



THE YEMEN TREND

**April
2017**

“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 April, talk of the humanitarian catastrophe unfolding in Yemen was dominated by warnings that a military offensive on the port city of Hodeidah could induce famine. However, according to the World Food Programme, there are indications famine is already occurring in some of the hardest-hit districts but is being masked by governorate-level statistics. Meanwhile, a high-level pledging event in Geneva on April 25 brought in \$1.1 billion for the humanitarian response in 2017, out of a total \$2.1 billion requested. The UN Office for the Coordination of Humanitarian Affairs called for the port of Hodeidah to remain operational, and the Yemeni government again requested for the UN to monitor the port.

On the political front, UN Envoy Ismail Ould Cheikh said in late April he is “a bit optimistic” efforts to steer the parties away from confrontation in Hodeidah could lead to the resumption of peace talks by the end of May, although no concrete steps in that direction have yet been announced. US Secretary of Defense Jim Mattis visited Saudi Arabia and called for a return to the negotiating table “as soon as possible,” but did not indicate whether in his government’s calculation negotiations would occur after or instead of the Hodeidah operation. Some members of congress and the senate expressed concern throughout April over reports the Trump administration is considering increasing its support for the coalition, and voiced opposition to the possible assault on Hodeidah. At the same time, the Yemeni government renewed its call for the UN Security Council and the US government to designate the Houthis a terrorist group.

The military operation to retake the Red Sea coast progressed slowly throughout April, as forces aligned to President Hadi and the coalition sought to stabilize coastal areas of Taiz and capture the Khalid Bin Waleed military base further inland. By the end of the month Houthi/Saleh fighters continued to hold the camp and the southern border of Hodeidah, although Hadi and coalition forces had entered the gate of the camp. Vice President Ali Mohsen visited Midi district in Hajjah, to the north of Hodeidah, and along with the commander of the Fifth Military Region he vowed to retake Hodeidah after pushing through Midi. Meanwhile, the US launched an estimated 34 strikes in four governorates against alleged AQAP militants.

Timeline

- Apr. 03** The US announces it conducted around 20 airstrikes since the beginning of April
- Apr. 12** Hadi/coalition forces enter Khalid Bin Waleed military camp in Taiz, clashes ongoing
- Apr. 25** High-level pledging event for the humanitarian response in Yemen raises \$1.1 billion
- Apr. 26** UN envoy says he hopes to resume peace talks by the end of May
- Apr. 27** Hadi sacks Aden Governor Aidarous Al-Zubaidi and Minister of State Hani Bin Buraik

Humanitarian and Economic Trends

A high-level pledging event for the humanitarian response in Yemen was held on April 25 in Geneva. Heading into the conference only 15 percent of the \$2.1 billion target had been met. The event brought in pledges for nearly [\\$1.1 billion](#), meeting slightly more than half the required amount. The United Kingdom was the top donor, followed by Saudi Arabia, the European Commission, Kuwait, and the UAE (view the complete list [here](#)). UN Secretary-General Antonio Guterres hailed it as a “remarkable success,” although the head of the World Food Program (WFP), David Beasley, [warned](#) days later that more is desperately needed. “We are going to have to make life challenging decisions as to who will receive food and who will not,” he said, adding that in Yemen a child dies every six to ten minutes.

Pockets of famine likely already exist in the hardest-hit districts, according to an [operation document](#) for the WFP’s new emergency operation called “Immediate, Integrated and Sustained Response to Avert Famine in Yemen.” Seven governorates are currently classified as IPC Phase 4 (emergency) and 13 in IPC Phase 3 (crisis), but the WFP said important differences at the district level are being masked. “In the most affected districts of IPC Phase 4 governorates, indicative GAM (global acute malnutrition) rates are above 40 percent and poor food consumption scores exceed 50 percent, suggesting that pockets of famine may already exist, even if data on crude death rates is unreliable,” the document reads. For reference, the GAM rate for Hodeidah governorate – which has the highest rate in the country – as of March 2017 was 25.3 percent, and the malnutrition threshold that is a core component of the formal classification of famine is 30 percent.

UN OCHA called for the port of Hodeidah to remain operational in an April 4 [statement](#). Emphasizing that seven million people in Yemen face the prospect of famine, the UN agency said even at its currently reduced capacity “there is no viable substitute for Hodeidah port,” both in terms of its location and infrastructure. The statement says the costs that would be associated with re-routing imports to Aden port “are prohibitive,” and that

“steering the humanitarian response away from the Hodeidah port, even temporarily, is inconceivable.” In response, the next day the coalition “stressed that it shares the concerns of the United Nations about the status of Hodeidah port,” but argued it is now being used by the Houthis to smuggle weapons and people, [according](#) to the state-run Saudi Press Agency (SPA). Without commenting on whether it would refrain from taking military action against the port, the coalition added it “has demanded from the United Nations on more than one occasion to exercise its control over the port.”

Later in the month, on the sidelines of the high-level pledging event in Geneva, Prime Minister Ahmed Bin Dagher [told](#) Reuters the government had again “proposed to the United Nations to operate the port and to impose monitoring on the port.” Bin Dagher said this proposal was discussed with Secretary-General Guterres himself but “we didn’t receive a clear answer.”

The blockade imposed by the coalition was criticized by Idriss Jazairy, the UN special rapporteur on human rights and international sanctions, who said “the blockade involves grave breaches of the most basic norms of human rights law, as well as of the law of armed conflict, which cannot be left unanswered.” [According](#) to the special rapporteur, the naval and aerial blockade is one of the main causes of the humanitarian crisis and the imposed restrictions are “mostly arbitrary.” While the statement mentions there are distribution impediments within the country, it does not mention the Houthis or former president Saleh by name. The day before, Hisham Sharaf, the foreign minister in the Houthi/Saleh government, sent a [letter](#) to the UN calling the blockade a violation of international humanitarian law. Following the statement, Abdulraqueeb Fatah, the minister of local administration in the Hadi government and head of the Supreme Relief Committee, [criticized](#) it for placing the blame on the coalition when, he argues, the problem lies with Houthi/Saleh forces disrupting or confiscating aid being distributed in Yemen.

More than 166,000 teachers have not been paid since October 2016, UNICEF’s representative for Yemen, Meritxell Relaño, [said](#) at a mid-April press conference in Sana’a. That amounts to 73 percent

of all teachers in Yemen, and the representative said if the teachers do not receive their salaries up to 4.5 million schoolchildren are at risk of being prevented from finishing the school year.

Political Developments

Efforts underway to avoid the military offensive on Hodeidah could lead to the resumption of peace talks by the end of May, the UN envoy said on April 26. Ould Cheikh [told](#) AFP he hopes “to enter a new round of talks before Ramadan,” and that he plans to invite the Houthis to a meeting in Oman in May to discuss options for moving forward with his peace plan. “I’m a bit optimistic, (because) if we are able, as I am hoping, to stop the military operation in Hodeida, I think we are paving the way for new talks,” he said, adding the negotiations would likely be held in Geneva or Kuwait.

Background:

In March the UN envoy toured several Gulf and European countries, including London where a meeting on the 13th convened the Quint – the foreign ministers of the US, UK, UAE, Saudi Arabia, and Oman. Like the previous meeting in February, no notable developments were announced. Coalition and Hadi-aligned figures signaled their intention to capture the port of Hodeidah before entering a new round of negotiations, and the Houthi/Saleh alliance did not demonstrate a willingness to discuss military withdraws and weapons handovers. The refusal by both sides to move forward with the roadmap prompted the UN envoy to tell the UN Security Council on March 29 “the Government of Yemen should agree to engage in talks based on the framework, and Ansar Allah (the Houthis) and the General People’s Congress must end their long-standing refusal to undertake serious discussions on security arrangements.”

The last time clear steps for the peace process were made public was at the end of 2016, following the December 18 meeting of the Quad – the precursor to the Quint before Oman became a permanent member. The plan that emerged was for the 12-member De-escalation and Coordination Committee (DCC) to convene in Amman to hash out a joint implementation plan for a ceasefire, which after two weeks of planning would be put into effect and the DCC would relocate to Dhahran Al-Janoub in Saudi Arabia to monitor it. This ceasefire would

be used to jumpstart talks for a comprehensive settlement. Since then, it has not been made clear whether the UN envoy has changed his strategy, however it appears a ceasefire will continue to be sought after as a means to initiate talks. One indication of this is the Council of the European Union adopted conclusions on Yemen, according to an April 3 [press release](#), calling on “all parties to urgently agree on a cessation of hostilities to be monitored by the United Nations as a first step towards the resumption of peace talks under UN leadership.”

*For more background details, see DeepRoot’s [March 2017](#) issue of *The Yemen Trend*.*

President Hadi removed Aidarous Al-Zubaidi as governor of Aden and Hani Bin Buraik as minister of state on April 27. The newly appointed governor, Abdulaziz Al-Meflahi, is from Al-Dhale governorate and was serving as an advisor to the president. Al-Zubaidi was made an ambassador in the ministry of foreign affairs, but not assigned to a country, and Hadi ordered an investigation into Bin Buraik, without mentioning details. Earlier on April 27 Mehran Al-Qubati, the commander of the 4th Brigade within the Presidential Guard, was detained by the UAE on arrival at Aden airport. Saudi Arabia mediated the resulting dispute between Hadi and the UAE, and flew Al-Qubati to Saudi Arabia. Hadi’s dismissal of the two prominent politicians, both of whom are aligned to the UAE, prompted a vocal response from the UAE. For example, Anwar Gargash, the Emirati minister of foreign affairs, [said](#) “among the rules of political action, you should build trust with your allies and not stab them in the back.”

Secretary of Defense Jim Mattis visited Saudi Arabia in mid-April. It was widely reported that he called for a return to the negotiating table, but he did not rule out or discourage the possibility of a military offensive to retake Hodeidah. “Our goal is to push this conflict into the UN-brokered negotiations to ensure that it ends as soon as possible,” he said at a media availability following his meeting with the king and the deputy crown prince, according to Defense Department [transcripts](#). At the same time, he said, “we’ll have to overcome Iran’s efforts to destabilize yet another

country and create another militia in their image of Lebanese Hezbollah." That same day, several major western news outlets [reported](#) from Riyadh that US officials told them on condition of anonymity the US is looking at ways to bolster military support for the coalition under the belief that further gains are needed to re-enter negotiations for a settlement. The support would not involve US troops on the ground or direct US strikes on Houthi/Saleh targets, but rather an increase in the kind of support already being provided, namely mid-air refueling and targeting intel.

US politicians expressed concern over reports the Trump administration is considering increasing its support for the coalition and voiced opposition to a possible military operation to retake the port of Hodeidah. For example:

- On April 6 [Senate Joint Resolution 40](#) was put forth, titled "A joint resolution to provide limitations on the transfer of air-to-ground munitions from the United States to Saudi Arabia." This bill calls for air-to-ground munitions transfers to be prevented until conditions are met by the government of Saudi Arabia regarding targeting practices and humanitarian aid.
- Also on April 6, a [letter](#) signed by 31 members of congress was submitted to the secretaries of defense and state. The members of congress asked for details on Saudi targeting practices, capabilities, no-strike lists and the role US personnel are performing within the Coalition Command.
- In an April 10 [letter](#) addressed to President Trump, 51 members of congress expressed "serious concern over reports that your administration is actively considering 'direct support for the anti-Houthi coalition' of militaries led by Saudi Arabia in Yemen." The letter notes that "congress has never authorized the actions under consideration," and that the Houthis do not fall under the 2001 Authorization for Use of Military Force (AUMF) President Bush received to target AQAP and associated forces, thus making congressional approval constitutionally required.
- In an April 27 [letter](#) signed by nine senators addressed to the new Saudi ambassador to the US, Khalid Bin Salman, five requests are made, including that the Saudis "refrain from bombing the port of Hodeidah and call for an immediate humanitarian ceasefire around the port."

Objections by Democratic lawmakers – presumably including those raised above – were reportedly delaying the resumption of a massive arms sale to Saudi Arabia, unnamed US officials [told](#) Reuters in late April. One official said the US is seeking commitments from Saudi Arabia that it will adhere to strict targeting practices, while another official said "the decision has been made to let the sale go through" and that no such commitments are required.

The Houthis should be designated a terrorist group, Yemen's deputy human rights minister, Mohammed Askar, [told](#) the UN Security Council in mid-April. The Yemeni government also requested the same from the US. A [report](#) released shortly afterwards by the Yemeni embassy in Washington, titled "The US Congress and Yemen: Background, Critical Issues and the Way Forward," explains the Yemeni government's stance. It is suggested the designation be tacked on to the legislation expected to be considered over whether to designate Iran's Revolutionary Guard a terrorist group. "There should be language in the legislation to designate the Houthis as one of the terrorist groups supported by the IRGC," the embassy report reads. "If the Houthis know of the prospect of this legislation, this will apply leverage on the Houthis to abandon its ties with Iran, to disavow its hostilities, to seek peace and to engage as a conventional political organization in Yemen rather than as an unrestrained militia." This same demand was made to the UN by the Yemeni government in February.

Sheikhs from across Yemen convened in Riyadh on April 5 for a gathering hosted by Saudi Arabia. Over 150 sheikhs attended, many with varying alliances but all nominally opposed to the Houthi/Saleh alliance. At the [meeting](#) Mohammed Bin Salman gave a speech to the sheikhs reaffirming his support and telling them efforts would be stepped up to retake Hodeidah and that the overall aim is to hand over the capital Sana'a to the legitimate government and prevent Iran from having any influence in the country. The Hadi government was not involved in organizing the meeting, and it appeared the Saudis were making an effort to engage more directly with local actors rather than rely on operating through the Hadi government.

Military and Security Developments

The military operation to retake the Red Sea coast from Houthi/Saleh forces progressed slowly in April, as forces aligned to Hadi and the coalition sought to capture more areas in Taiz before advancing further up the coast into Hodeidah governorate. At the same time, forces to the north in Midi district of Hajjah near the Saudi border sought to push through that frontline in order to reach Hodeidah from the north. At the beginning of April two newly-trained brigades were [reportedly](#) amassing for the offensive, one in Midi around 230 km north of Hodeidah city, and one in Mocha district 130 km south of the city, near the border of Al-Khoukha district in southern Hodeidah. “The political decision of liberating Hodeidah has been taken and military preparations have been completed, only the timing remains to be decided,” Mohsen Khasrof, a senior military official in the Hadi government, told Reuters. In Hajjah, Vice President Ali Mohsen [visited](#) the fronts in Midi and Haradh, where he met with Major General Omar Sajaf, commander of the Fifth Military Region. Both men said they planned to capture Midi and Haradh then take Hodeidah port.

In Taiz, Hadi and coalition forces remained near the coastal border of Hodeidah as Houthi/Saleh forces continued to mount resistance in Mocha and further inland. While comprehensive casualty counts are unavailable, heavy fighting was sustained throughout the month, and from [April 10 to April 15](#) over 75 fighters were documented killed in clashes near Mocha alone. [According](#) to UAE news agency WAM, Hadi/coalition forces recaptured the strategic mountain of Jabal Al-Nar in eastern Mocha district, but the Khalid Bin Waleed camp in neighboring Mouza district remained under Houthi/Saleh control. The camp is situated near a crucial intersection that links the Mocha port on the west coast with Taiz city to the east, and is the main inland road joining Taiz and Hodeidah. On April 12, Hadi/coalition troops [announced](#) they had entered the western gate of the camp, and shortly after media belonging to Hadi-aligned forces reported the capture of [stockpiles](#) of arms.

On April 23 government forces said they [captured](#) a communication tower, but by the end of April they had yet to retake the whole camp.

Dozens of US airstrikes were conducted in at least four governorates throughout the month. [According](#) to the Department of Defense, about 20 strikes were conducted in Shabwa in the first three days of April, for a total of 70 nationwide between February 28 and April 3. The strikes were said to be “largely unmanned,” indicating not all were by drone. In the weeks that followed, suspected drone strikes reportedly killed over a dozen AQAP militants in [Abyan](#), [Al-Baydha](#), [Marib](#), and [Shabwa](#). The latter two strike locations were later claimed by the Defense Department in an April 24 [statement](#), which added ten US strikes to the April 3 tally of 70. Spokesman Jeff Davis said eight AQAP members were killed in the April 23 Shabwa strike, which the Associated Press [reported](#) days later included Abu Ahmed Awlaqi, considered by the US to be the leader of the group’s operations in Shabwa. However, immediately following the strike Aden Alghad [reported](#) that three civilians from the Aal Lahul tribe who happened to be driving behind the car carrying the AQAP members were killed. A [suspected](#) strike in Shabwa on April 29, and [three more](#) suspected drone strikes in Marib on April 30 brought the estimated number of US strikes in April to 34.

Houthi/Saleh forces have been placing landmines in residential areas, killing and maiming scores of civilians, according to the Sana’a-based human rights organization Mwatana. In a [report](#) titled “Concealed Killer: Civilian victims of landmines planted by Ansar Allah group (Houthis) and Saleh forces,” Mwatana documented the use of landmines by the Houthi/Saleh alliance in areas they withdrew from. The organization found evidence of mines being “planted in residential areas, public roads, main streets, homes, farms and crossing paths frequented by civilians daily.” Based on research conducted in six governorates between July 2015 and October 2016, the report notes:

- The landmines were planted in residential areas when civilians were displaced by active fighting, and they exploded when civilians returned to their homes and farms. In none of the documented cases was there any evidence Houthi/Saleh forces left any signs or markings to warn civilians.

- Mines were planted at the entrances of civilian homes, and residents told Mwatana they perceived this was punishment by Houthi/Saleh forces “because of their refusal to join or support them in the fighting.” Mwatana concluded in some instances there appeared to be “deliberate targeting because of their opposing positions to a particular warring party, resulting in more killings and civilian casualties, including a number of children.”
- In every case investigated, the rules of international humanitarian law and customary humanitarian law, “which require implementing special measures to reduce the indiscriminate effects of landmines, were not implemented or followed.”

Human Rights Watch released a similar [report](#) in April, titled “Yemen: Houthi-Saleh Forces Using Landmines.” In it, they include a [letter](#) by the Sana’a-based Houthi/Saleh foreign ministry responding to the allegations of mine use. The ministry shifted the blame to “armed factions and terrorist groups” who it says are reusing unexploded ordnance from coalition airstrikes. However, there are indications Houthi/Saleh forces have continued to plant land mines in territory they withdraw from, including residential areas. In April UN OCHA [noted](#) that mines left by the Houthi/Saleh alliance when they fled Mocha town earlier this year continue to pose security concerns to returnees. Meanwhile, the group appears to have deployed mines off the western coast and across Yemen’s northern border. A mine thought to have been planted by Houthi/Saleh forces in Jizan region of Saudi Arabia [killed](#) a Saudi border guard and injured three others, and naval mines found off the coast in recent months prompted Hadi-aligned forces to launch [Operation Naval Arrow](#) in mid-April to rid the coast of mines.

Houthi/Saleh forces have launched 48 ballistic missiles into Saudi Arabia since the war broke, coalition spokesman Ahmed Asiri [said](#) in an interview with Saudi mouthpiece Al-Arabiya. According to him, a total of 138 missiles have been fired by the Houthi/Saleh alliance both in Yemen and Saudi Arabia, and the missiles were said to be manufactured in North Korea, China, and former Soviet states. The spokesman accused Iran of handling the operations, preparation, and maintenance of the missiles.

Analysis – Hodeidah: How and when?

For months, the internationally recognized government of Yemen, including the president and several of his top military commanders, has stated its objective to retake by force the country’s entire west coast and most importantly the port city of Hodeidah. How and when the assault on the port would unfold remains unclear. As for the approach, forces to the north in Hajjah and to the south in Taiz are converging on Hodeidah governorate, but progress is slow and both are well over 100 km away from the port on either side. A naval and aerial assault directly on the port is therefore the more likely scenario in the near term, but the coalition may wait until ground troops have made it closer to the port. As for the timing, there are a number of other factors, outlined below, which may be preventing the operation from going ahead.

The Hadi government and the coalition, namely the UAE, are establishing stability in western Taiz before progressing into Al-Khoukha district of southern Hodeidah. Hadi/coalition forces continue to face heavy clashes in several inland areas, most importantly the Khalid Bin Waleed camp, and clearing these areas of Houthi/Saleh fighters is important in order to be able to sustain military operations along the coast into Hodeidah. At the same time, reconstruction is ongoing in the port town of Mocha – where the UN estimates [40 percent](#) of houses and other infrastructure was damaged in fighting there earlier this year – and Hadi/coalition forces may wait until the port is fully operational. This would achieve the dual objectives of demonstrating to the Yemeni and international community that they are capable of re-establishing order as they claim they will do in Hodeidah, and would also open up an important supply route that will be crucial in the offensive. Nasser Sharif, the deputy transport minister in the Hadi government, [said](#) in April that his ministry was working to reopen the Mocha port to humanitarian aid and that it was preparing to move the presidency of the Yemen Red Sea Ports Corporation, the body that administers Yemen’s Red Sea ports, from Hodeidah to Mocha.

A further reason for delay may be the coalition is awaiting greater commitment from the Trump administration, which is under mounting pressure not to resume arms sales or increase support for the Hodeidah operation. In at least three letters and a proposed bill, members of congress and the senate in April (see Political Developments section) raised opposition to US involvement in

Yemen, and in a closed-door [meeting](#) held by the Defense Department at the request of aid agencies, USAID and State Department officials discouraged support for the operation due to the risk it will induce famine.

These reasons also leave open the possibility the coalition and the Hadi government are open to the prospect of negotiating with the Houthi/Saleh alliance before making a move on Hodeidah. The UN envoy voiced cautious optimism a compromise could be reached to avoid the operation, yet the situation on the ground shows no signs of subsiding. Days after protesters marched from Sana'a to Hodeidah calling for the port to remain open, on April 26 the coalition dropped [leaflets](#) on Hodeidah city. "The control of the Hodeidah port by the terrorist Houthi militia will increase famine and hinder the delivery of international relief aid to our gracious Yemeni people," one said. "Our forces of legitimacy are heading to liberate Hodeidah and end the suffering of our gracious Yemeni people," said another. The following day, tensions escalated between Hadi and the UAE following the sacking of Aden Governor Aidarous Al-Zubaidi and Minister of State Hani Bin Buraik, presenting another potential obstacle to be overcome in the operation to retake Yemens west coast.

RECOMMENDED READING AND VIEWING:

- Writing in the Atlantic Council, Maysaa Shuja Al-Deen situates [The Endless Battle in Taiz](#) in its historical context and lays out the reasons why, in her view, the coalition has been reluctant to push Houthi/Saleh forces out of Taiz.
- [Instruments of Pain \(I\): Conflict and Famine in Yemen](#), a Crisis Group special briefing, summarizes the current status of the conflict and lays out the risks of military action to retake Hodeidah port before offering suggestions for how famine could potentially be avoided.
- Watchlist and Save the Children released a report titled "[Every Day Things are Getting Worse": The Impact on Children of Attacks on Health Care in Yemen](#)". The report compiles existing statistics as well as interviews conducted with medical workers.
- Andrew Exum, the US deputy assistant secretary of defense of Middle East policy from 2015-2016, writes in The Atlantic his view of [What's Really at Stake for America in Yemen's Conflict](#). He argues the new administration will intensify efforts against both AQAP and the Houthi maritime threat. However, he predicts it will be done in a way as to satisfy Saudi Arabia and the UAE and "there's a real danger the Trump administration gets its calculus wrong in this regard."

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