

Conflict in Yemen: ***The Forgotten Crisis***

22nd October 2015

A report by the **All Party
Parliamentary Group for Yemen**



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Secretariat provided by the **Human Security Centre**

This report was produced with the assistance of evidence submitted by:

- Amnesty International
- Danish Refugee Council
- International Coalition of the Red Cross
- MBI Al Jaber Foundation
- Medecins Sans Frontieres (UK)
- Mercy Corps
- Norwegian Refugee Council
- Oxfam International
- Saferworld
- Save the Children
- The Yemen Safe Passage Group
- United Nations World Food Programme

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Contents

3. Introduction from the Chair

4. Background

6. Summary of the Current Crisis

8. Humanitarian Situation

a. A Halted Humanitarian Response

12. Political Situation

- *International Humanitarian Law*

15. Security Situation

- *Intervention and Status on the Ground*
- *Security Challenges for Aid Delivery*
- *British Citizens and Dependents in Yemen*
- *Terrorism*
- *Maritime Security*

21. Role of the United Kingdom

- *Cooperation with Saudi Arabia*
- *Government Statements*
- *Arms Shipments and International Law*

25. Summary of Recommendations

- *Additional Recommendations for Parliamentarians*

1. Introduction from the Chair

Yemen currently faces its greatest crisis.

With 80% of the population in urgent need of humanitarian assistance, 50% of the population lacking regular access to water and over 4,600 people estimated to have died in the conflict, the foremost message of this report is the need for all of the parties to agree to an immediate ceasefire.

In the eyes of many observers, aid workers, and the Yemeni diaspora, Yemen is often seen as a *forgotten conflict*, not attracting the same international and public attention as comparable crises in the region. We believe it is crucial to raise awareness of this tragic crisis, as Yemen remains in critical need of emergency aid and humanitarian assistance.

We come with practical solutions at with practical solutions at the heart of our recommendations, suggesting actions the British government can take in creating the circumstances for a ceasefire, a long-term diplomatic solution, and to ensure emergency aid is able to reach the population.

The international community has acted decisively before to bring Yemen back from the brink. Faced by a crisis of such a vast scale, we need to do so once again. If we do not act now, it may soon be too late.

With Best wishes
for peace
Keith Vaz

Rt Hon Keith Vaz MP

Chair of the All Party Parliamentary Group on Yemen

2. Background

Yemen is a low-income country located in the Middle East, sharing land borders with Saudi Arabia in the north and Oman in the northeast, while its coastline borders the Red Sea to the west and the Gulf of Aden and the Arabian Sea to the south. With a land area of 527,970 square kilometres, Yemen is the second-largest country in the Arabian Peninsula, with a population estimated to be 26.7 million as of July 2015. Sana'a is the largest city in Yemen and the constitutionally recognised capital of the country, though Aden – its second-largest city and largest port – has served as the provisional capital since March 2015 when Sana'a fell to Houthi rebels.

The modern-day Republic of Yemen was formed in 1990, with Ali Abdullah Saleh, who had served as President of North Yemen since 1978, as President. The 2011 revolutions across the Middle East popularly referred to as the 'Arab Spring' also took place in Yemen. In February 2011, people demonstrated against President Saleh's government, which had been in power for almost three decades. Accusations highlighted corruption, lack of reform and a poor human rights record.

On 23 November 2011, President Saleh signed the Gulf Cooperation Council Plan for political transition, agreeing to transfer powers held by his office to his deputy, Vice-President Abd Rabbuh Mansur Hadi.¹ This followed a lengthy process of negotiations, brokered between April and May 2011 with assistance from Saudi Arabia, the US, the UK and the EU. The role of the UK and particularly International Development Minister Alan Duncan was notable in reaching a positive outcome. The agreement provided a basic framework for early presidential elections followed by constitutional revisions, a constitutional referendum and, eventually, new parliamentary elections.

Nearly a month after Yemen held its 21 February 2012 presidential elections, International Development Minister Alan Duncan referred to a "Yemen Paradox", since no real changes took place after Saleh's departure, despite there being a new government.² For some analysts, such as Tobias Thiel at the LSE: as the "deal granted former President [Saleh] immunity in exchange for his resignation", it contained a "fatal flaw: it retired Saleh from the presidency, but not politics." Saleh remained the chairperson of the General People's Congress and continued playing what observers

1 Al Arabiya News, 21 October 2015, <http://www.alarabiya.net/articles/2011/11/23/178702.html>
2 Speech Global Strategic Forum, Wednesday 14th March 2012, House of Lords

described as a “a poisonous role in sabotaging the transition.”³

In September 2012, following a meeting of donors in Saudi Arabia, led by the British government, a \$6.4 billion package of support was finalised. The intent was, as Alan Duncan noted, to “underpin the Yemeni economy, direct funds into infrastructure, and urgently address Yemenis' basic needs, such as healthcare, education and access to sanitation.”⁴ Having pledged \$3.2 billion, Saudi Arabia was the largest donor, while the UK pledged to contribute \$311 million (£196 million) between 2012 and 2015. At the time, this commitment – and the UK’s leadership role in negotiating the package – was welcomed by aid agencies such as Oxfam, as it was to make a real and significant difference to the lives of the 10 million Yemenis most affected by the hunger crisis.⁵

Whilst reiterating that the UK would remain committed to strengthening government systems by working alongside them, Duncan also emphasised that the primary purpose of every pound spent was to tangibly improve the lives of poor Yemenis. He stated in *The Guardian*: “No British money is channeled through the government; it is all managed by trusted partners, whether UN agencies, international NGOs or Yemeni civil society organisations. We are clear that it would be wrong to punish people for having a weak government by withholding aid – and foolhardy not to address the lack of development that can foster a sense of injustice which can exacerbate conflict.”⁶

In response to continued humanitarian and economic problems in the country, a 'Friends of Yemen' conference was held at the British Foreign and Commonwealth Office in London on 7 March 2013, co-hosted by the British Foreign Minister, William Hague; his Yemeni counterpart, Dr Abu Bakr al-Qirbi; and Nizar bin Obaid Madani, the Saudi Foreign Minister.⁷ The group urged the international community to honour aid commitments and accelerate progress on a mutual accountability framework to guide economic policy reform. The UK pledged £70m to Yemen over the next two years, including £4.4 million to support constitutional reform.

3 LSE Middle East Centre Blog, 3 March 2014, <http://blogs.lse.ac.uk/mec/2014/03/03/yemens-negotiated-transition-between-the-elite-and-the-street/>

4 The Guardian, 6 September 2012, <http://www.theguardian.com/global-development/2012/sep/06/money-yemen-humanitarian-crisis>

5 ibid

6 The Guardian, 28 September 2012, <http://www.theguardian.com/global-development/poverty-matters/2012/sep/28/uk-aid-yemen-saves-lives-promote-stability>

7 FCO and Department for International Development, 1 February 2013, <https://www.gov.uk/government/news/uk-priorities-in-yemen>

3. Summary of the Current Crisis

The current conflict in Yemen has roots dating back to 2004, but which greatly escalated in the autumn of 2014 when the rebel group known as the Houthis intensified attacks on the Yemeni government and President Abdu Rabbu Mansour Hadi. The Houthis represent a minority of the Yemeni population and generally belong to the Zaydi strain of Shi'a Islam. The group capitalised on a weak central government and security apparatus to capture much of Yemen, including the capital Sana'a, and to remove President Hadi – whom the UN Security Council has made clear is Yemen's legitimate President, on 20th January 2015.

Following the Houthi takeover of Sana'a – the subject of an urgent question in the House of Commons on 21st January 2015⁸ – a 10-member coalition was formed by Saudi Arabia, including Egypt, Jordan, Sudan, Morocco, Senegal and four other Gulf states, Bahrain, Kuwait, Qatar and the UAE. The Coalition responded in March to the ousted Yemeni President's request for intervention by launching airstrikes targeted at the Houthis. Saudi Arabia's aim for the aerial campaign has been to "restore stability to Yemen by crippling the Houthis", whom they see as an instrument of Iranian power, and ultimately facilitate "returning President Abdu Rabbu Mansour Hadi...back to power".⁹

The Saudi-led intervention provoked a mixed response from the international community. The United States praised the Saudi-led campaign, with Deputy Secretary of State Antony J. Blinken stating that US approval of the campaign was "sending a strong message to the Houthis and their allies that they cannot overrun Yemen by force"¹⁰ and announced on 7th April that it would expedite the delivery of weapons to aid in the offensive. Naril Elaraby, the Secretary-General of the Arab League, and Iyad Ameen Madani, the Secretary-General of the Organisation of Islamic Cooperation, both stated that the actions of Houthi militias had rendered the international intervention necessary. Turkey, Canada, France and the UK also supported the Saudi-led intervention. Noting that recent Houthi actions and expansion were "a further signal of their disregard for the political process" and that "any action taken should be in accordance with international law", the UK's Foreign and Commonwealth Office stated in a press release in March

8 Urgent Question on Yemen, House of Commons, 21 January 2015, <http://www.publications.parliament.uk/pa/cm201415/cmhansrd/cm150121/debtext/150121-0001.htm#15012169000079>

9 The New York Times, 7 April 2015, <http://www.nytimes.com/2015/04/08/world/middleeast/yemen-houthis.html>

10 Reuters, 7 April 2015, <http://www.reuters.com/article/2015/04/07/us-yemen-security-usa-blinken-idUSKBN0MY1IJ20150407>

2015 that it supported the intervention following President Hadi's request for support".¹¹

On the other hand, Iran, which reportedly views the civil war as key to a regional power struggle between itself and Sunni-ruled Saudi Arabia, sent a naval destroyer to waters near Yemen on 8 April 2015, while Iranian President Hassan Rouhani criticised the Saudi-led airstrikes as being "wrong" and a "mistake". Oman, despite being a member of the GCC, also decided not to join the coalition. Russia too opposed the intervention, while the EU warned that military intervention could have serious regional repercussions. Federica Mogherini, the EU's foreign policy chief, stated in March 2015 that "the latest events in Yemen have dramatically worsened the already fragile situation in the country" and that she was "convinced that military action is not a solution".¹²

Five days after Saudi Arabia began its aerial campaign against the Houthi rebels, Saudi-led naval forces imposed a de-facto blockade on ports in Yemen.¹³ The fighting and airstrikes in Yemen have intensified in recent months, with both sides perceived to be preparing for a sustained conflict. Cross-border raids have intensified into Saudi territory, as has the bombing campaign on key infrastructure controlled by the Houthis.

As a result of the aerial and naval blockade, bringing in food, aid, diesel and fuel oil to Yemen has become virtually impossible, with hospitals, schools and water pumps closing down because of the lack of electricity supply. At present, aid agencies believe that 20 million Yemenis (nearly 80% of the population) are in urgent need of food, water and medical aid.¹⁴ The impact of Coalition airstrikes and the de-facto blockade on the humanitarian crisis has compelled both the US and the UK to quietly urge the Saudi-led coalition to exercise greater caution, moderate its tactics and loosen the naval embargo.¹⁵ Concerns have also been raised with the Houthis' indiscriminate shelling of civilian areas.¹⁶ Despite efforts to reignite political reconciliation processes, largely through the United Nations, short truces have failed to hold due to violations and political stagnation, resulting in a worsening humanitarian crisis.

11 FCO Press Release 26 March 2015: The current situation in Yemen

12 EEAS Statement of the High Representative and Vice President Federica Mogherini on the situation in Yemen, Brussels, 26 March 2015.

13 The Wall Street Journal, 30 March 2015, <http://www.wsj.com/articles/airstrikes-hit-yemen-refugee-camp-says-doctors-without-borders-1427739278>

14 The Guardian, 5 June 2015, <http://www.theguardian.com/world/2015/jun/05/saudi-led-naval-blockade-worsens-yemen-humanitarian-disaster>

15 ibid

16 Human Rights Watch, 29th July 2015: <https://www.hrw.org/news/2015/07/29/yemen-houthi-artillery-kills-dozens-aden>

4. Humanitarian Situation

The humanitarian crisis in Yemen is regarded by multiple NGOs and observers to be one of the worst humanitarian crises on the globe. In August 2015, the Head of the International Red Cross, Peter Maurer, stated that after five months of war in Yemen, the destruction appears similar to that seen in Syria after five years. This situation appears to be becoming more severe in the short term. According to the Yemen Safe Passage Group, “with no indication that a ceasefire or political solution is imminent, and the recent failures of any ceasefires being sustained long enough to allow sufficient aid to flow, the humanitarian crisis looks set to deepen.”¹⁷

The ICRC reaffirms that assessment: “The humanitarian toll is devastating. All aspects of life in the country have been affected and no family has remained untouched. The situation is critical.”¹⁸ The Danish Refugee Council estimates that over 4,628 people have died and 28,598 people have been injured as a result of the fighting and bombing campaigns. “This means that on average, 30 people have been killed and 185 injured every day in Yemen since the end of March.”¹⁹ Save the Children reports that 573 children have been killed and 702 have been injured, although they believe the actual numbers of child casualties to be higher.²⁰ Over 1.4 million have been internally displaced.

Hostilities are increasingly taking place in densely populated areas, resulting in high casualties and heightened suffering. As ICRC notes: “Parts of the northern city of Sa’ada have for instance been completely destroyed. The southern cities of Aden and Taiz have also suffered intense hostilities and extensive damage to vital infrastructure.”²¹ Vital infrastructure critical for aid delivery and post-war reconstruction has been severely damaged, including ports, airports, bridges and roads.

More than 23% of Yemen’s health facilities have been damaged since March 2015,²² and at least 160 health care facilities have been closed down completely across the country.²³ In some of the worst affected areas including Taiz, there are only a handful of hospitals still functioning and struggling to cope with an influx of dead and wounded”.²⁴ Yemen had a poverty rate of over 50% prior to the conflict; the fighting has exacerbated this situation.

17 Evidence submitted by Yemen Safe Passage Group

18 Evidence submitted by ICRC

19 Evidence submitted by Danish Refugee Council

20 Evidence submitted by Save the Children

21 Evidence submitted by ICRC

22 Evidence submitted by ICRC

23 Evidence submitted by Amnesty International

24 Evidence submitted by ICRC

The UN World Food Programme reports that “the national average cost of food basket in September was over 30% more than the pre-crisis level which has strained people’s ability to buy food”²⁵ and Oxfam reports that “nearly 25,000 additional people are going hungry each day.”²⁶ This is not limited to the populations living in areas under bombardment.²⁷ Lack of fuel, WFP notes, also continues to restrict food transportation and water pumping.²⁸ Yemen’s already limited water resources have also been strained by the crisis.²⁹ 13 million Yemenis (or 50% of the population) struggle every day to find or buy an adequate amount of clean water to drink or grow crops.³⁰

In addition to emergency needs, longer-term development priorities such as education are effectively halted amidst the violence. An estimated 1.8 million of Yemen’s children are currently out of school. According to the MBI Al Jaber Foundation, “even before the crisis began, armed confrontation during 2011 left circa 820 schools out of service either totally or partially damaged by fighting”. They further added that without an end to the conflict, much needed improvements to the education sector could not commence.³¹

The United Kingdom has been a leader internationally in providing emergency aid to Yemen, recently committing an extra £75 million in response to the humanitarian crisis in Yemen, providing medical supplies, water, food and emergency shelter, as well as supporting UN work to co-ordinate the international humanitarian response.³² The Department for International Development has been widely praised for its response to the worsening humanitarian situation. More countries need to take a similarly active role to provide emergency aid to Yemen, and share this responsibility.

- **Recommendation:** The UK government should ensure that the crisis in Yemen is given a higher priority on the global agenda in the provision of emergency aid, and DFID should continue to lead global efforts in providing emergency assistance to the population.

25 Evidence submitted by WFP

26 Evidence submitted by Oxfam

27 Evidence submitted by Mercy Corps

28 Evidence submitted by WFP

29 Evidence submitted by Norwegian Refugee Council

30 The Guardian, 2 April 2015, <http://www.theguardian.com/global-development-professionals-network/2015/apr/02/water-scarcity-yemen-conflict>

31 Evidence submitted by MBI Al Jaber Foundation

32 Parliamentary Question 11647, 13 October 2015

A Halted Humanitarian Response

The de-facto blockade, which continues to be enforced by the Coalition, is one of the immediate issues to be addressed to ensure aid agencies are able to manage the growing humanitarian crisis. As UN and aid agencies report, only a small number of aid ships have been allowed to unload; many have been turned away or have had to wait for long periods until they could be searched for weapons; and most commercial shipping continues to be blocked. This is particularly serious when one considers, as Save the Children states, that “Yemen is critically dependent on imports, relying on external sources for 70% of its fuel requirements, 90% of its food and 100% of its medical supplies.”³³ According to the ICRC, “food supplies and other basic necessities are critically low: Yemen used to import 90% of its goods; only 15% of which is now entering the country.”³⁴

The UK and US governments have reportedly begun to suggest alternatives to the present arrangements to ease the naval embargo. The UK has “urge[d] the coalition to quickly move to targeted naval interdictions of incoming commercial ships”; and its Royal Navy has liaison officers working with their Saudi counterparts to urge a “more targeted, intelligence-driven approach”. Following this and other similar suggestions by Western powers, the Coalition has committed to “move towards ‘intelligence-led interdiction’, stopping and searching individual ships on which there was good reason to believe arms were being smuggled, and away from a blanket policy of blocking the majority of vessels approaching Yemeni ports”.³⁵ This commitment is achievable, as many of the shipments to Yemen originate from Saudi ports.

An increased flow of humanitarian aid should also be viewed as in the interest of the Coalition, both to end any speculation that starvation is being used as a military strategy, as well as to avoid a famine and economic disaster that Saudi Arabia would not want to occur on its doorstep.³⁶ Allowing a normalised flow of commercial shipping and aid would also provide the Government of Yemen and Saudi Coalition moral and diplomatic high ground in a messy conflict with high civilian casualties.

33 Evidence submitted by Save the Children

34 Evidence submitted by ICRC

35 The Guardian, 5 June 2015, <http://www.theguardian.com/world/2015/jun/05/saudi-led-naval-blockade-worsens-yemen-humanitarian-disaster>

36 Evidence submitted by the Yemen Safe Passage Group



- **Recommendation:** Lifting the de-facto blockade must be priority for the UK and international partners, who should follow up on Saudi Arabia's recent commitment away from blanket inspection of all shipping. The United Nations recently announced in September that a new Verification and Identification Mission (UNVIM) had been agreed, intended to ensure that commercial deliveries by sea do not include shipments of arms. The UK can support a speedy empowerment of UNVIM to allow commercial shipping to be delivered at normalised levels, whilst working with Saudi Arabia to a streamlined, targeted inspections programme, to allow vital aid to reach the population

5. Political Situation

An immediate cessation of hostilities, followed by longer-term framework for negotiations should be the priority of the international community. Multiple peace talks held by the United Nations have been the primary avenue for negotiations so far, but positive outcomes of these talks – temporary ceasefires – have so far been broken and short-lived.

As a result of negotiations so far, airstrikes paused for a 5-day humanitarian ceasefire between 12th and 17th May 2015.³⁷ On 9 July, the UN announced an unconditional truce for Ramadan 10-17 July. However, fighting continued on both sides and both called for the UN to monitor each other's violations of the ceasefire.³⁸ Despite an inability to sustain the outcomes of these talks, there is no doubt that without a political solution there can be no end to the humanitarian catastrophe currently unfolding. The primary issues facing the pursuance of a negotiated solution are:

Neither side has achieved a decisive military victory

Despite initial successes in the Saudi-coalition's military campaign, the conflict has become increasingly intractable, with neither side feeling compelled to make significant concessions. On 13th September, President Hadi rejected a round of talks, and instead launched what an official described as the "largest and fiercest offensive since operations began."³⁹ Despite the escalation to a ground offensive, the Houthi rebels have not yet been driven to sue for peace.

Limited international pressure

The conflict in Yemen has not received political, diplomatic or public attention on the scale of the conflict in Syria, or airstrikes on Daesh in Iraq. The Yemen Safe Passage Group has called for the conflict to be moved to a higher diplomatic level. The international community, including the UK, has not put significant pressure on the warring parties to end the conflict diplomatically.⁴⁰

Lack of Trust

Distrust between the two sides permeates through negotiations. This is unsurprising as the conflict began when the Houthi rebels abandoned the agreement political framework and attacked Sana'a.

37 The Guardian, 26 July 2015, <http://www.theguardian.com/world/2015/jul/26/saudi-arabia-led-coalition-calls-ceasefire-yemen-120-die-airstrike>

38 Al Jazeera, 10 July 2015, <http://www.aljazeera.com/news/2015/07/announces-humanitarian-truce-yemen-150709161417747.html>

39 France24, 13 September 2015, <http://www.france24.com/en/20150913-yemen-exiled-president-hadi-rejects-talks-launches-offensive-houthi-rebels>

40 Evidence submitted by the Yemen Safe Passage Group

The UN-brokered ceasefires of 11th July and 26th July both broke down within hours, when fighting and air-strikes began shortly after the agreements were made.⁴¹ Peace talks in June ended in failure when the Houthis and exiled government could not even agree to communicate directly.⁴²

These factors are relevant beyond a ceasefire alone, as whilst the international community should facilitate a peace process, we must recognise that any long term settlement must ultimately emerge from the Yemeni factions themselves, and that this would need to be sustained.

- **Recommendation:** The international community and the UK should increase the level of diplomatic pressure on the warring parties to agree and sustain a temporary ceasefire in the short term, whilst forwarding a long-term diplomatic resolution to the crisis. This will necessitate raising the crisis in Yemen to more senior diplomatic levels.

One factor which has also had an impact on negotiations is UN Security Council Resolution 2216 (passed in April), which Oxfam describes as a “stumbling block to a peaceful resolution of the conflict”. It is deemed to be so as it penalises and sets conditions for the Houthis alone.⁴³ As a result, it has been used as a political instrument by both the Coalition/Government of Yemen and Houthis to justify non-participation in peace talks. The Resolution has also been used to continue the de facto blockade, as it includes an arms embargo on the Houthis.

Recent statements by the Houthis have demonstrated more willingness, in principle, to implement the resolution and the peace plan brokered by the UN Special Envoy to Yemen, Ismail Ould Cheikh Ahmed, offering an opportunity for the international community to push for “meaningful peace talks without preconditions.”⁴⁴

- **Recommendation:** Should UN Security Council Resolution 2216 continue to serve as a block to a negotiated solution, the UK should support a new resolution which demands an immediate ceasefire, free flow of humanitarian supplies into and around Yemen, and the reinstatement of previously agreed outcomes of the National Dialogue Conference in January 2014 and the Peace and National Partnership Agreement in September 2014.

41 Al Jazeera, 11 July 2015, <http://www.aljazeera.com/news/2015/07/yemen-truce-effect-150710220440465.html>

42 Washington Post, 19th June 2015, https://www.washingtonpost.com/world/yemen-peace-talks-end-without-agreement--or-a-cease-fire/2015/06/19/cdabaea0-169e-11e5-8457-4b431bf7ed4c_story.html

43 Evidence submitted by Oxfam

44 Evidence submitted by Oxfam

International Humanitarian Law

Multiple observers have raised concerns that International Humanitarian Law has been breached during the conflict. The United Kingdom has a responsibility to promote and protect international law. Any breaches by either party should be strongly condemned.

Accusations of breaches of international law largely focus on fighting and bombings which have harmed civilians and civilian infrastructure. Amnesty International in particular has publicly condemned such breaches, stating both sides have carried out indiscriminate attacks using imprecise weapons, such as artillery and mortar fire in heavily populated civilian areas.⁴⁵ The use of certain weapons has also been raised in human rights accusations, and Saudi Arabia admitted to using CBU-105 cluster munitions following accusations from Human Rights Watch, but stressed they were used on Houthi armour assets and not in population centres.⁴⁶

Save the Children identify one example where a UNICEF warehouse in Dhamar (south of Sana'a) storing supplies for 11,000 people was destroyed in a coalition airstrike on 17 September.⁴⁷ Pro-Houthi forces were responsible for indiscriminate artillery strikes into populated areas in Aden in July, which Human Rights Watch believe were "in violation of the laws of war."⁴⁸ Houthi forces have also been accused of a widespread use of child soldiers.

Diplomatic pressure is growing on this issue, and the Dutch government led an effort – which was rejected - on 2 October to mandate an independent U.N. Investigation on human rights breaches.⁴⁹ Whilst both parties dispute any allegations that they have deliberately targeted civilians and civilian infrastructure, the political reality is that any damage, intentional or unintentional, to the civilian population will undermine legitimacy in their cause.

- **Recommendation:** All parties should take immediate measures to prevent any damage to the civilian population and infrastructure, and stop any and all potential breaches of international humanitarian law. International actors such as the UK should monitor and condemn breaches by all sides. The growing international and diplomatic pressure should be used to show both sides that an immediate ceasefire is necessary.

45 Evidence submitted by Amnesty International

46 Human Rights Watch, 3 May 2015 www.hrw.org/news/2015/05/03/yemen-saudi-led-airstrikes-used-cluster-munitions

47 Evidence submitted by Save the Children

48 Human Rights Watch, 29 July 2015 www.hrw.org/news/2015/07/29/yemen-houthi-artillery-kills-dozens-aden

49 Reuters, 2 October 2015 www.reuters.com/article/2015/10/02/us-yemen-rights-idUSKCN0RW1ES20151002

6. Security Situation

Intervention and Status on the Ground

The Saudi-led intervention began on 26th March 2015, when Saudi Arabia began a bombing campaign to force Houthi withdrawal from key areas in Yemen, spearheading a coalition of 10 (mostly Arab, Sunni) countries.⁵⁰ The operation, codenamed “Operation Decisive Storm”, was a countrywide air campaign against Houthis and allied military units loyal to former President Saleh.

Various Houthi-controlled targets have been struck including radar installations; airbases; Houthi-seized tanks and other armoured vehicles; missile facilities; arms depots; etc. In addition to airstrikes, the coalition appears to be airdropping weapons and medical supplies to pro-Hadi fighters in Aden.⁵¹ The de-facto blockade by Saudi and Egyptian naval vessels was implemented to enforce an arms embargo (primarily to prevent Iran from supplying the Houthis with any military hardware). The US and Pakistan have lent naval support to this effort.

On 21 April 2015, Saudi Arabia announced the end of Decisive Storm, having successfully “eliminated the threat.” They then announced the next phase of their intervention, Operation Renewal of Hope, which would focus more on the political process, but retain objectives from Decisive Storm such as “confronting terrorism” and “preventing any moves by the Houthi militias and their allies to acquire or use weapons seized from the Yemeni armed forces or abroad.”⁵² Despite this announcement, the no fly zone (NFZ), airstrikes and arms embargo continued.

Despite the initial description of the Saudi-led intervention as a “short, sharp campaign” by Yemen's Foreign Minister Riad Yassin,⁵³ the aerial campaign has, now over six months in, escalated into a ground offensive. Many of the Coalition's partners previously stated they would be averse to a ground war, such as Egypt, which recently provided 800 troops for this purpose. On 8th September, it was reported that the Saudi-led alliance has deployed 10,000 troops to Yemen.⁵⁴

In return, Houthi forces have responded by launching incursions into Saudi Arabia, reportedly

50 Al Arabiya News, 26 March 2015, <http://english.alarabiya.net/en/perspective/features/2015/03/26/Allies-back-Saudi-led-Decisive-Storm-op-in-Yemen-with-fighter-jets-.html>

51 The Huffington Post, 3 April 2015, http://www.huffingtonpost.com/2015/04/03/saudi-weapons-airdrop-aden_n_6999576.html

52 Saudi Embassy in Washington, 21 April 2015, <https://www.saudiembassy.net/press-releases/press04211501.aspx>

53 BBC News, 27 March 2015, www.bbc.co.uk/news/world-middle-east-32082426

54 Reuters, 8 September 2015, <http://in.reuters.com/article/2015/09/08/yemen-security-idINL5N11E1DO20150908>

“seizing towns and even military installations”⁵⁵ They have also exchanged fire across the border, where in one example in July three Saudi soldiers and seven border guards were killed. A particularly worrying use of force has been the launching of Scud missile by Houthi forces into Saudi Arabia, which has been attempted several times during the conflict.⁵⁶ Their efforts to take key cities such as Aden also led to significant damage to the civilian population from shelling.

Given that military action is not having the desired effect for the Coalition's forces, whose primary desire for the intervention was a stable Yemen headed by the government in exile, the stagnating conflict should be seen as an opportunity for the UK and other international partners to offer the combatants a ‘way out’. The Houthis are losing ground in the current Coalition offensive; however it could take a long time before these gains are decisive.

The Coalition has now invested significant domestic, military and diplomatic capital into defeating the Houthis, but the diplomatic and military resources this has required have gone far beyond what would have been deemed acceptable when the conflict began. Likewise, the Houthi rebels would not have expected that their coup would have led to a long term, destructive conflict.

The conflict has led to an unprecedented humanitarian crisis, near-famine and economic collapse, which will certainly have destabilising implications to the region, such as refugee flows and the growth of extremist groups. Neither the Houthis nor the Coalition desire these outcomes, and if the humanitarian crisis worsens, there will not be a country remaining to govern.

- **Recommendation:** The stagnating military situation is an opportunity for an international actor with a long-standing relationship with Saudi Arabia and Yemeni exile government to push for a diplomatic solution which can allow the coalition to 'save face', and the Houthi rebels to reach a diplomatic solution in the face of a military offensive. Given the severe humanitarian situation, this offers all parties an opportunity to cease military operations for humanitarian reasons and recover moral and diplomatic capital.
 - The UK government in particular has an opportunity to participate in the process as an “honest broker”. Saudi Arabia should be approached with practical solutions at the heart of the negotiating process.

⁵⁵ Financial Times, 20 October 2015: <http://www.ft.com/cms/s/0/4286e318-7705-11e5-a95a-27d368e1ddf7.html#axzz3pEcymEq2>

⁵⁶ Reuters, 26 August 2015 <http://www.reuters.com/article/2015/08/26/us-yemen-security-idUSKCN0QV0NQ20150826>

Security Challenges for Aid Delivery

The danger to aid workers within the country are severe: on 28th September, two volunteers working with the Yemeni Red Crescent Society were killed along with other civilians during an airstrike in the Al-Swaida area of Taiz. Two ICRC staff members were killed on the 2nd of September in the Amran Governorate. ICRC's Offices in Aden were also attacked by armed gunmen on the 24th of August. Since the start of the crisis in March, a total of six Yemen Red Crescent volunteers have been killed while carrying out their humanitarian work.

Medecins Sans Frontieres detail similar challenges, stating that as the frontline is constantly shifting, MSF constantly struggles to supply hospitals, or procure authorization to give medical supply to these hospitals. Mercy Corps state in their evidence that, "with regards to security, we would like to highlight the fact that lawlessness prevails in Aden, evidenced by an incident of looting of our office just this week." They also state that in some areas, "security is so bad (with the presence of snipers, shelling, airstrikes, and general criminality) that most of our staff can barely leave their homes, let alone their neighbourhoods."⁵⁷

NGOs and charities require safe, predictable, and unimpeded access to people across Yemen, and distribution free from interference or threats to staff. Humanitarian aid must be delivered across frontlines, and in particular into cut off areas under heavy fighting.

- **Recommendation:** Both parties must allow unconditional and safe access for humanitarian agencies, and allow them to work in an independent and impartial manner without excessive hurdles or political interference, including across frontlines.

British Citizens and Dependents in Yemen

Another specific concern relates to the 30 British citizens & 300 dependents of British citizens still stranded in the country, trapped by the continued fighting. The Yemeni diaspora in the UK, with whom the UK government has previously enjoyed a positive relationship with, are understandably anxious for the safety of their loved ones.

Parliamentary petitions were presented on 21st July raising these concerns by Luciana Berger MP and Louise Ellman MP, who both represent constituencies in Liverpool, which has a large Yemeni

⁵⁷ Evidence submitted by Mercy Corps

community. These concerns have been raised in meetings of the All Party Parliamentary Group.

In the early stages of the conflict, the Foreign and Commonwealth Office advised against travelling in Yemen, and was thus unable to evacuate citizens who remained. At present, the Foreign Office is “unable to offer advice on the safety of travelling to any potential evacuation point from Yemen.”⁵⁸ Operations to evacuate foreign nationals have been undertaken by other countries, including the Russian government, which evacuated six British nationals.⁵⁹ The Government of India also lead an operation which evacuated over 550 foreigners from 32 countries, including a dozen Americans.⁶⁰

- **Recommendation:** The Foreign and Commonwealth Office should maintain regular contact with British citizens and dependents of British citizens in Yemen, and liaise with all parties to the conflict to ensure those who wish to leave the country are able to do so safely, as they currently face extreme risks crossing frontlines and conflict zones.

Terrorism

Yemen has long been plagued by terrorism, and is home to one of the most dangerous terrorist networks – Al Qaeda in the Arabian Peninsula (AQAP). Their Yemeni branch is especially feared for expert bomb-makers, and its several thousand fighters.

AQAP has a decentralised hierarchical structure, which makes the group incredibly flexible and elusive. The group’s primary objectives include overthrowing the government in Sana’a, targeting embassies and other foreign infrastructure in Yemen and the region, and carrying out attacks in Western countries. AQAP has claimed responsibility for numerous attacks in the region and beyond, including attacks on the US, British and Italian embassies in Sana’a; suicide bombings targeting tourists; the bombing of a Japanese oil tanker in 2009; and training the perpetrators and allegedly orchestrating the attack on French satirical magazine Charlie Hebdo in Paris in 2015.⁶¹

The current conflict has allowed AQAP to benefit from the resultant security vacuum. The distraction of the civil war has eased the pressure from government security forces, allowing increased militant presence in the country. Yemen's limited water resources have also allowed

⁵⁸ Foreign and Commonwealth Office, 27 August 2015 [Unclassified]

⁵⁹ Russia Today, 13 April 2015, <https://www.rt.com/news/249345-yemen-evacuation-russia-gratitude/>

⁶⁰ Washington Post, 8 April 2015, <https://www.washingtonpost.com/news/worldviews/wp/2015/04/08/india-leads-rescue-of-foreign-nationals-including-americans-trapped-in-yemen/>

⁶¹ Council on Foreign Relations, 19 June 2015, <http://www.cfr.org/yemen/al-qaeda-arabian-peninsula-aqap/p9369>

them to fill the void of the central government in regions south and east of Sana'a by providing villages with water, wells, and other important water infrastructure.⁶² However, clashes between the Houthi rebels and AQAP are taking place on an almost daily basis.

There is now clear evidence that Islamic State has also expanded into the country. In March 2015, extremists affiliated to Islamic State carried out suicide bombings on two Shi'a mosques in the capital of Sana'a killing at least 137 people.⁶³ It was the first attack attributed to Islamic State since the group gained a foothold in the country. On 2nd September, a double suicide bomb attack in Sanaa killed at least 20 people in a mosque.⁶⁴ Just days later, during the Muslim Eid al-Adha holiday, two suicide bombers attacked another Shi'a mosque, killing at least 25 people and leaving many more wounded.⁶⁵

Prior to the Civil War, the United States worked with the Yemeni authorities in targeting terrorist groups operating in the country. The international and national counter-terrorism operation has now been partly halted, except for isolated US drone strikes. The long-time leader of AQAP, Nasser al-Wuhayshi, was killed in an US strike in June 2015. Al-Wuhayshi was AQ's second in command and the highest-ranking AQ leader assassinated since Osama Bin Laden in 2011.

The growth of these organisations is a direct threat to the entire region and to Western states. Re-establishment of a central security apparatus and dedicated counter-terrorism efforts can only happen after the Civil War has ended. This factor should provide an impetus to the international community to increase the pressure on both parties to negotiate.

- **Recommendation:** The growth of terrorist groups in Yemen must be viewed with greater concern by the international community and identified as an additional motivating factor for a resolution of the conflict, to allow anti-terrorism operations to continue. In the short term, an interim strategy to tackle these groups should be formulated.

62 The Guardian, 2 April 2015, <http://www.theguardian.com/global-development-professionals-network/2015/apr/02/water-scarcity-yemen-conflict>

63 The Guardian, 20 March 2015, <http://www.theguardian.com/world/2015/mar/20/yemen-suicide-bombings-sanaa-mosques-shia-huthi-muslims-scores-dead>

64 BBC News, 2 September 2015, <http://www.bbc.com/news/world-middle-east-34134450>

65 The Guardian, 24 September 2015, <http://www.theguardian.com/world/2015/sep/24/yemen-suicide-bomb-blast-mosque-prayers>

Maritime Security

An additional factor from the civil war are consequences for maritime security. Yemen's coastline is strategically critical for trade, with the Gulf of Aden serving as one of the world's most important shipping routes – a gateway between Europe, the Middle East and Africa. With up to 95% of EU Member States' trade (by volume) transported by sea, 20% of global trade and almost 7 percent of oil and fuel cargoes passing through the Gulf of Aden, any threat to this route has serious economic implications for the wider international community.⁶⁶

Political instability in Yemen threatens to render the vast coastline a new home for piracy, akin to that witnessed off the coast of Somalia. The Saudi-led Coalition cited piracy as a key reason for the de facto blockade in April 2015, whilst Iran also sent two warships to the Gulf of Aden under the justification of protecting Iranian ships from piracy. Given the extreme humanitarian situation in the country, with dwindling supplies of food, water and fuel, there is a significant risk of increased piracy, which could have serious consequences for the region and the European Union.

66 EU NAVFOR Maritime Security Centre – Horn of Africa, <http://eunavfor.eu/mschoa/>

7. Role of the United Kingdom

The UK government has recognised that a political solution is urgently needed to end the conflict in Yemen and recognised the urgency of the humanitarian situation. The Government has led the world globally in its response to the humanitarian crisis, recently committing a further £75 million in humanitarian aid.⁶⁷ The UK has a very good record of working in Yemen, including its role during the 2011 crisis.

However, despite leading global efforts in providing emergency aid, the UK is capable of playing a more visible and active role in pushing for a diplomatic solution to the crisis and an immediate cessation of hostilities which is sustained on the ground.

Cooperation with Saudi Arabia

The UK maintains a close relationship with Saudi Arabia. A spokesperson for the UK Foreign and Commonwealth Office has stated that the UK is “not participating directly in military operations, but are providing support to the Saudi Arabian armed forces through pre-existing arrangements. A small number of UK personnel are coordinating planning support with Saudi and coalition partners. All UK military personnel have extensive training on International Humanitarian Law.”⁶⁸

In an answer to a Parliamentary Question, Minister of State for the Armed Forces Penny Mordaunt also recently stated that over 150 UK government personnel are currently working with the Saudi Arabian government.⁶⁹

Government Statements

With regards to the position of the UK on a negotiated solution and key issues such as access for humanitarian supplies, the statements given by relevant Ministers can be largely welcomed.

In the Department for International Development, Minister of State Desmond Swayne has stated: “The UK continues to call on all parties to the conflict to facilitate unimpeded and immediate

67 Justine Greening MP, 27 September 2015, <https://www.gov.uk/government/news/urgent-action-needed-to-prevent-famine-in-yemen-warns-justine-greening>

68 The Guardian, 5 June 2015, <http://www.theguardian.com/world/2015/jun/05/saudi-led-naval-blockade-worsens-yemen-humanitarian-disaster>

69 Written Question on Saudi Arabia and Yemen, 16 July 2015, <http://www.parliament.uk/written-questions-answers-statements/written-question/commons/2015-07-16/7583>

humanitarian access to all people in need in Yemen, and to lift any restrictions on commercial and humanitarian shipping, including of fuel for civilian use.”⁷⁰

Similarly, Parliamentary Under-Secretary Tobias Ellwood responded to the Parliamentary Question: “what recent discussions he has had with the Saudi Arabian authorities on pursuing a negotiated solution to the conflict in Yemen (Rt Hon Keith Vaz MP)”:

“The UK Government is in regular contact with the Saudi authorities about the situation in Yemen through our Embassy in Riyadh and our Yemen Office based in Jeddah. The Secretary of State for Foreign and Commonwealth Affairs, my right hon. Friend the Member for Runnymede and Weybridge (Mr Hammond) spoke to Saudi Foreign Minister Al Jubeir on 29 September in the margins of the UN General Assembly. He underlined the importance of a political solution to the current crisis as soon as possible and reinforced the necessity of compliance with international humanitarian law. I also chaired a high level meeting at UNGA focused on pursuing a political solution. (Parliamentary Under-Secretary Tobias Ellwood)”⁷¹

These statements are positive: however, *expressing the importance* of a political solution or for all parties to facilitate unimpeded humanitarian access may not be translating into *sufficient pressure* on the Coalition, Yemeni government-in-exile or Houthi rebels and supporters to fulfil those obligations, or to see negotiations as a preferable alternative to continued conflict.

Indeed, concerns have been raised by former Secretary of State for International Development, Andrew Mitchell, who has stated that, “Aside from the Department for International Development, other branches of government seem to have outsourced British foreign policy to Saudi Arabia and other members of the coalition.”⁷² He also states that resolution of the conflict so far has represented “a massive diplomatic failure”.

The UK can play a key role in creating credibility and support for a political solution, and prevent further deterioration of the humanitarian crisis. It must give more sustained and visible support to

70 Written Question on Yemen and Humanitarian Aid, 12 October 2015, <http://www.parliament.uk/business/publications/written-questions-answers-statements/written-question/Commons/2015-10-12/11278/>

71 Written Question on Yemen and Armed Conflict, 13 October 2015, <http://www.parliament.uk/business/publications/written-questions-answers-statements/written-question/Commons/2015-10-13/11624/>

72 The Guardian, 8 October 2015, <http://www.theguardian.com/commentisfree/2015/oct/08/britain-guilty-silence-yemen-saudi-arabia>

the United Nations negotiations process, provide support to the restoration of commercial shipping and push for all parties in the conflict to negotiate an immediate ceasefire.⁷³

Being close to Saudi Arabia and Yemen's exiled government, the UK is in a unique position to push for changes in policy which can allow improved humanitarian access, as well as apply pressure for a ceasefire.

- **Recommendation:** A ceasefire should be the immediate priority of British foreign policy in Yemen. This should be reflected in public statements and a visible effort to support the UN in bringing all parties to the negotiating table. This should be done at the highest diplomatic level, and the UK should be prepared to publicly pressure the Coalition towards negotiations.

Arms Shipments and International Law

Multiple observers have noted that Britain is one of the leading arms suppliers to Saudi Arabia. In evidence supplied by Saferworld, they show that since the air strikes began, the UK government has continued to supply precision-guided weapons and munitions to the Royal Saudi Air Force, and between 25 March and 1 July 2015 granted 37 export licences for military goods to Saudi Arabia.⁷⁴ In addition, UK personnel are based in Saudi Arabia to support the equipment supplied, and liaisons are based directly in the coalition headquarters.

This raises concerns that the UK is both supplying arms being used in the conflict whilst asserting its support for United Nations (UN) efforts to bring an end to it.⁷⁵ Such concerns demonstrate that the UK has a responsibility to visibly support a diplomatic solution and immediate cessation of hostilities, or be seen as prioritising strategic relationships over the humanitarian crisis.

The UK also has obligations under national legislation and the EU Common Position and the Arms Trade Treaty to ensure that no weapons are transferred where there is a risk of them being used to violate international humanitarian law. In response to a Parliamentary Question on the subject, Parliamentary Under-Secretary Tobias Ellwood has stated: "We are aware of reports of alleged violations of international humanitarian law (IHL) in Yemen by all sides to the conflict and take

⁷³ Evidence supplied by Saferworld

⁷⁴ Parliamentary Question, 30 September 2015, <http://www.parliament.uk/business/publications/written-questions-answers-statements/written-question/Lords/2015-09-16/HL2252/>

⁷⁵ Evidence supplied by Saferworld



these very seriously. We have raised our concerns with the Saudi Arabian authorities and have received repeated assurances of IHL compliance and we continue to engage with them on those assurances. We have also raised our concerns with the Houthis on the importance of compliance with international human rights law.”

- **Recommendation:** As a supplier of arms to Saudi Arabia, the UK has a further responsibility to push for a cessation of hostilities and long-term diplomatic solution. The UK should continue to raise any concerns relating to UK-supplied weapons and international humanitarian law, ensuring their use is compliant with domestic & international obligations.

8. Summary of Recommendations

- The UK government should ensure that the crisis in Yemen is given a higher priority on the global agenda in the provision of emergency aid, and DFID should continue to lead global efforts in providing emergency assistance to the population.
- Lifting the de-facto blockade must be priority for the UK and international partners, who should follow up on Saudi Arabia's recent commitment away from blanket inspection of all shipping. The United Nations recently announced in September that a new Verification and Identification Mission (UNVIM) had been agreed, intended to ensure that commercial deliveries by sea do not include shipments of arms. The UK can support a speedy empowerment of UNVIM to allow commercial shipping to be delivered at normalised levels, whilst working with Saudi Arabia to a streamlined, targeted inspections programme, to allow vital aid to reach the population
- The international community and the UK should increase the level of diplomatic pressure on the warring parties to agree and sustain a temporary ceasefire in the short term, whilst forwarding a long-term diplomatic resolution to the crisis. This will necessitate raising the crisis in Yemen to more senior diplomatic levels.
- Should UN Security Council Resolution 2216 continue to serve as a block to a negotiated solution, the UK should support a new resolution which demands an immediate ceasefire, free flow of humanitarian supplies into and around Yemen, and the reinstatement of previously agreed outcomes of the National Dialogue Conference in January 2014 and the Peace and National Partnership Agreement in September 2014.
- All parties should take immediate measures to prevent any damage to the civilian population and infrastructure, and stop any and all potential breaches of international humanitarian law. International actors such as the UK should monitor and condemn breaches by all sides. The growing international and diplomatic pressure should be used to show both sides that an immediate ceasefire is necessary.
- The stagnating military situation is an opportunity for an international actor with a long-standing relationship with Saudi Arabia and Yemeni exile government to push for a diplomatic solution which can allow the coalition to 'save face', and the Houthi rebels to reach a diplomatic solution in the face of a military offensive. Given the severe

humanitarian situation, this offers all parties an opportunity to cease military operations for humanitarian reasons and recover moral and diplomatic capital.

- The UK government in particular has an opportunity to participate in the process as an “honest broker”. Saudi Arabia should be approached with practical solutions at the heart of the negotiating process.
- Both parties must allow unconditional and safe access for humanitarian agencies, and allow them to work in an independent and impartial manner without excessive hurdles or political interference, including across frontlines.
- The Foreign and Commonwealth Office should maintain regular contact with British citizens and dependents of British citizens in Yemen, and liaise with all parties to the conflict to ensure those who wish to leave the country are able to do so safely, as they currently face extreme risks crossing frontlines and conflict zones.
- The growth of terrorist groups in Yemen must be viewed with greater concern by the international community and identified as an additional motivating factor for a resolution of the conflict, to allow anti-terrorism operations to continue. In the short term, an interim strategy to tackle these groups should be formulated.
- A ceasefire should be the immediate priority of British foreign policy in Yemen. This should be reflected in public statements and a visible effort to support the UN in bringing all parties to the negotiating table. This should be done at the highest diplomatic level, and the UK should be prepared to publicly pressure the Coalition towards negotiations.
- As a supplier of arms to Saudi Arabia, the UK has a further responsibility to push for a cessation of hostilities and long-term diplomatic solution. The UK should continue to raise any concerns relating to UK-supplied weapons and international humanitarian law, ensuring their use is compliant with domestic & international obligations.

Additional Recommendations for Parliamentarians

- Seek a joint meeting with the Foreign Secretary & the Yemen All-Party Parliamentary Group
- Request and/or participate in parliamentary debates on Yemen
- Submit regular Parliamentary Questions to the Prime Minister, Foreign Secretary, Defence Secretary, Business Secretary and Development Secretary

