



# THE YEMEN TREND

**February  
2017**

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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.

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# Executive Overview

International humanitarian organizations stepped up their warnings that famine may strike Yemen in 2017, placing emphasis on the military escalation up the country's west coast. "I am compelled to raise the alarm," UN Humanitarian Coordinator Jamie McGoldrick said, warning that airstrikes are already reducing imports into Hodeidah Port and in combination with the worsening economic crisis, the fighting "could accelerate the onset of famine." A \$2.1 billion appeal was launched by the UN and its humanitarian partners in order to provide assistance to 12 million people in 2017, noting that 7 million severely food insecure people are at risk of starvation if the call for funding is not met.

As the humanitarian catastrophe unfolds, neither the Hadi camp nor the Houthi/Saleh alliance are demonstrating readiness to support the UN envoy's attempts to initiate a ceasefire that would lead to peace negotiations. Instead, in February the Houthis requested that the term of UN Envoy Ould Cheikh not be renewed and President Hadi said Operation Golden Spear will continue until the entire western coast of Yemen is in his hands. The Quad – the foreign ministers of the US, UK, UAE, and Saudi Arabia – convened on February 16 but no substantial developments came out of the meeting, which was the first attended by US Secretary of State Rex Tillerson, indicating the new US administration does not intend to push for the resumption of peace talks as aggressively as John Kerry did in his final months in office.

On the military front, the offensive up the west coast dubbed Operation Golden Spear proceeded, with Hadi-aligned forces and the coalition taking fragile control over Mocha around February 10 following weeks of fighting that left hundreds dead. The forces pushed along the coast to Yakhtul, which is about 14 km north of Mocha Port and 25 km south of Hodeidah governorate. Progress has been slow, blamed by military officials on the Houthis' heavy use of landmines along the coastal road, and tensions flared between President Hadi and the UAE, a leading player in the coastal offensive, but Hadi and army spokespeople reaffirmed throughout February their intention to retake the entire coast. In Abyan, AQAP took advantage of a withdrawal by Security Belt Forces from parts of the governorate, and briefly captured several towns at the beginning of the month. In Aden, clashes at the airport on February 12 between Hadi-aligned fighters and forces aligned with the UAE revealed the deep-seated power struggle between the two powers.

# Timeline

- Feb. 2** AQAP briefly takes over several towns in Abyan
- Feb. 8** Humanitarian Response Plan launched, \$2.1 billion requested
- Feb. 10** Mocha said to be under full control of Hadi-aligned forces (approximate date)
- Feb. 12** Clashes at Aden airport between Presidential Guard and UAE-backed forces
- Feb. 16** Meeting of the Quad, first time with US Secretary of State Rex Tillerson
- Feb. 22** Houthi/Saleh forces kill Operation Golden Spear commander Major General Ahmed Al-Yafai

# Humanitarian and Economic Trends

**An international appeal for \$2.1 billion for the year 2017** was launched on February 8 by the UN and its humanitarian partners. The [appeal](#) – the largest in Yemen’s history – is intended to provide assistance to 12 million people. The 65-page [Humanitarian Response Plan](#) (HRP) is largely based on the [Humanitarian Needs Overview 2017](#) released in November, and states that 18.8 million people are estimated to be in need of humanitarian assistance. Of these, 10.3 million people are acutely affected and 3.3 million are acutely malnourished. Last year’s HRP was only 60 percent funded, and the 2017 plan warns that failure to respond to current needs will mean “more than 7 million severely food insecure people will risk starvation.”

**The preliminary results of the Emergency Food Security and Nutrition Assessment** (EFSNA) were released on February 8. The [joint assessment](#), conducted by the WFP, FAO, and UNICEF through coordination of the Food Security and Agricultural Cluster (FSAC), is the first national, household-level assessment to be conducted in Yemen since March 2015. Some of the most important findings are:

- An estimated 17.1 million people are now food insecure, a number that has risen by three million in seven months. Of this total, 7.3 million people are estimated to be in need of emergency food assistance. On the nationwide level, 65 percent of households are estimated to be food insecure, which is significantly more than estimated in the Humanitarian Needs Overview 2017, and higher still than the 2014 rate of 41 percent.
- In four governorates – Abyan, Hodeidah, Hadhramout, and Taiz – malnutrition rates have surpassed the emergency/critical rate of 15 percent used by the WHO. Hodeidah governorate has the highest rate by a wide margin, at slightly over 25 percent. According to the widely-used Integrated Food Security Phase Classification (IPC) model, one of the key thresholds for the formal designation of famine is a malnutrition rate exceeding 30 percent.
- More than 80 percent of Yemenis were found to be indebted, and more than half of all households are purchasing food on credit. Re-

latedly, the cost of living is 40 percent higher than compared to the pre-crisis period while income levels are continuing to deteriorate and there are lengthy delays in the payment of public employee salaries.

**The UNHCR said people in Yemen are dying of famine** and warned the crisis is likely to worsen. “We used to say last year that we were in a catastrophe,” UNHCR Yemen representative Ayman Gharaibeh said in a [statement](#). “Now we’ve said that it is beyond any humanitarian catastrophe that we’ve seen,” he said, adding “there is significant famine” occurring in Yemen. His statement came although famine has not yet been officially declared in the country.

**The civilian impact of the offensive on the west coast** was highlighted by several UN and humanitarian officials throughout February. On February 10 the UN Office of the High Commissioner for Human Rights [said](#) while pro-Hadi and coalition forces demanded civilians to evacuate Mocha, Houthi/Saleh forces warned civilians not to leave and “credible reports indicate that Houthi-affiliated snipers shot at families attempting to flee their homes in Houthi-controlled areas – suggesting the use of civilians as human shields.” Over 200 houses were reported damaged or destroyed by airstrikes, and among several casualties, 11 civilians were killed on January 22 when an airstrike hit a house, Commissioner Zeid Ra’ad Al-Hussein said. “There are real fears that the situation will repeat itself in the port of Hodeidah, to the north of Mocha, where airstrikes are already intensifying.” The day prior, the European Commission [said](#) coalition airstrikes have been “targeting the main transport infrastructure linking Hodeidah Port to the rest of the country,” including recent airstrikes on six bridges “considered vital for the transport of humanitarian aid.”

**The Saudi-led coalition told the UN to redirect shipments to Aden Port**, according to an article posted on February 24 by ABC news. “We’ve been told now by the coalition to redirect the shipments including the humanitarian supplies to Aden in the south,” UN Humanitarian Coordinator in Yemen Jamie McGoldrick is [quoted](#) as saying. In a February 21 [statement](#), McGoldrick said the offensive up the west coast of Yemen “is effectively limiting the flow of life-saving commodities, including food staples,

# Political Developments

into Hodeidah Port,” and only a limited number of shipping companies are now using the port. For example, in February the Red Cross [halted](#) shipments to Hodeidah.

Earlier in February, McGoldrick stated at a [press conference](#) that at any given time there are about 30 vessels parked offshore waiting to dock at the port, and the delays drive up shipping costs and sometimes cause the food to spoil. In both his statements, the humanitarian coordinator noted that some commercial and humanitarian shipments have been re-routed to Aden, but said “the Aden Port does not have the required capacity or infrastructure to accommodate Yemen’s import demands” and movement across the front lines remains restricted. The latter point was made clear in late February, when UNOCHA head Stephen O’Brien was [denied access](#) from Houthi-controlled Ibb to Taiz city.

**President Hadi announced Saudi Arabia has designated \$10 billion** “for the reconstruction of liberated provinces, including \$2 billion as a deposit in the Central Bank to shore up the riyal,” [according](#) to his official Facebook page. On February 23 the spokesman for the Aden-based Central Bank of Yemen [said](#) [at min. 33] the negotiations for the \$2 billion deal were in the advanced stages following over a month of planning. “I think it shows the ability for the Central Bank of Yemen to be able to rebuild its capacity in Aden and the level of trust of our GCC partners,” the spokesman said. Within a couple of weeks the requisite steps to complete the process of transferring the bank from Sana’a to Aden will be completed, he said, and the bank will begin to process the loan afterward. The status of the other \$8 billion remains unclear.

**Norwegian Refugee Council (NRC) employees were detained** in Hodeidah on February 14. The three national staff, three casual workers, and a contracted driver were all eventually [released](#), according to a February 23 statement by the NRC. The organization said the staff were detained while they were distributing relief aid on February 14, due to a misunderstanding over some of the supply boxes which had markings from Saudi Arabia, where the boxes were originally from before being repurposed for use in Yemen.

**The foreign ministers of the US, UK, UAE, and Saudi Arabia**, referred to as the Quad, convened on February 16 for the fifth time since August. This was the first meeting for US Secretary of State Rex Tillerson, and like the December 18 meeting, the Quad was joined by the foreign minister of Oman and the UN envoy. [According](#) to the State Department, “The Secretary underscored the United States’ continued support for the UN-led process and work of the UN Special Envoy, Ismail Ould Cheikh Ahmed, and noted the urgent need for the unfettered delivery of humanitarian assistance throughout Yemen.” Two days later, the Sana’a-based foreign minister, Hisham Sharaf [reportedly](#) asked the UN to include Russia in the Quad “as a neutral party,” and from Russia on February 27 the UN envoy [tweeted](#): “Russia’s commitment to ending the war in Yemen was clear in today’s meeting with Deputy Foreign Minister Bogdanov” – the same official the Houthi delegation met with in December.

## Background:

The UN envoy travelled to the capitals of Saudi Arabia, Qatar, and Oman in early January, before meeting President Hadi in Aden then Houthi and Saleh officials in Sana’a. In his January 26 [speech](#) to the UN Security Council, Ould Cheikh criticized both warring parties and reported no significant progress related to the peace process. “President Hadi continues to criticize these proposals without agreeing to discuss them and this will hinder and impede the path toward peace,” he said. At the same time, he said representatives of the Houthi/Saleh alliance had not provided him any plans on the process of troop withdrawals or the handing over of heavy weapons.

The UN envoy has been attempting to convene the 12-member De-escalation and Coordination Committee (DCC) in Amman to hash out a joint implementation plan for a ceasefire intended to smooth the way for the resumption of peace talks. On December 18 former Secretary of State John Kerry

said within two weeks of planning he hoped the ceasefire would go into effect and the DCC would relocate to Dhahran Al-Janoub to monitor it, but no further progress on this front was reported in December or January. On January 30 the building in Dhahran Al-Janoub used by the DCC to monitor ceasefires was damaged by cross border shelling.

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

**In a letter to UN Secretary-General Antonio Guterres** on February 10, Supreme Political Council head Saleh Al-Sammad [reportedly](#) called for the term of UN Envoy Ould Cheikh not to be extended, “for failing in his mission and lack of impartiality.” Guterres, the new secretary-general, had a joint press conference with Saudi Foreign Minister Adel Al-Jubeir in Riyadh on February 12. When [questioned](#) about the UN envoy, he responded: “My answer is very simple, our envoy has my full support and I believe that he is doing an impartial work, that he is doing it in a very professional way, and independently of what other people may think, he has my full support.”

**The Hadi government claimed it is ready to send its De-escalation and Coordination Committee (DCC) members to Dhahran Al-Janoub**, according to government officials. The Saudi Press Agency [reported](#) on February 20 that Foreign Minister Abdulmalik Al-Mekhlafi, who serves as head of Hadi’s delegation for the peace process, said the government is ready to relocate the DCC and reactivate the Local Disengagement Councils (LDCs). Meanwhile, Khaled Alyemany, Yemen’s permanent representative to the UN, [said](#) the meeting of DCC members in Jordan, originally proposed on December 18, is still being planned. “So far we are trying to get that meeting,” Alyemany said. “Our intention is to push the Houthis to send a representative... if they send their representative then we can have meetings in Jordan to establish the monitoring of cessation of hostilities.”

## Analysis:

US Secretary of State Rex Tillerson took office on February 2 and in his first month spoke little of what Yemen policy the new administration intends to advance. However, there are indications Tillerson may place less emphasis on the UN-sponsored peace process than his predecessor, and instead lend increased support to the coalition and President Hadi through weapons deals, intelligence sharing, and diplomatic support. The US appeared to take a more active role at the February 16 Quad meeting on the issue of initiating a ceasefire, and Operation Golden Spear continued expanding along the coast with apparent tacit support from the US. Furthermore, where Obama’s stance on Iran in Yemen was characterized by a foreign policy of appeasing Saudi Arabia following the landmark nuclear deal, the Trump administration appears to consider Iran a more hostile and direct threat toward US interests.

Coming into the position, Tillerson appeared to signal a fresh start rather than a continuation of Kerry’s efforts to renew peace talks. Jon Finan, former director of policy planning at the US State Department and Kerry’s former chief of staff, said Kerry’s only contact with Tillerson during the transition was one short phone call. [Speaking](#) on New York public radio station WNYC, Finan said Kerry’s staff prepared information and memos for the new teams, but “the vast majority of us, I would say almost all of us, never actually met with the people who were coming into fill those positions, or even in many cases knew the names of the people who were going to fill those positions by the time we left.” Ahead of the February 16 meeting the State Department planned to be “primarily in [listening mode](#)” and said it would view the meeting “as an opportunity for [Tillerson] to sync up with these parties.” The so-called Kerry Plan, which proposed simultaneous military and political tracks for the roadmap, did not appear to be aggressively pursued, although Mathew Tueller, who stayed on as the US ambassador to Yemen, later [told](#) Asharq Al-Awsat the new US administration intends to continue with the so-called Kerry Plan unchanged.

The Yemeni government is encouraging the Trump administration’s more militaristic, Iran-centric outlook by criticizing the political initiative of the last administration while continuing to play up Iran’s involvement in Yemen. At a talk in Washington in mid-February titled [Challenges to the Yemeni Peace Process](#), Khaled Alyemany, Yemen’s perma-

ment representative to the UN, criticized Kerry's "kidnapping" of the peace process. Alyemany said UNSC Resolution 2216 was being dealt with by the Houthis – not fully, but "they accepted to take 2216 as the basis for the settlement" before the Kerry Plan "came to kidnap the entire peace process." He went on to speak of the Obama administration's weaknesses and how Trump is, in his view, renewing America's top spot in the world. On February 19, it was [reported](#) that on behalf of the Yemeni government Alyemany requested the UN designate the Houthis a "terrorist" group.

This came after former US National Security advisor Michael Flynn referred to the Houthis as such. "Just this week, Iran tested a ballistic missile, and one of its proxy terrorist groups attacked a Saudi vessel in the Red Sea," Flynn said in a [statement](#). Republican-leaning news stations are also playing a key role furthering the divisive rhetoric. For example, Fox News – America's most-watched news channel – [called](#) that attack an "Iran-backed suicide attack" and said "US defense analysts believe those behind the attack either thought the bomber was striking an American warship or that this was a 'dress rehearsal' similar to the attack on the USS Cole." (The head of the US Naval Forces Central Command later [said](#) it was an unmanned remote-control boat, and no evidence surfaced of Iranian involvement or intent to target a US ship).

The late January US raid on a village in Al-Baydha that left [25 civilians dead](#), according to the Bureau for Investigative Journalism, did little to stifle relations between Hadi and the US. Despite The New York Times [writing](#) on February 7 that "Yemen has withdrawn permission for the United States to run Special Operations ground missions against suspected terrorist groups in the country, according to American officials," the Yemen embassy in Washington [said](#) the opposite on February 8: "The Government of Yemen looks forward to strengthening and enhancing such cooperative operations with the new US administration." US Central Command also said there had been no orders to cease operations in Yemen.

It is often said that further political marginalization of and military action against the Houthis will drive the group closer to Iran, but this may be confusing the directionality of the relationship. The more the US administration and the Gulf states involve themselves in Yemen, the higher the rate of return Iran is likely to perceive for its investment in the country. Tehran's foreign policy in Yemen is unlikely to change if the Houthis become "closer" because it

already has well-established political and economic ties to the group and its policies in Yemen are driven by primarily regional rather than local considerations, namely to keep Saudi Arabia and its neighbors tied up in a costly war in their backyard while pursuing more important objectives in Iraq and Syria. Furthermore, by publicly and divisively playing up Iran's involvement in Yemen, the US is putting itself in a position to be more easily goaded – something that factions from all sides may be keen to do or capitalize on. The Hadi government is encouraging a US foreign policy that provides more diplomatic protection and improves Hadi's international legitimacy, while in the past Houthis have used US military action to launch recruitment drives and military elements in Iran may seek to inflame tensions with the US ahead of the upcoming presidential election.

## Military and Security developments

**Mocha was taken under the full control of Hadi-aligned forces** and their coalition partners, and President Hadi [said](#) Hodeidah governorate is the next stage in Operation Golden Spear. Despite the announcement on January 23 that Mocha had been retaken, and further premature announcements including by [Reuters](#) on February 7, major clashes occurred early in the month, including on February 8 with AFP [reporting](#) at least 32 fighters were killed in Mocha, bringing the total number of reported combatant deaths in the coastal offensive to 400 in less than a month-and-a-half period. The UN Office of the High Commissioner for Human Rights [said](#) the "whole city and port" were under government control on February 9, and several news organizations and spokespeople have placed February 10 as the date of full, albeit fragile control over Mocha.

On February 11, Major General Ahmed Sayyef Al-Yafai, commander of Operation Golden Spear, [said](#) Mocha was safe for displaced residents to return to. The general said the Houthis planted sophisticated landmines that killed many government forces, and part of the reason for the delay in taking the port town was that his troops moved on it via the surrounding inland mountains rather than the main road to avoid landmines. Hadi-aligned and coalition forces made progress in [Yakhtul](#), which sits about 14 km north of Mocha on the route to Hodeidah, while Houthis were [said](#) to be fortifying their positions in southern districts of Hodeidah. Al-



though under nominal control, on February 13 at least eight were killed in [clashes](#) in Mocha, and on February 22 on the outskirts of Mocha town a missile fired by Houthi/Saleh forces [killed](#) Major General Al-Yafai, who was also the deputy chief of staff in Hadi's army.

**AQAP briefly captured territory in Abyan in February**, with militants temporarily taking over several villages early in the month. AQAP members [attacked](#) the town of Lawder on February 2, killing six soldiers, and by the next day had advanced into several villages in Abyan, setting up checkpoints on key roads and taking over government offices in Lawder and Khanfar districts. The move by AQAP followed months of hit-and-run attacks on security forces, and occurred immediately after the UAE-sponsored Security Belt Forces withdrew from parts of the governorate. Some outlets reported the withdrawal came as a result of salaries not being paid or concerns over security, but in his February 5 [resignation letter](#), the commander of the Security Belt Forces in Abyan, General Abdullah Al-Fadhli, said some of his forces were ordered to withdraw without his consent. AQAP was pushed out of the villages and towns they captured, but continued to mount guerrilla attacks and undermine local authority. A February 24 suicide bomber in a truck [killed](#) eight and injured 11 at the gate of an army base in Zinjibar, the capital of Abyan.

**The Presidential Guard and the militia in charge of Aden airport clashed** on February 12, exposing the wider rift between forces loyal to President Hadi and those affiliated with the UAE. The clashes occurred after a dispute emerged between Hadi and the head of the airport forces, Saleh Al-Omairi (better known as Abu Qahtan), who is loyal to the UAE. Abu Qahtan met Hadi a week prior and complained resistance and military leaders affiliated with Hadi had received salaries while his troops went unpaid. He requested another meeting with Hadi on February 11, which Hadi refused to grant and instead ordered Abu Qahtan to be replaced. When Abu Qahtan refused, Hadi ordered the Presidential Guard to take control of the airport. The Presidential Guard, backed by troops commanded by several resistance leaders in Aden aligned with Hadi, were intervened by the UAE-sponsored Security Belt Forces and clashes broke out at the airport and a major intersection in Aden.

[Reuters](#) and [AP](#) reported the coalition was supporting the Presidential Guard and that a coalition helicopter struck the airport forces, but local sources reported an apache helicopter hit a vehicle belonging to the Presidential Guard. A ceasefire was reached that held for the remainder of February and Abu Qahtan remained in charge of the airport forces. However, the situation remains fragile and further clashes are anticipated between Hadi and the UAE, to be played out through affiliated local forces in Aden. On February 27 Hadi traveled to the UAE but it does not appear any agreement was reached.

**An airstrike on a funeral in Arhab district of Sana'a killed at least nine women** and a child on February 15, and left dozens injured. The women were at a house [said](#) to belong to local tribal leader Mohammed Hadi Al-Najai, and were gathered to mourn the death of a local woman. Hours after the airstrike, the Houthis [claimed](#) to have fired a ballistic missile at Abha Airport, which is a civilian airport in the Asir region of Saudi Arabia. They said the missile was in revenge for the airstrike and claimed it "hit the target accurately," although no evidence arose and Saudi Arabia [said](#) it was intercepted. The Houthis capitalized on the incident by holding a large [protest](#) in Sana'a, attended by senior Houthi officials. Supreme Political Council head Saleh Al-Sammad also made a [visit](#) to the site of the attack.

**The parliament of Somaliland voted to allow a UAE military base** to be established in the port of [Berbera](#). This will be the country's second military base on the east coast of Africa, the other being at the port of Assab in Eritrea, which is currently being used by the UAE to conduct operations in Yemen. It is also speculated the UAE could be constructing a military base off the west coast of Yemen, [according](#) to Jane's Defense Weekly. "Large runway construction project underway on Yemen's Mayyun/Perim island in Bab Al-Mandeb, probably another UAE military base in the making," one of their researchers wrote.

**The US Air Force has carried out 1,778 mid-air refueling sorties** since April 2015 in support of the Saudi-led coalition, [according to](#) the spokeswoman of the force's central command, Kathleen Atanasoff. This amounts to 7,564 refueling "events," or "around 54 million pounds of fuel off-loaded in support of Saudi operations in Yemen" – a 50 percent increase in 2016 compared to the year before.

## RECOMMENDED READING AND VIEWING:

- The [final report](#) of the UN Panel of Experts on Yemen was released to the public in February. The 242-page report, submitted to the UN Security Council in January, provides an excellent overview and thorough analysis of developments in Yemen. (Note: On February 23 the UNSC [extended](#) the Panel's mandate for another year).
- A report by the International Crisis Group, [Yemen's Al-Qaeda: Expanding the Base](#), delves into the factors driving the group's successes and motivating new recruits, suggesting steps local and international stakeholders should take to reverse its gains.
- [Is Yemen the First Battleground in the Trump Administration's Confrontation with Iran?](#) That is the question discussed by the speakers at this talk, held at the Arab Gulf States Institute in Washington.
- [Cucumber seeds and beekeeping kits: the new ways to fight famine](#), an article in the Guardian, ties Yemen's looming famine in with the larger regional crisis in food insecurity.
- The Yemen Embassy in Washington DC released a short paper presenting the government's take on the [Economy of Yemen: Background, Challenges and Key Issues](#).

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