were published in April, making claims independent of the HRW report. See: The [UN Refugee Agency](#) (UNHCR); [Middle East Eye](#); and [VICE](#).

## Political Developments

**The UN envoy plans to present “a framework for negotiations” within two months,** he told the Security Council at his first [briefing](#) on April 17. In the first half of April Martin Griffiths travelled to Oman, The UAE, and Saudi Arabia. In Muscat he [met](#) senior officials from the Houthis and GPC party, including Houthi delegation head Mohammed Abdulsalam and GPC Assistant Secretary General Dr. Abu Bakr Al-Qirbi, who led the Sana’a-based GPC delegation in previous rounds of talks. Then, in Abu Dhabi he [met](#) with the leadership of the Southern Transitional Council (STC).

**Supreme Political Council head Saleh Al-Sammad was killed,** replaced by Mehdi Mohammed Hussein Al-Mashat. The Houthis [announced](#) his death on April 23, saying he was killed on April 19 in an airstrike in Hodeidah, and in the same statement saying the Supreme Political Council leadership selected Al-Mashat, the former director of Abdulmalik Al-Houthi’s office, as president of the council. Al-Mashat was [sworn in](#) by the Sana’a-based portion of the national Parliament on April 25. The lack of power struggle over the replacement of Al-Sammad demonstrated the Houthis’ relatively firm internal grip on power. The presidency of the Supreme Political Council, according to its founding document, is supposed to alternate between a Houthi and GPC president. Al-Sammad’s term was extended repeatedly, and Al-Mashat is a longtime Houthi. While the governing agreement still technically exists, this provides further indication the GPC-Sana’a has little influence.

The circumstances of Al-Sammad’s death remain unclear. On April 24, Saudi Ambassador to the US Khaled Bin Salman [stated](#) that he was killed by the Saudi air force, the first such public acknowledgement by the coalition. Only ten days before his death, Al-Sammad [called](#) 2018 ‘the year of ballistic missile excellence’ and vowed to fire missiles into Saudi Arabia every day. In a detailed examination of the strike, Foreign Policy [found](#) that the airstrike that killed Al-Sammad may have

instead occurred on April 22, and that the UAE led the operation. "Though the Saudis have claimed credit for the strike, the intelligence for the attack was routed through Tareq Saleh's staff to the UAE, which also carried out the operation," FP wrote, saying Al-Sammad was killed by a Chinese-made drone in a strike conducted via an operations room in the UAE.

**Talk of an offensive to retake Hodeidah port has again increased, but the US has raised clear objection.** At his first briefing to the Security Council on April 17, UN Envoy Martin Griffiths [warned](#) of "unconfirmed reports that movements of forces in Yemen are on the increase and that the prospect of intensive military operations in Hodeidah, long heralded, may soon be forthcoming." That same day, at an April 17 Senate Foreign Relations Committee hearing on [US Policy Toward Yemen](#), David Satterfield, acting assistant secretary of state for near eastern affairs, was questioned by two senators about the US stance toward such an operation. "We have made clear that the port is to remain fully operational," Satterfield stated (min. 47:30), adding the US has been clear on its view that an attempt to seize the port would not accelerate prospects for a political solution. Though he declined to answer whether continued US support for the coalition is conditional on the port remaining open, Satterfield said (min. 103) that in late 2017 "we told the Saudis explicitly that if there was not an immediate and sustained lifting of any constraints on Hodeidah and Saleef ports... that it would be exceedingly difficult to maintain the type of support for the coalition that had existed, and that view has not changed.

"The Houthis routinely predate aid deliveries coming through land crossing as well as through the ports of Hodeidah and Saleef. By predation I mean a variety of measures: skimming, removing, looting aid from convoys; taking taxes repeatedly from the drivers and personnel of the convoys; the Houthis profit mightily from all commercial as well as humanitarian goods from any sources. The Houthis in addition control the telecommunications networks of Yemen, from which they also extract revenues. They are a predatory body, but they are also part of the political situation and must be part of the political solution."

*David Satterfield, acting assistance secretary of state for near eastern affairs, at a Senate Foreign Relations Committee hearing on April 17*

## A closer look: US Opposition to a Hodeidah Offensive

The envoy's statement about the increased possibility of an assault on Hodeidah port comes amid a surge of military activity on the coast and echoes the words of his predecessor, Ould Cheikh, who [told](#) the Security Council in March 2017 that the offensive is "very likely to happen." Little over a year later, while Hadi and coalition-aligned forces on the ground in Yemen remain steadfast in their stated determination to retake the port, the Trump administration's position has shifted considerably. When President Trump took office in January 2017 his administration, eager to more aggressively counter perceived Iranian expansionism and improve the relationship with Gulf countries that deteriorated toward the end of Obama's term, was seen as more open to supporting an operation to retake Hodeidah.

In March 2017, the same month the offensive was said to be imminent, the Washington Post [reported](#) that Defense Secretary Jim Mattis had asked the Trump administration to remove restrictions on military support to Saudi Arabia and the UAE. The move came after the UAE requested support in the offensive to retake Hodeidah port, and Mattis sought to allow the US military to support the UAE against the Houthi/Saleh alliance "with surveillance, refueling, and operational planning and assistance without asking for case-by-case White House approval." According to the Post, a previous proposal by the UAE for help capturing Hodeidah was rejected by Obama on the grounds that the operation "was unlikely to succeed in dislodging the entrenched, well-armed rebels and could worsen the humanitarian situation."

Also that month, on March 9 former US Ambassador to Yemen Gerald Feierstein gave his [testimony](#) to the Senate Foreign Relations Committee. As a goal for 2017, he recommended "the US should back Government/Coalition efforts to capture the [Hodeidah] port in exchange for firm guarantees that the Coalition will repair the damaged port facilities urgently and provide unfettered access to the port for international humanitarian organizations."

The full blockade of Hodeidah on November 6, 2017 likely hardened the Trump administration's stance against an assault on the port. Military progress on the ground toward Hodeidah from the north and south had stagnated, and US participation in the war was receiving increasingly negative publicity in Congress and local media. The coalition's blockade therefore brought all of the negative humanitarian backlash an operation would have, without providing any of the

benefit. “When the Saudis closed the border after the November 4th missile attack, we were not in favor of that,” a senior State Department official [said](#) the following month. They are exercising “a great deal of US muscle” to keep the ports open, he said.

In the lead-up to USAID-funded cranes being delivered to Hodeidah port on January 15, 2018, pressure on the Saudis had been mounting in Washington. The Whitehouse released a [statement](#) on December 8 calling “on the Saudi-led coalition to facilitate the free flow of humanitarian aid and critical commercial goods, including fuel, through all Yemeni ports,” and the day after that statement Reuters [quoted](#) a senior US official as saying “we wanted to be very clear with Saudi officials that the political environment here [in Congress] could constrain us if steps aren’t taken to ease humanitarian conditions in Yemen.”

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

## Military and Security Developments

**Tareq Saleh began leading a front on the West coast of Taiz**, commanding a group his supporters and the coalition is referring to as the “Yemeni National Resistance Forces.” Emirati media [announced](#) the launching of this campaign on April 19, which has the nephew of former president Saleh battling the Houthis in eastern parts of the coastal Mokha district, and published [footage](#) of Tareq in a command room. This front, which is taking place within the larger west coast operation overseen by the UAE military, is said to include the participation of southern and Tihama (Hodeidah) resistance fighters. The port and coast of Mokha district is already under the control of UAE-aligned forces, but Tareq’s fighters are seeking to retake the inland portion of the district before pushing north toward the port city of Hodeidah.

Since the beginning of 2018, Republican Guard and Special Forces that defected from the Houthi/GPC-Sana’a alliance reconvened in military camps in Aden, where they were armed and transported by the coalition by boat to Mokha port, [according](#) to an aide to former president Saleh. Tareq’s forces are not under the jurisdiction of the Yemeni government or

military, and prior to the new front [protests](#) were held in Taiz city over the build-up of fighters under Tareq, who they accuse of having killed civilians in Taiz both during the current war and during the 2011 uprising.

**Hadi-aligned forces raised the Yemeni flag in the middle of Midi town on April 11**, claiming the [capture](#) of the west coast port after years of heavy clashes. The commander of the 5th Military Region and the governor of Hajjah raised the flag, accompanied by officials from the Sudanese and Saudi militaries. The battle for Midi has been one of the longest-lasting continuous campaigns in the war, and while a notable victory, it still leaves anti-Houthi forces over 200km by road from Hodeidah port. Mohsen Khasrouf, head of the Moral Guidance Department in the Hadi military, [told](#) Gulf News that the forces now plan to retake the town of Haradh (in the northeast of Hajjah) with the port city of Hodeidah being their final destination.

**A Saudi oil tanker was attacked by the Houthis in international waters on April 3.** The Houthis [claimed](#) the attack was on a warship in retaliation for the coalition airstrike in Hodeidah that killed at least 14 IDPs the day prior. However, the attack was on a commercial oil tanker called Abqaiq and occurred around 1:30 pm Saudi time off the coast of Hodeidah in international waters, [according](#) to coalition spokesman Turki Al-Maliki, who said “the tanker suffered a minor injury but completed its navigational line.” While the damage was minimal and the Saudi government stated no interruption to its oil supply had occurred, the attack [raised concerns](#) the oil market could be disrupted. Following additional Houthi attempts to target Saudi oil infrastructure in April (see below), later in April 23 Bloomberg [reported](#) that crude oil has surged to a three-year high, and that the recent flare-up in cross-border attacks – more specifically the fear of a successful hit on Saudi oil infrastructure – is partly to blame.

**Houthi missile and drone attacks on Saudi territory occurred with regularity in April.** Several of the same civilian locations have been targeted previously, which based on a [report](#) released by Human Rights Watch in April “violated the laws of war.” The following attacks, none of which are believed to have hit their target, occurred in April:

- On [April 4](#) a missile was fired into Jizan region, the Houthis’ [stated](#) aim was a Saudi Aramco facility.



- On April 11 at least [three ballistic missiles](#) were fired at Saudi cities, including one at the capital Riyadh.
- Earlier on the same day, two drones targeted Abha airport and an Aramco oil facility in Jizan, respectively. The coalition maintains the drones are Iranian, and in mid-April the coalition also [claimed](#) two surveillance drones were shot down in Midi district of Hajjah, and [another](#) drone packed with explosives was identified along the west coast.
- Another [missile](#) was fired at the southern city of Jizan on April 12
- In mid-April coalition spokesman Turki Al-Maliki [said](#) to date 119 ballistic missiles had been fired into Saudi Arabia, and said “the Iran-backed terrorist group tried to target Abha airport in western Saudi Arabia with a drone.”
- On April 28, the Sana’a-based Saba News [reported](#) eight missiles were fired “on economic and vital targets in Jizan.” Saudi Arabia [acknowledged](#) detecting and shooting down four missiles targeted at Jizan.

**Dozens of Sudanese fighters were killed in a surprise attack in Hajjah on April 6.** Sudanese media [named](#) three senior Sudanese officers among the dead, in addition to saying “dozens” of soldiers were killed and around 100 injured. “The Sudanese soldiers were lured into a trap by the rebels,” AFP [quoted](#) a military source as saying. The Sudanese government did not address the news directly, but days after the incident Foreign Minister Ibrahim Ghandour was [reported](#) as reaffirming Sudan’s intention to remain in the war and his ministry said his counterparts in the coalition “offered their condolences to families of martyrs and hoped for a speedy recovery of those wounded in operations in Yemen in recent days.” Sudanese media later [reported](#) that after the incident, hundreds more Sudanese fighters were flown to the UAE for military training.

The Houthis played up the attack and also claimed a number of other, likely exaggerated, high-casualty attacks against Sudanese troops in April, in an apparent attempt to capitalize on public opposition to their presence in Yemen. The Sudanese fighters are widely viewed as Saudi-paid mercenaries, as they belong to a controversial paramilitary unit called the Rapid Support Forces (RSF), according to a 2017 [report](#) by the Small Arms Survey, which is comprised in part of fighters implicated in the genocide in Darfur. More directly, the alleged rape of a Yemeni woman by a Sudanese fighter resulted

in [protests](#) being held in early April across Houthi-controlled areas of Yemen, attended by Houthi Revolutionary Committee leader Mohammed Al-Houthi and other senior officials.

**Government forces took control of state institutions in Taiz city after a handover from informal resistance fighters.** A plan to retake public institutions from various informal resistance groups has long been in the works, and building on progress made by his predecessor, incumbent governor Ameen Mahmoud chaired a meeting in Taiz on April 5, which included a presidential delegation from Aden. [According](#) to the state-run Saba News, the government sought “to oversee paramilitary Abu al-Abbas Brigades’ handover of the city’s eastern precinct to the provincial security forces.” Governor Ameen had Taiz Axis commander Khaled Fadhel implement this plan, which Abu Al-Abbas initially refused, calling it a ploy by the Islah Party and saying he can protect government employees working inside his territory. Through mediation, Abu Al-Abbas ultimately agreed to hand over state institutions, although he remains a powerful figure in Taiz and at the end of April events were still in progress.

## Recommended reading:

- The Rethinking Yemen's Economy initiative released a policy brief with recommendations for [Increasing the Effectiveness of the Humanitarian Response in Yemen](#). The initiative brings together more than 20 of Yemen's leading socio-economic experts, and is implemented by DeepRoot, the Sana'a Center for Strategic Studies, and the Center for Applied Research in Partnership with the Orient (CARPO).
- "Yemen has now become the frontline of antimicrobial resistance (AMR)," The Bureau of Investigative Journalism writes in an article on the [Deadly Mixture of Drug Resistance and War](#).
- For Just Security, an article about [Civilian Casualties and Effectiveness of US Drone Strikes in Yemen](#). "One of the demands that survivors of drone strikes would ask for is a list of wanted individuals," writes author Abdulrasheed Al-Faqih of the Mwatana organization in Yemen. "A list that is clear and available to the public so that they can avoid targeted individuals, protect their children, and not allow US targets to have a presence in their areas."
- [Reframing Media Narratives in the Yemeni Civil War](#): Arguing the Yemen war receives lacking media attention – at least in relation to the war in Syria – due to "the inability to present a clear, moralistic narrative," this Harvard Political Review piece discusses how "only by reframing the conflict as a humanitarian crisis has the media been able to raise public awareness of the issue."
- [Fear grips Yemen's Aden as deadly attacks target clerics](#), writes Ahmed Al-Haj for the Associated Press. Dozens of imams in Aden have been assassinated during the war, and many believe the killings are politically motivated rather than the work of Jihadist groups like AQAP or the Islamic State.
- Arguing UN Security Council Resolution 2216 "disincentivises the Hadi government from coming to the negotiating table" and confines the new envoy to an unrealistic track, former US Ambassador Stephen Seche writes in IRIN that to [Give peace a real chance in Yemen](#) the three-year old resolution needs to be scrapped.



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