



“The Crisis in Yemen”

**Testimony before the
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Chairman Murphy, Ranking Member Young, and distinguished members of the Subcommittee: It is an honor to have the opportunity to appear before you today—and especially to do so with Special Envoy Tim Lenderking and Amanda Catanzano, colleagues with whom I have been privileged to work, and for whom I have the deepest respect.

Starting in March 2018 and through December 2020, I served as the United Nations Resident and Humanitarian Coordinator for Yemen. During that time, I was stationed in Sana'a, the capital city, which remains under the control of the Ansar Allah movement, known more widely as the “Houthis.” For nearly three years, I was the only senior international official present in northern Yemen. With the permission of the Committee, I am pleased to offer brief reflections on Yemen’s crisis and possible options for making the situation better.

How bad is the Yemen crisis?

The conflict in Yemen has lasted six years, resulted in the world’s worst humanitarian crisis, wrecked public institutions, created new forms of corruption, fragmented political power and turned Yemen into a failed state likely to collapse, or worse, split into independent, separately administered zones.

The humanitarian crisis, in particular, is so shocking in its magnitude, it is hard even to describe.

More than 20 million Yemenis are dependent on humanitarian assistance and protection to survive. Twelve million Yemenis are suffering from the most severe, acute, agonizing and life-threatening forms of need. They are either hungry, ill, homeless, thirsty, unable to send their children to school or without visible means of livelihood, or all of these.

Sixteen million people, more than half the country, are hungry. They wake up every morning and have no idea when, or if they will eat that day. Two million Yemeni children and one million pregnant and lactating women are already ravaged by lack of nutrition or food, or both. If something is not done now, as many as 400,000 children could starve this year.

During the 25 years I served with the United Nations I worked in 11 acute major conflicts and emergencies. One of the hardest things you see are malnourished, starving children. The very moving documentary “Hunger Ward” by Skye Fitzgerald follows two young girls as they suffer from and are treated for malnutrition. It is a heart-wrenching story. The film is up for an Oscar this year, and many of us hope it wins.

Since 2015, when the war started, Yemen has experienced wave after wave of humanitarian catastrophe. In 2017, the worst cholera outbreak in modern history hit the country. The next year, in 2018, Yemen faced the one of largest famines the world had seen in decades.

That famine was pushed back because humanitarian organizations, led by the World Food Programme, UNICEF, the World Health Organization, the UN High Commission for Refugees, the UN Population Fund, the Food and Agriculture Organization and more than 150 front-line partners, supported generously by donors, launched one of the largest, fastest scale-ups of assistance in generations.

This year, because agencies and partners have not received the money they asked for, because access to the people hurting the most is difficult, and because of the destitution created by the war, famine is again stalking the country.

And it is not just famine. Yemen is one of the 11 countries at highest risk of epidemics of infectious diseases. COVID has hit the country very hard. Millions of people are at even greater risk of illness and death because life-saving medicines and equipment are in short supply, half of all hospitals and clinics are not functioning, authorities have failed to mandate protective measures and because immunity levels are disastrously low after years of neglect, trauma and hardship.

What is driving the humanitarian crisis?

The humanitarian crisis in Yemen has a very specific cause—the war.

Yemen's war is being waged along two fronts. Militarily, belligerents are doing everything they can to degrade and disable the capabilities of their enemies. This includes airstrikes, bombing, missile and mortar strikes, artillery shelling, landmines and fighting. The impact of this warfare on civilians is enormous. Four million Yemenis have been displaced from their homes and nearly 20,000, probably more, have been killed. Hospitals, schools, water and electricity grids, food stores and irrigation canals have been hit and destroyed.

The “second front” includes the coercive measures directed at destroying the enemy's economy. This strategy is used deliberately and to great effect by the Saudi-led Coalition. Measures include controls over the number and timing of all ships entering the port city of Hodeida, the entrepot for close to 90 percent of all basic goods entering northern Yemen.

Other measures, devastating in their impact on civilians, include the decision to stop payment of salaries for public servants in areas under the control of Ansar Allah, restrictions on lines of credit, quotas on the importation of basic goods including fuel and cooking gas, controls on capital flows through the Central Bank and on foreign exchange, liquidity shortages, import restrictions on industrial materials and differing customs regimes.

The measures which together constitute the “second front” are now the main drivers of the humanitarian crisis. They have led to the immiseration of the population in areas under the control of Ansar Allah, ruined many economic and financial enterprises and starved public and national institutions of necessary resources. Although impossible to know for sure, at least 130,000 civilians are conservatively estimated to have died as a result of these.

The “second front” may now be a main driver of the humanitarian crisis, but it is not the only cause.

In northern Yemen, Ansar Allah has systematically taken over and transformed governance in the areas they administer. Oversight and control of state institutions are now fully in the hands of the movement. Parallel institutions, staffed exclusively by Houthis, have been established for key functions including policing and internal security.

Virtually all public revenues are now channeled directly into institutions under the control of the movement, including the branch of the Central Bank in Sana’a. The movement has also introduced mechanisms to set and execute district and governorate budgets. Ansar Allah has usurped Zakat, a main pillar of social protection, making it a compulsory tax, and imposed draconian tariffs on agriculture and trade.

The new structures and mechanisms created by Ansar Allah are not an improvement on the old system; they are predatory, operate without public accountability and constitute a separate system of authority with wide-ranging powers.

Houthis are using these instruments to divert revenue from public goods and services to their fighters, sabotage private sector companies that do not cooperate with them, and manipulate currency and liquidity for their interests, not those of the general public.

At the same time, Ansar Allah has introduced literally hundreds of restrictions on humanitarian aid, seeking to control the type, flow and targeting of all forms of assistance. Ansar Allah also continues to threaten, bully, intimidate and detain humanitarian staff.

Restrictions on aid are also sometimes imposed by the Government of Yemen, local authorities and other political groups. All restrictions on the delivery of humanitarian assistance are violations of humanitarian principles and therefore unacceptable. The severity, intent and impact of those imposed by Ansar Allah, however, are of a different magnitude. Ansar Allah's arbitrary exercise of power and its reliance on repressive administrative mechanisms and regulations have combined to create one of the most non-permissive operating environments in the world for humanitarians.

What can be done?

The steps being taken by President Biden and the US administration to find ways of resolving Yemen's war and addressing humanitarian crisis are very welcome. Many of us who have worked in Yemen know that only the US has the leverage to end the war. There are many reasons why the US should use this.

The war has given countries hostile to the US and our allies opportunities to undermine our interests and expand their influence in the region. Two of the world's most malign extremist forces—AQAP and ISIL-- are present in Yemen, and likely to spread further if the war continues.

Yemen sits astride one of the world's most important maritime chokepoints; close to 10 percent of total seaborne-traded oil and refined products transit through the Bab el-Mandeb, a narrow straight linking the Indian Ocean with the Mediterranean through the Red Sea and Suez Canal. Disruption to the straight would likely have an immediate, negative impact on global energy supplies.

There are also compelling moral reasons for being in Yemen and doing more. The US is the most generous donor in the world and as concrete proof of its commitment to values-based diplomacy, none of us would want to see the US turn its back on Yemen in its time of greatest need.

Of the many things that need to be done in Yemen, none is more urgent than relieving humanitarian suffering.

Four steps will make all the difference.

First, we need to give generously to humanitarian agencies, and encourage other countries to do as well, to ensure these partners have the nearly USD 4 billion dollars they require this year.

Second, the many restrictive measures imposed on the economy need to be immediately lifted, allowing the basic goods that people need to survive to enter and circulate freely in the country.

Third, a consortium of international donors and financial institutions needs to reach agreement with authorities in both Aden and Sana'a to capitalize the Central Bank in Aden, which will improve liquidity in the south, and pay salaries for public servants in the north, which will dramatically increase the purchasing power of hard-hit families.

None of these steps are impossible; we took all of them in 2018. And because we did, we avoided famine.

The fourth step is harder. In 2018, Ansar Allah had not yet constructed its police state. The instruments and structures of this state are now so predatory and coercive, the US and our allies need to leverage our influence and condition our engagement with Ansar Allah in ways which incentivize it to change its behavior.

There are many very talented people and diplomats who are advocating and working to end Yemen's war and secure a new political peaceful future. Their efforts are determined, and heroic.

Yemen's political future, however, can only be decided by Yemenis. The US and our allies can help create the conditions for a national reckoning, but the work of deciding what kind of country Yemen will be is theirs, not ours.

One of our most important roles is to insist that the broadest possible configuration of the Yemeni society is included in the national reckoning.

Decisions about the future of Yemen cannot just be in the hands of the elites who have brought destruction and misery to the country and who are likely to strike deals that reflect their own narrow interests. All the many forces that control territory in the country and aspire to represent the will of the people need to be included. So does the private sector, which will have to rebuild the economy, women's and youth groups who will be key to the country's recovery, civil servants who will have to revitalize public systems and the intelligentsia, tribal leaders, community leaders and religious leaders who will play leading roles.

This reckoning will not be--cannot be--the same as the 2013-2014 national dialogue. Too much has changed.

Political power has shifted dramatically. Ansar Allah now fully controls the instruments of the state in northern Yemen and has constructed its own parallel state-within-a-state. In the south, new constellations and political forces challenging the integrity of Yemen's unification have emerged. Tribal leaders have played decisive roles during the conflict, widening their influence and asserting their role in adjudication of social and property issues. War profiteers, many linked to the warring parties, have established powerful patronage networks to protect their gains.

Civil society is overwhelmed and public institutions are on life-support. The companies and trading houses which have managed to survive in the private sector are struggling to keep their doors open. Civil society groups have stepped into the void created by collapsing state institutions, providing social protection, insisting on accountability and caring for families and communities facing famine and disease. Public institutions have been hollowed out and many are no longer able to provide basic services.

Before the national reckoning can even start, however--and before any of the political, economic, social and security questions that need to be answered can be answered, the parties and forces fighting this war must lay down their weapons.

So far, the belligerents have not yet made this commitment. Instead, they continue to maneuver, stall, dodge and fight. There are now 47 separate frontlines in Yemen. A year ago, there were 33. This may be evidence of the parties trying to gain final advantage before sitting down to talk or it may signal that the forces fighting Yemen's war are not yet persuaded they should stop.

The views expressed in this testimony are those of the author and not the U.S. Institute of Peace.