

THE YEMEN PEACE PROJECT

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Recent Developments in Yemen's Armed Conflict **February 22, 2016**

This report summarizes important recent developments regarding Yemen's armed conflict and the worsening humanitarian crisis in the country. The Yemen Peace Project provides periodic reports to policymakers and nongovernmental actors, intended to inform discussions of US policies toward Yemen and America's role in the conflict. The body of this report includes hyperlinks to primary sources referenced.

Summary of issues covered:

- In early February, Saudi Arabia sent official diplomatic messages warning UN staff and humanitarian agencies to leave areas under Houthi control, indicating that the Saudi-led coalition would not guarantee their safety from airstrikes. The Saudi warning has negatively impacted aid operations.
- Both the Saudi-led coalition and the Houthi-Saleh alliance are imposing blockades on food and other necessities in parts of the country. International law and US military regulations prohibit the use of starvation of civilians as a military tactic.
- The World Food Program was recently able to deliver medical supplies to the city of Ta'iz for the first time in months. The city, which remains under siege by Houthi-Saleh forces, is approaching a famine-level food emergency.
- The Saudi-led coalition has used US-made cluster bombs in heavily populated areas, despite US prohibitions on such use. The ordnance used also fails to meet US standards for reliability.
- Houthi-Saleh forces are conducting a massive crackdown on peaceful opposition activists, politicians, and journalists. As many as 800 people have been forcibly disappeared by Houthi authorities in and around San'a, according to local sources.
- UN Special Envoy for Yemen Ismail Ould Cheikh Ahmed told the UNSC that parties to the conflict had not yet been able to agree on terms for new peace talks.
- The UN Special Advisors on the Prevention of Genocide and the Responsibility to Protect reported that all sides in the conflict have committed serious violations of international humanitarian law.
- According to UNICEF, well over a million children have been displaced from their homes by the war. At least 1.3 million children under the age of five face severe malnutrition, and over two million have been prevented from attending school.

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Belligerents' interference with humanitarian assistance

On February 11, news sources [reported](#) that the Saudi mission in Geneva had informed the UN's Office for the Coordination of Humanitarian Affairs (OCHA) via *note verbal* to [notify](#) all international organizations working in Yemen to relocate outside "...regions where the Houthi militias and the groups belonging to them are activating." A similar letter was sent on the same day by the Saudi Embassy in London to international aid organizations and their employees. Apart from the Southern city of Aden, the Houthi/Saleh forces control areas where the majority of Yemen's civilian population lives, including San'a, where most aid and UN operations are headquartered.

Briefing the Security Council on February 16, Under Secretary General for Humanitarian Affairs Stephen O'Brien reported the Saudi notification, noting that it had [already impacted](#) the humanitarian community's work on important missions. O'Brien also reported other Saudi interference with humanitarian activities, including diversion of a World Food Program chartered vessel *en route* to deliver [food aid to an approved port in Yemen](#) to the Saudi Arabian port of Jizan.

O'Brien reminded parties to the armed conflict of their duty in the conduct of military operations to protect all civilian persons and objects, including humanitarian and healthcare workers and facilities. He stated that UN agencies and their partners will continue to deliver impartial and neutral assistance across Yemen according to need.

While Saudi Arabia and its allies continue to hinder the flow of aid and commercial shipments into Yemen, forces aligned with the Houthi movement and former president Ali Abdullah Saleh are also imposing blockades inside the country, most notably in and around Yemen's second-largest city, Ta'iz. The World Food Program (WFP) reports that Ta'iz is suffering a [severe food emergency](#), only one step above the UN's "famine" classification. WFP was able to deliver food inside the most hard-hit area of the [besieged city](#) in mid- February. On February 10, following months of a siege on Ta'iz by Houthi-Saleh forces, The World Health Organization (WHO) was allowed to deliver medical supplies to three hospitals in Ta'iz. Three districts of the city remain [inaccessible](#) to medical assistance efforts and throughout the city patients are suffering from both chronic diseases and emergency injuries that cannot be addressed due to lack of basic medical supplies. In recent weeks the UN has made repeated calls to allow humanitarian access to besieged areas throughout the country.

The Director of Operations at the International Committee of the Red Cross (ICRC) [reported](#) on 11 February on his visit to Yemen: "Their quest for survival, food, water and shelter is a daily struggle amidst continuous air strikes and ground fighting. The restrictions on the movement of fuel, food and medicine into and around the country are making the crisis even worse." In Yemen the destruction of civilian infrastructure is a daily occurrence. More than 2.7 million people have had to flee their homes; more than 6,000 have been killed. Over 30,000, including women and children have been injured, while health facilities have suffered more than 100 attacks since March 2015.

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Ten of Yemen's 22 governorates, some 7.6 million people, are currently at the WFP's "severe food emergency" level. The YPP notes that the use of [starvation and blockade of food](#) supplies to a civilian population as a military tactic is widely considered to be a war crime. The new Department of Defense Law of War Manual [affirms](#) that the starvation of civilians as a method of conflict is prohibited, regardless of conflict classification.

Belligerents' use of prohibited arms and tactics

In a detailed [report](#) supported by on the ground investigations, issued in [mid-February](#), Human Rights Watch reported the Saudi-led coalition's use of US-provided cluster munitions in San'a and other heavily populated areas of Yemen, causing numerous civilian casualties. Similar evidence was provided by Amnesty International [in a January](#) report. While the United States and Saudi Arabia are not parties to the international ban on cluster munitions, US law does prohibit the use of such weapons in areas with civilian populations. US law also bans the export of cluster munitions with a failure rate higher than one percent. Evidence gathered by HRW proves that the US-made weapons used by the coalition have a failure rate that far exceeds that standard. Both the coalition's use of these weapons and the US government's provision of the munitions violate international and US law.

Human Rights Watch [has documented](#) a massive crackdown by Houthi-Saleh forces on peaceful opposition activists, politicians, and journalists. As many as 800 people have been forcibly disappeared by Houthi authorities in and around San'a, according to local sources. Based on interviews with witnesses and family members, the report claims that Houthi authorities are depriving many detainees of food and water, preventing them from contacting anyone on the outside, and holding them in otherwise illegal and abusive conditions. One journalism student, for example, who has been imprisoned for more than four months, was "first held for three days without food or being allowed to use the bathroom." A professor at San'a University's medical school "was being held in a three-by-three meter cell with 14 other men and was only allowed to use the bathroom once a day."

United Nations officials brief the Security Council

Special Envoy Ismail Ould Cheikh Ahmed [reported](#) to a February 17 session of the Council that "The parties to the conflict are divided over whether a new round of talks should be convened with or without a new cessation of hostilities." He noted that the previous round of talks in December had included creation of a De-Escalation and Coordination Committee. This committee has had some successes; however, the security situation in Yemen has deteriorated dramatically in the past two months. This has been accompanied by a continued deterioration in living conditions for civilians amounting to what under Secretary General Stephen O'Brien told the Council was a "humanitarian catastrophe".

The chairman of the Sanctions Committee's Panel of Experts also [briefed the Council](#) (covered on video of counsel session) on the dire humanitarian situation and called on all parties to respond to the Panel's requests for information and to cooperate with the Panel's members during their visits to Yemen. In January a [widely leaked report](#) by the Panel stated that coalition

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air strikes had targeted civilians in a “widespread and systematic” matter. It also confirmed that civilians were being deliberately starved as a war tactic.

In a February 16 [joint statement](#), the Secretary General's Special Advisor on the Responsibility to Protect and the SG's Adviser on the Prevention of Genocide reported that serious abuses and violations of international law by all sides in the Yemen conflict have been extensively documented, including by the United Nations. “Evidence gathered suggests that some of these violations may amount to war crimes and crimes against humanity.” The statement concluded, “We must, collectively, make the protection of the civilian populations of Yemen our primary consideration if we are to avoid a catastrophe in this region.”

[UNICEF reported](#) in January that the deadly combination of military attacks, disease and deprivation has had a particularly serious impact on children. Children make up at least half of the 2.7 million Yemenis displaced from their homes, while 1.3 million children under five face acute malnutrition, and at least 2 million cannot go to school.

Other recent reports on Yemen's conflict

This section summarizes only reports that set out a broad, comprehensive review of the Yemen conflict. There are many more specialized reports, including some referenced above, that provide coverage of selected incidents and issues. Information about current developments is provided on a daily and hourly basis on the YPP's blog, Facebook page, and Twitter feed.

- **The Yemen Peace Project, *United States' Policy and Yemen's Armed Conflict*, September 2015.** [This report](#), prepared in cooperation with San'a Center for Strategic Studies and Resonate Yemen, reviews the origins of the internal conflict, its transformation in 2014-15 into a countrywide, internationalized armed conflict, devastating the economy and political structure of the State and resulting in a humanitarian catastrophe. The report focuses upon US policy and engagement, military and diplomatic. It concludes by recognizing the crucial role of the US in bringing Yemen's warring parties to the table to secure an end to the present hostilities. Just as important, the report notes, will be the US role in a postwar Yemen. US policymakers should begin working now to develop a just and constructive US policy, in line with America's values and its obligations under international law, which recognizes the civil and human rights of the Yemeni people. Several specific steps to this end are set out.
- **UN Office for the Coordination of Humanitarian Affairs, *Humanitarian Needs Overview*, November 2015.** [This report](#) is a very comprehensive, annual overview prepared by OCHA.
- **International Crisis Group, *Yemen: Is Peace Possible?* February 2016.** [This report](#) deals extensively with the principal belligerents, the regional context, and the UN – led negotiations. Various recommendations are provided including steps that could improve chances for a cease fire and durable political settlement.

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About the Yemen Peace Project

The Yemen Peace Project (YPP) works to transform the relationship between the United States and Yemen by promoting understanding between Americans and Yemenis and advocating for a peaceful, constructive foreign policy.

To this end, the YPP seeks to provide accurate and in-depth information about Yemen's political, social, and cultural issues; to facilitate communication between Yemenis and non-Yemenis; to create new opportunities for Yemenis to make their voices heard.

For more information about the YPP and our programs, please contact executive director William Picard at picard@yemenpeaceproject.org.