

The Humanitarian Crisis in Yemen

IN BRIEF

Yemen's humanitarian emergency is both a product and a potential driver of political instability. As dire as the situation is, speakers warned that it stands to worsen and become a broader flashpoint.

A convergence of factors have made the conflict more harmful to civilians and more complex to resolve. One factor, according to speakers, is the failure of warring parties to uphold rules of war that protect civilians. Second, the complex and fragmented nature of Yemen's conflict has complicated its resolution. A peace process must also grapple with the rise of a Yemeni war economy that has provided some actors with economic incentives to resist ending the conflict.

Yemen is a relatively low priority for global powers, but speakers argued that it should not remain so. All of the speakers agreed that Yemen's crisis demands greater attention for strategic and geopolitical reasons, and not only for humanitarian ones. A broader risk lies in a drawn-out Yemeni war becoming a regional and global flashpoint generating instability far beyond its borders.

Yemen's humanitarian ordeal can only be partially addressed in the absence of a solution to the conflict. The only horizon for resolving the conflict is a political one that will allow broader development and governance questions to be addressed, speakers argued.

Speakers called for the UN Security Council and international powers to strongly back a negotiations framework that encompasses a broad array of parties. They asked if the time had come to reopen the parameters of the diplomatic process. To avoid repeating past mistakes, speakers saw it as vital that a Yemeni-led process encompass marginalized regions, civil society, women, and other groups in addition to armed actors and traditional elites. ■

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emen's unprecedented humanitarian crisis cannot be understood in isolation from the country's complex political and economic dynamics, International Rescue Committee (IRC) president and CEO David Miliband and other experts agreed at an event on "The Humanitarian Crisis in Yemen" on April 5, 2018 hosted by the CSIS Humanitarian Agenda in partnership with the CSIS Middle East Program. Yemen's humanitarian emergency is both a product and a potential driver of political instability, Miliband argued. Political and diplomatic actors share an urgent responsibility to address the drivers of that instability.

A subsequent panel discussion analyzed the context for Yemen's humanitarian emergency and the consequences of its persistence. The participants were Barbara Bodine, director of Georgetown University's Institute for the Study of Diplomacy and former U.S. ambassador to Yemen, Peter Salisbury, senior consulting fellow with Chatham House's Middle East and North Africa Program, and Abdulrahman al-Eryani, a Yemeni international economist and development specialist.

The speakers agreed that Yemen is a relatively low priority for global powers but argued it should not remain so. Should Yemen's humanitarian crisis be left to deteriorate, they warned, the consequences will be far-reaching and long-lasting. Charting a constructive path forward requires sustained diplomatic engagement to facilitate aid provision and conflict resolution and to draw a broad base of Yemenis into a process to forge a framework for the future.

COMPLEX CONFLICT DYNAMICS

In its complexity, its protracted nature, and its devastating toll on civilians, the conflict plaguing Yemen since 2015 embodies what Miliband called some of the most perilous patterns in modern wars. As al-Eryani noted, Yemen's preexisting fragility was a factor in lowering Yemen's resilience to the impacts of conflict. Yet, a convergence of factors have made the conflict more harmful to civilians and more complex to resolve. Miliband argued, "This is a manmade conflict with very deep roots and very, very acute consequences."

One factor, the speakers held, is the failure of warring parties to uphold rules of war that protect civilians. Miliband cited information collected by the Yemen Data Project that since

the start of Yemen's conflict, essential infrastructure has been hit by at least 4,500 air strikes, while 342 strikes have hit educational buildings and 68 have hit hospitals and health clinics. Miliband also framed the blocking of aid delivery as not merely a logistical issue, but also a political one. "The problem is strangulation, not access," he argued. He further asserted that a stable humanitarian supply chain rests on the "permanent" opening of ports to humanitarian and commercial shipments including food, fuel, and medicine.

Second, the complex and fragmented nature of Yemen's conflict has complicated its resolution. It is a gross oversimplification, the speakers agreed, to characterize the war as merely a two-sided contest between the government of Yemeni President Abed Rabbo Mansour Hadi and Houthi rebels, nor is it principally a proxy war between a Saudi-led coalition that supports Hadi and Iran, which supports the Houthis. In reality, sub-conflicts are playing out along local, national, regional, and increasingly global axes, and parties often switch sides opportunistically.

There is a risk that the fragmentation of warring parties will translate into lasting fractures in Yemeni society, Miliband said.

Even actors ostensibly allied with each other possess a wide range of agendas and priorities and sometimes come into direct competition with one another, explained Salisbury. He described tensions within the Saudi-led coalition between a "tribal military faction" in the North that has aligned with Islah, Yemen's leading Islamist party, and a subset of forces backed by the United Arab Emirates in the South that is broadly hostile to Islah. The Houthis are also far from a monolith, Salisbury argued. The political wing leading the negotiations has waning influence as the military wing gains clout. There is a risk that the fragmentation of warring parties will translate into lasting fractures in Yemeni society, Miliband said.

The humanitarian situation is also intimately linked with Yemen's dire economic straits. Al-Eryani argued that a lack of unified tools and institutions to address the "economic distortions" wrought by the conflict presents one of the

toughest obstacles to the country's future viability. Since the conflict began, a fractured public sector and financial institutions, an eroding revenue base, and falling oil production have all taken a toll and frustrated a coordinated response.

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Al-Eryani argued that priority should be given to restoring Yemenis' purchasing power—the "main problem" when it comes to food security in a country where 90 percent of food is imported. Al-Eryani also called for support for small and medium enterprises, which employ 80 percent of Yemen's private sector workforce. Miliband spoke of a "desperate need" to fund public sector payrolls and called on outside donors such as Saudi Arabia to extend support beyond Yemeni security personnel to civilian public employees. However, Bodine noted that as long as Yemeni financial institutions continued to be split between spheres of control, the effectiveness of cash injects into the Hadi-aligned central bank in Aden will be limited.

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business communities in key economic centers have been affected by shifting pressures, with “winners and losers” emerging in the new landscape. These interests must be reconciled in hammering out a solution to the conflict, Salisbury argued. This will include the need to “rethink the economic disincentives for the conflict,” particularly for those newly empowered by the war.

LOW PRIORITY, RISING RISK

Another challenge to tackling Yemen’s humanitarian emergency is the relatively low priority the crisis has received among world powers. Beyond Yemen’s location at a relative distance from many global powers, Miliband said he sees growing “fatigue” in the international community. Amidst proliferating crises in the Middle East post-2011, he diagnosed the response among publics and governments as one less of “compassion fatigue” than of “complexity fatigue.” “Financial fatigue” among some donor countries and “diplomatic fatigue” among the global policy community compound the problem still further.

In Miliband’s words, “Yemen is more likely to be the Afghanistan of the 21st century, seemingly endless war, than the Lebanon of the 21st century, with its fragile peace.”

All of the speakers agreed that Yemen’s crisis demands greater attention for strategic and geopolitical reasons, and not only for humanitarian ones. To be sure, Miliband said, on a humanitarian level, the sheer number of people in acute need—about three-quarters of all Yemenis—requires urgent attention. Yet, as dire as the situation is, Miliband and others warned that it stands to worsen if left to fester. A global trend towards increasingly protracted civil wars provides reason for concern that, in Miliband’s words, “Yemen is more likely to be the Afghanistan of the 21st century, seemingly endless war, than the Lebanon of the 21st century, with its fragile peace.”

A broader risk lies in a drawn-out Yemeni war becoming a regional and global flashpoint generating instability

far beyond its borders. Bodine said, “If Yemen is allowed to continue to be destroyed and becomes not just a failed state but almost a vacuum, this is going to have geostrategic implications for us and our neighbors and our friends.” Miliband argued that flagging diplomatic will represents a threat not only to Yemen’s prospects for peace, but also to broader stability. “I see a world that is becoming more lawless, that is creating more vacuums into which bad actors are moving, because there is that diplomatic fatigue,” he said.

PATHS FORWARD

Ultimately, speakers said, Yemen’s humanitarian ordeal can only be partially addressed in the absence of a solution to the conflict. There must be a recognition of the limitations of humanitarian actors’ mandate, as well as their capacity, Miliband stressed. “We, the NGOs, can’t replace a functioning state or economy,” he said, nor stem ongoing damage to institutions and communities.

The only horizon for resolving the conflict, speakers argued, is a political one that will allow broader development and governance questions to be addressed. Speakers stressed the futility of a solution through military means, with Miliband arguing that “the militarization of diplomacy is a snare and not an answer.” More broadly, the speakers cautioned the international community against reverting to a narrowly “securitized” view of Yemen that focuses on countering specific violent actors such as al Qaeda in the Arabian Peninsula or the Islamic State group without addressing the social, political, and economic conditions that foster their growth.

Bodine argued, “We need to walk back and define what would be a government that is legitimate in the eyes of the broadest range of Yemeni players and people, and work that as the political process.”

The appointment of a new UN special envoy, Martin Griffiths, represents an opportunity to rebuild momentum in a peace process, speakers said. They wondered as well if the time had come to reopen the parameters of the

diplomatic process. Several highlighted concerns that have gathered around UN Security Council Resolution 2216 as a peacemaking framework. Bodine assessed that 2216's ascription of legitimacy specifically and solely to the Hadi government "has become something of an obstacle" to reconciliation as that government has become increasingly weak and marginalized in exile. Bodine argued, "We need to walk back and define what would be a government that is legitimate in the eyes of the broadest range of Yemeni players and people, and work that as the political process." Miliband pointed to the "more balanced" and "more-people centered" statement by the UN Security Council president of March 2018 as a potential launching pad for a forward-looking process.

Speakers called for the UN Security Council and international powers to strongly back a negotiations framework that encompasses a broad array of parties. It is critical that such inclusion not be illusory, Salisbury warned. He argued that one of Yemenis' key frustrations with the post-2011 National Dialogue Conference was the fact that most citizens' input was divorced from the actual process of governance and exercise of power, which remained tightly in the hands of feuding elites.

The best hope for Yemen, Salisbury argued, lies in "embracing the complexity that Yemen presents, rather than hoping it will simplify itself."

Outside parties may be attracted to the simplicity of a "single interlocutor" in Yemen, speakers said, but this should not come at the expense of real agency for a broader array of Yemenis or to the effect of seeking out, in Bodine's words, "the next Saleh." The best hope for Yemen, Salisbury argued, lies in "embracing the complexity that Yemen presents, rather than hoping it will simplify itself." To avoid repeating past mistakes, speakers saw it as vital that a Yemeni-led process encompass marginalized regions, civil society, women, and other groups in addition to armed actors and traditional elites.

Building consensus around such a process will be a long-term investment, speakers agreed. Yet, the costs of such a process are far outweighed by the costs of allowing Yemen's crisis and its humanitarian wreckage to continue to smolder. ■

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