

Center for Strategic and International Studies

TRANSCRIPT

Online Event

**“Sustaining Yemen: Ensuring Humanitarian Aid Amid Shifting Conflict Dynamics”**

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FEATURING

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Jacob Kurtzer: Hello and welcome to the Humanitarian Agenda at the Center for Strategic and International Studies. My name is Jacob Kurtzer. I'm the director and senior fellow of the program. Thank you all for joining us today for this important conversation. And particularly thank you to our panelists for making the time to help share your thoughts and your work with our audience. I want to also extend a note of gratitude to USAID's Bureau of Humanitarian Assistance for their support for today's discussion.

All of us who are joining the call today are well aware of the human toll of seven years of conflict in Yemen. Unfortunately, the global picture has become so convoluted and complicated, with crises in Ukraine, Afghanistan, and elsewhere, that Yemen has fallen off the radar a bit – a crisis which captured so much attention in terms of resources and the media is not really in top of mind anymore. And that's unfortunate, because the impact of the conflict on the civilian population has been extreme, and the needs remain quite dire.

We're at a moment where there's a tenuous diplomatic breakthrough that may offer a chance to recapture some humanitarian gains or consolidate some of those which have been made already. But it's tenuous, and we know that there have been moments of hope and optimism in the past that collapsed. So to help us understand this moment and what it means for the humanitarian picture, what it means for humanitarian action and access, what it means for the human rights of Yemeni civilians who have been caught up in the crossfire, we're once again extremely grateful to have an esteemed panel with us today.

Radhya Al-Mutawakel is the co-founder and chairperson of the Mwatana Organization for Human Rights. Summer Nasser is the CEO of Yemen Aid. Amanda Catanzano is the director for humanitarian policy at the International Rescue Committee. And Paul Harvey is a partner at Humanitarian Outcomes. Thank you all so much for being with us today.

Radhya, you're joining us today from Yemen, and so I'd like to start with you and maybe get a picture from inside Yemen of the situation today. Your organization obviously, by its name, focuses on the situation for human rights for Yemeni civilians. Can you tell us a little bit, from your perspective, what the ceasefire that's been announced means for the picture – for the achievement of human rights for Yemeni civilians? And maybe more broadly, what the overall picture looks like, you know, from before this diplomatic breakthrough, and what we need to understand here in Washington and around the world about the picture with respect to the human rights conditions inside Yemen today?

Radhya Al-  
Mutawakel:

Thank you. I'm glad to be with you today.

So ceasefire, it's like a step. But it's not an end of violations in Yemen. So the war is Yemen, it's not only the airstrikes and the ground shelling. It's much more than this. And even if there is a ceasefire, even if parties to the conflict are committed to the ceasefire, and they are not, still the Yemenis are facing daily violations by all parties to the conflict, that is making their life miserable.

So we in Mwatana tried for many years to document the starvation as a weapon of war, because the starvation is used as a weapon of war in Yemen by all parties to the conflict. But it was very difficult to document it from a human rights perspective. So it take us very long in order to do this. And we documented, like, a pattern of airstrikes and landmines and preventing humanitarian aid by the Saudi and Emirati-led commission, by Houthis, in a very – in a very – in certain areas, that can – we tried to prove the pattern, the intent, to prove that parties to the conflict are using starvation as a weapon of war.

But this is even not all the reasons that led to starvation in Yemen. There are many details that has nothing to do with the very direct violation for the international humanitarian law, but still affect the daily lives of Yemenis. For example, one of these things is the salaries. I mean, millions of Yemenis are not receiving their salaries since 2016 in the public sector. This is one of the things that really broke the backs of Yemenis. And this has nothing to do with the ceasefire. With the truce, with the ceasefire, Yemenis are still not receiving their salaries.

So that's why we in Mwatana, whenever we say that Yemen is the worst humanitarian crisis in the world, human rights NGOs, they add "man-made" crisis. So because we believe, even among the war, Yemen doesn't have to – doesn't have to have to be the worst humanitarian crisis in the world. It happened only because of the huge lack of accountability, because of the attitude of parties to the conflict.

So there are many violations that we have documented in the ground, are very proved, whether it is airstrikes, or landmines, or ground shelling, or preventing the access of humanitarian aid. This is – many of these supply issues still continue. Besides, there are many other files like the detention, forced disappearance, torture. I mean, even this space of civil society is shrinking in Yemen by parties to the conflict.

I don't want to be pessimistic when I talk about the truce. It's a step. We hope that it's going to be a step towards something bigger. But we can't say that really changed the daily lives of Yemenis. And it didn't even prevent them from the violations of parties to the conflict.

Mr. Kurtzer: Thank you, Radhya. You talked about the starvation and the forced starvation as the weapon of war, and the man-made nature of this conflict – or, of this crisis. I want to turn to Summer Nasser at Yemen Aid. I'm hoping you can tell us a little bit – your organization was founded in 2016 and is led by and organized by Yemeni Americans.

So can you tell us a little bit about Yemen Aid's work? And in particular, you know, on your website you talk about the, you know, essential provision of basic services, and governance in Yemen. So how you manage to do both the humanitarian relief, but also put an emphasis on this return to, you know, essential services on the part of the Yemeni government, particularly in the wake of Radhya's comments about basic salaries not being paid, and some of these other second-order impacts that are having humanitarian consequences?

Summer Nasser: Well, thanks so much, Jacob, for having us today. Absolutely, we are a Yemeni American entity. We are a 501(c)(3) here in the United States. But interestingly, we are an INGO in Yemen. So we are licensed by the Ministry of Planning and International Cooperation from the Yemeni government. Our work basically covers the urgent assistance, but also can go through the sustainable development projects, economic livelihood, and so on and so forth. And so we try our best to understand the dynamics on the ground, what are the needs, and how do we proceed with results that make sense for Yemenis on the ground, right?

There's an issue with the typical status quo of humanitarian aid. It does nothing to support Yemen long term. And that could be replicated in different countries as well. And so we – what we do is we bridge the gap between West and East. And how we do that is by advocating for Yemenis and what those needs look like. You know, we at points convince our donors that a food basket won't work, can we do a greenhouse? And so these are the languages that we try to use to, you know, better their lives.

You know, as Radhya had said, there is no accountability. And I agree with her, and anyone else who says that. Unfortunately, government entities and also nongovernment entities – whether it's the de facto groups in the north, the Houthis, or the legitimate government – they look at INGOs as an asset. And it doesn't have to be in a positive light. It could be in a negative light, in which it could be for personal gains, versus a more national consensus of how we support individuals.

And what we do is we, as Yemen Aid, we talk to government officials and we talk to any local official to ensure that they understand that the needs have to be pushed towards the basic support. Whether it's giving water access, whether it's salaries. And we advocate in that manner, along with

our projects. We don't just advocate, you know, just randomly, but it goes along with our timeline, for sure.

Mr. Kurtzer: Thanks, Summer. You mentioned the exploitation of international humanitarian work, and the importance of engaging with all actors. My colleague at CSIS recently hosted Special Envoy Lenderking – my colleague Dr. Alterman in the Middle East Program – to talk a little bit about the U.S. role. And, you know, he – Special Envoy Lenderking raised this issue about the way that aid has been exploited. And I think it speaks to the point that Radhya was making as well about the man-made nature of this crisis, that not all the impacts are felt from violence, but from different behaviors.

So I want to turn to you now, Paul, at Humanitarian Outcomes. You have a recent report out, a humanitarian access score report, looking at the situation in Yemen. And we know that, you know, blockades and denial of aid has been a pattern that we've seen in this context and this conflict for a number of years. So can you give us a little bit of the findings of your recent report, and what the access picture looks like, and the reach and effectiveness of the humanitarian operations in general today?

Paul Harvey: Sure. So I'll be drawing on a report that was funded by USAID BHA that comprised a phone survey of Yemeni people – their views on what aid they had access to and whether it was reaching people, complemented by interviews staff and some humanitarian organizations. I guess I'd say sort of three or four things about it.

So the first point is there's certainly a lot of aid has reached Yemen over the last seven years. In the latest humanitarian response plan, it estimates that \$40 million worth of aid has been provided since 2016. So there isn't a, you know, fundamental access challenge in terms of the ability of organizations to provide aid in Yemen. There are certainly access challenges in terms of where aid can be provided, and security challenges, and risk to aid workers in terms of violence against aid workers, as well as violence against civilians, and restrictions on the part of authorities on all sides of the conflict in how aid can be provided.

But the real access challenges are, in a sense, about sort of presence and about information and accountability. It's about knowing if we're getting aid to the right people, if aid is being effectively provided, and being able to monitor and understand, you know, the effectiveness of aid. And so it's as much about sort of access to assessments, access to good analysis, access to monitoring and presence on the part of aid agencies in order to be able to properly understand what's going on on the ground.

And access barriers according to types of organization – obviously, international organizations have been particularly constrained in terms of their presence, in part because of the security challenges, but in part because of slightly overly restrictive – arguably, security management systems sort of restricted, in particular, U.N. agencies, because they're sort of heavily-guarded compounds, and constrained their ability to get out. Now, that's starting to change. There have been some relaxations in terms of security restrictions, that have enabled greater levels of presence.

And to a degree this is – you know, this is the old humanitarian dilemma of the sort of humanitarian imperative to act in the face of awful suffering, but that constraining your ability to sort of negotiate and stand up to parties of the conflict and authorities in terms of their restrictions, and desire to control that. And so, you know, the ability to set red lines on things like the ability to do assessments or the scope of monitoring are difficult in the face of the level of suffering and the imperative to respond to that.

So agencies have been doing their best to navigate that, whilst running a massive aid operation complicated by COVID and the future restrictions on presence that that presented. But it remains a challenge. And the challenge, as we've heard from previous discussants, is about sort of information and accountability and the ability to advocate, and negotiate, and provide aid in the context of authorities that are continuing to control and instrumentalize it.

Mr. Kurtzer: Thanks, Paul. Interesting, there's some themes emerging here. I think accountability in two separate ways – one for violations of IHL and human rights violations, and other accountability for the humanitarian operations and making sure that money is being spent where it should be and how it should be.

I want to turn to you, Amanda. Last year you testified before the House Foreign Affairs Subcommittee. And you spoke of – you described the situation in Yemen as not static, the Yemenis trapped in a hellish cycle, and the response treating the symptoms but not addressing the conflict at the root causes. And I'm wondering if you could speak to two separate points. I mean, one is IRC is a major humanitarian operation provider. So has the situation for your work changed in the last year? And, secondly, how do you see the recent events, the ceasefire, potentially changing the situation in the future and creating potentially more space or – you know, or is this a brief moment that, you know, doesn't necessary portend a better future?

Amanda  
Catanzano:

Thanks, Jake. And thanks for hosting this conversation. Like you said up top, with the humanitarian crises in Ukraine and Afghanistan and elsewhere, it's been hard to get airtime for Yemen. So I appreciate the space you've created today.

I think, you know, I would answer that question in a couple of different ways. You're right. I mean, I think things have shifted, but I think there are some important consistencies from where we are now to where we were a year ago, when I testified. I think a couple things I would point to as the drivers of this conflict and – I mean, the drivers of this crisis and the drivers of humanitarian suffering in Yemen, and of course the conflict but also the collapsing economy and the constraints on access, both of which, you know, my colleagues here touched on. And so I think we have to think of all three of those things in equal measure when we try to get a sense of what the situation is for Yemenis today.

I think when we look at the truce and the ceasefire, this is something that all of us on this call have pushed for for a long time. It's nascent and it's hard to say what kind of impact that's going to have on the humanitarian response right now. We haven't seen it open up access yet, but we do think, you know, if there's progress, if there's focus on extending it past the expiration next week, that's the biggest window of opportunity to change things on the ground. But it's not a factor yet.

And then we look at the two other issues or drivers of the crisis. When it comes to the collapsing economy and when it comes to the constraints on access, we haven't seen improvements. And in some ways, we've seen deterioration in that respect. And the most recent numbers from the U.N. on humanitarian needs bear that out. We have, you know, over 23 million Yemenis in need of humanitarian assistance. That's up 13 percent from last year. When we look at the economy, it's as bad as it was last year, or worse. It's worse than it was three years ago.

A lot of that has to do with fluctuations in the exchange rate, particularly at the end of last year where we saw a doubling of the exchange rate virtually overnight, in November and December, which just pushed food prices far beyond the ability of not just Yemenis who have been suffering for a long time, but even Yemenis who had sort of eked out a living over the last seven years were really just pushed beyond their limits at that point. And we've seen a stabilization in that exchange rate, largely due to the Saudi deposit into the central bank. But that's still just within the last several weeks we've seen that stabilization. It's not back to the levels of 600 or 700. It's more around the level of 800. So it's still higher than it was. And it's a little too soon.

But commodity prices and food security are about more than just the exchange rate. It's about food imports. It's about fuel imports. It's about global food prices. And I think one thing we all know is there's been a staggering increase in global food prices since the Ukrainian war began. And for Yemen, it's devastating. This is a country that's 90 percent dependent on imports for its food supplies, and 40 to 50 percent of its wheat came from Ukraine and came from Russia. So any improvements or uptick we might have seen from the stabilization of the exchange rate is really being nullified so far by the global food prices. So that driver is still very much in place.

And then, as Paul just referenced, the constraints on access are real, and they have, in most cases, nothing to do with the conflict. That's why we haven't necessarily seen the truce open any doors for us that weren't open previously. This is – these are not about insecurity. They're about red tape. They're about delays in visas. They're about delays in sub-agreements, which is essentially the paperwork that NGOs need to get to work on a particular project. Those still take months and months to get into place.

And I think it's important to stress, that's not just a problem in the north. It's a problem in the south. You know, we've seen a doubling in visa processing time both in the north and south. We've seen a process – you know, a three-month delay in getting sub-agreements signed. That's both in the north and the south. And I think perhaps arguably things are even trickier in the south because while there's a lot of attention on this truce and this cease fire, what it does mask is a real security deterioration in the south. Our teams at IRC will say at certain places at certain checkpoints, they don't even know who's in charge. So the places where security is actually affecting us is more in the south than in the north.

So when we look across those three areas, we're only seeing, you know, a snapshot of improvement on the conflict side, but that's really on the bigger conflict and not necessarily the internecine warfare or conflict in the south. We're seeing the economy continue to suffer and we're seeing access continue to be a challenge. So I think when we look at what we were recommending last year in terms of funding gaps, in terms of humanitarian diplomacy for access, in terms of pushing for a ceasefire, we'd seen progress and we're hopeful that this ceasefire can be translated into a more significant and more steady political process. But I think that remains to be seen. So I wouldn't say that I'm pessimistic, but I think my optimism has to be curbed by the fact that two out of three of those markers for progress are still trending the wrong direction.

Mr. Kurtzer: Thanks. I guess between pessimistic and optimistic is realistic. And we probably need to have a very realistic view of the situation on the ground.

Radhya, I want to come back to you. Paul mentioned in his comments the balance for humanitarian organizations between the humanitarian imperative to respond to the needs of, you know, civilians impacted by violence versus the advocacy and the ability to push against the key actors. And I'm wondering if, for your organization, your human rights organization, if you're feeling that same struggle. And particularly in the point that Amanda raised, where the ceasefire expires next week, and this idea of a cessation of violence versus a push for accountability for perpetrators. And how do you – so I want to maybe ask you two questions. The first would be, what you see from your view there as the likelihood of the ceasefire being extended? And secondly, how do you balance that push for accountability with the benefits of a cessation of violence? And are they at odds at all, in your assessment of the human rights picture?

Ms. Al-Mutawakel: Yes. I will start with the last question. We think that accountability – if there is a serious accountability, this will help not only to keep the ceasefire but also to push for peace. But what happened in Yemen, that the wholly investigative mechanism that we used to have, which is called a Group of Eminent Experts, was failed to be renewed in last October. So at the same time, while we, as Yemenis, see that the Human Rights Council is establishing mechanisms for accountability for Ukraine and other conflict zones, we lost the only one we have. We were asking in the last Human Rights Council session, as a civil society, we were asking for a criminally focused investigative mechanism, which is even stronger than the one we already have.

And instead of having this communal investigative mechanism we got the GEE. So that was a very – I mean, very dangerous message of impunity from the international community to parties to the conflict. And it was very clear to us that this message was very well-received by parties to the conflict. The violations has increased since October until now, much more than it used to be before October. And this gap of accountability has not been – I mean, it's still there. And it was not replaced by another message of accountability until now.

The U.S., many European countries, they have the opportunity now to create a mechanism for Yemen in June in the Human Rights Council. We as a civil society tried to push to have something come from the General Assembly in New York. And then we were told by different states that it's better to have it through the Human Rights Council in June. And then we said, yes, we will go to the Human Rights Council. And now we started to

hear, maybe it's difficult to get this mechanism for accountability in Yemen in June.

It's very sad because this is happening only because of political reasons. We know that the situation – nothing – what else should happen in Yemen in order to convince the world that we need accountability mechanism? And this mechanism, we know it will have a positive influence on parties to the conflict, and it will push a little to protect our – to respect civilians, because the GEE has its positive influence. And a stronger message will bring a stronger, I mean, influence. But when you just send a very opposite message of impunity, and now we just leave us without having any accountability mechanism, it's very sad, very dangerous.

But we keep pushing. We are trying to push states to create a mechanism, again, out from the Human Rights Council, to be for public – not only for public report, but also for collect and preserve evidence. And we are trying to find champions. And it's not easy to go from state to another state to convince them to be a champion in order to draft a resolution in the Human Rights Council. The U.S., they have used Yemen a lot in their election campaigns. And they say they will be committed. And one of the things that – the very clear things that the U.S. can do in order to help human rights situation in Yemen, is to strongly support the creating for international mechanism for accountability.

But now they are vague. They are trying – they say they are with it, and then are not with it at the same time. The same with other European countries. We are still trying to find champions to draft a resolution in the Human Rights Council. And we are not asking for accountability mechanism for fun. It's not, like, a fashion accessory. It's a real need. And we know and we watched by ourselves how much this can influence, can make parties to the conflict care, and make them even closer to respond to the asks of a ceasefire or peace. Because it shows the price of the war and gives them a message that they are not – they don't have impunity. It's a puzzle. We are still in the middle of this puzzle.

Mr. Kurtzer: Thank you, Radhya.

Summer, in Paul's comments he talked about some of the difference between the local humanitarian action and that of the INGOs or the U.N. agencies. And you described Yemen Aid as an INGO, that operates as an INGO there. But you also used the term "connecting East to West." So I'm wondering if you could speak a little bit about, from your perspective, the role or opportunity that exists within Yemen to support and engage local civil society organizations, be they, you know, formal NGOs or other structures that already exist, to respond to some of the humanitarian

needs. Shifting away from some of the more standard way of doing business in the humanitarian sector.

Ms. Nassar:

Yeah, absolutely. It's interesting, because Amanda spoke lightly about the different viewpoints of how organizations experience things in Yemen. And IRC has, unfortunately, certain experiences, and I think the same with Yemen Aid. It's interesting, it's pretty much the opposite. In the south, we're actually pretty comfortable, but in the north we have a lot of security issues. So I think it all depends on organization and how they experience things on the ground.

But absolutely, I think there are various issues, honestly, with the NGO mechanism when it comes to humanitarian aid. I think have more critiques than – (laughs) – than the positives. And one of the issues is that we are, as an INGO, we're still considered a local organization by nature, since we are Yemeni in background. But, yeah, the first is monitoring and auditing. I mean, this is one of the biggest problems we're seeing on the ground in Yemen. And it's something that we're shocked about too, especially as a Yemeni American entity, when it comes to financial transparencies and things of that nature.

We see that international donors and larger NGOs tend to fund smaller organizations and there aren't any follow-ups in terms of fund requirements regulations, and even follow ups in terms of the donation agreements. By kind of emphasizing this and prioritizing this, it will lead to NGOs to improve, obviously, their internal controlling mechanism and then also implementation quality. Unfortunately, you know, like I said earlier, organizations that are local, could be local, but also could be nongovernment, and de facto, and government entities, they look at it as an asset. There is no transparency, there's no follow up. And there's a lot of play in the numbers, unfortunately.

And I have to say this honestly, if from the top tier, you know, from the high-level organizations, they enforce this and really are strict with this, then local organizations will understand that this is a memo. But when we're seeing gaps and also a lack of governance and, you know, accountabilities when it comes to finances, we're seeing an issue of a lot of corruption. And that's something that needs to be said. And then also that does not impact – that also impacts how we support Yemenis on the ground. So if we have a fund, hypothetically it's supposed to be 80 percent at least towards Yemenis actually impacting their lives, we see that it's 50 percent, 40 percent. And the others is just, like, shadow numbers. And it's mind-blowing to me.

So I think the way we should do that is by good monitoring and enforcing that. The second is capacity building. Yemenis are in need of capacity

building. It's essential. A lot of organizations, they need support to understand how these mechanisms are to be set, the policies, and so on and so forth. So I think by having a more emphasis on capacity building, there is more managerial capacity in terms of how to improve their internal regulations and policies. And it trains them also on project management tools. So I think, you know, in general, those are, like, my two, you know, key points for supporting the local organizations.

Mr. Kurtzer: Thanks, Summer.

I want to pivot back to Paul, and some of the data from your report. You mentioned you did this as a phone survey. And 60 percent of your respondents attested that humanitarian assistance did not reach areas where it was most needed. So from your perspective, based on your experience in the sector and your work now at Humanitarian Outcomes, you know, what are some of the reasons for this in Yemen specifically? And then what steps do you think could be taken to improve the delivery and have it sustained regardless of the political developments?

Mr. Harvey: So, yeah. And the other frightening thing of the phone survey was only 26 percent of the people surveyed said they'd received any aid over the past year, although 80 percent perceived that they needed it. So there are clear question marks over how well the pretty large volumes of assistance are reaching those in most need.

And I'd pivot back to Amanda's point about bureaucratic red tape. I mean, the bureaucratic red tape isn't sort of there for safety net. It's all about sort of controlling aid operations from the part of authorities and parties to the conflict. And that sort of aspect of control is what aid agencies are struggling with in being able to access populations most in need and being able to know that the people who need it most are getting the aid. And that's about, you know, permissions to do monitoring, it's about permissions to do assessments, it's about the whole process of being able to know better who's receiving it.

And so, you know, this is the sort of challenge of the core humanitarian principle of independence in particular, you know, the ability to operate independently and have a good picture of where aid is going. And then there are no – I'm not sure there's any magic wand to that. There's been slight improvements, I think, in the coordination of donors and aid agencies around humanitarian access; slightly better sort of donor-level advocacy through the senior officials meeting, the monitoring groups that since 2019 lots of people described as sort of a bit of a nadir and things improving since then; a somewhat greater willingness on the part of sort of senior humanitarian leadership and U.N. agencies to relax sort of

security restrictions where appropriate to enable greater sort of access on the part of international staff to monitor aid operations.

And so, you know, those are the sorts of things that can incrementally improve the ability of aid operations to be more confident that aid is getting to where it's most needed. I think, you know, getting the balance right in international and local partnerships, and in taking – in working better with Yemeni organizations and civil society to, you know, take advantage of their existing access ability to know what's really going on, is part of the picture. Thinking about what localization – realizing localization commitments better would look like in the Yemeni context – you know, there's a whole raft of things that might be possible, and that are starting to be done. But there's no – you know, it's fundamentally a very difficult dilemma of needing to meet humanitarian aid in a hugely challenging context, where the parties of conflict are keen to continue controlling and exercising control over aid, to the extent that they're able to.

Mr. Kurtzer: Thanks, Paul.

And coming back to you, Amanda, you know, you sit here in Washington. And one of the complexities of this conflict and humanitarian response, at least from the Washington perspective, has been to various different degrees the United States has been either a party to the conflict or at least acting in strong support of the Saudi-led coalition, while also being the largest donor by far of humanitarian operations. And Paul talked a little bit about, I think, creating some diplomatic engagement. And we've obviously seen a high level of diplomatic work over the last six weeks. But, you know, from your experience, what can the U.S. government today do better, you know, from the administration side, from the Congress side, to support humanitarian aid, humanitarian action in Yemen?

Ms. Catanzano: Well, I think I might put it in a couple different categories. I mean, the first and the most obvious is one thing that hasn't come up much in this discussion but is real fueling of fire in this crisis, is the lack of humanitarian funding over the last several years. We go to back 2019 and nearly 90 percent of the HRC was funded. The right resources to the right agencies at the right time really did make a difference in terms of averting famine, in terms of malnutrition outcomes for children. We have proven that, you know, while it's not easy for all the access constraints reasons we've laid out, and a host of other reasons, there is an ability to reach people and to avert the worst, if not get things on a better path.

We've really been hindered in our ability to do that over the last couple years, as the humanitarian financing has really all but dried up since

2020. And that has real impacts, whether it's WFP cutting back its rations by 30 percent, and even for an organization like IRC where we used to be one of the largest health actors in Yemen, we're halting some mobile health teams that are really some of the only access that some Yemenis have to health care. And we have to walk away by the end of this fiscal year from about 22 static health clinics. And talking to some other big partners in the health space, it looks like that number, when you combine the five biggest NGOs in that space, is going to be closer to 100. So we're talking about, you know, tens of thousands of people each month who are going to lose access to health care in a country where 50 percent of health care facilities are offline.

So, I mean, it's a long-winded way of saying, yes, the U.S. has been a very generous donor. I think it's about moving money quickly, it's about leveraging other opportunities, like the Ukrainian emergency supplemental, to get more resources into the places that are suffering the most from the knock-on effects from Ukraine. And top among them is Yemen. But it's also about rallying other donors. The donor conference was obviously an abject failure. What other creative solutions are there? What new donors can they be bringing to the table, given this big void that's been left with some of the Gulf donors who had provided such big donor dollars in the past? So I think there is a big piece around the humanitarian financing.

And then I would say it's really, like you said, Jake, about investing in this peace process, putting diplomatic muscle into it. But approaching it with balance. You know, you mentioned some of the recommendations in last year's testimony. And one of the things that IRC had called for at the time, and I really still believe in, is the need for a new political framework for peace. That the existing U.N. Security Council is outdated. That it wasn't just failing to facilitate a political process but was actively – it was an active obstacle to it, given how one-sided it was. And while we haven't seen a change at the Security Council, I think if we're being honest, if we're thinking about the last six weeks, and perhaps even a little bit longer, and what got parties to the table, I do think it was in large part a more balanced approach from the Biden administration in terms of how they were engaging parties to the conflict.

And I think it's, you know, at least born some, you know, fledgling fruit here in terms of the ceasefire. And I guess what remains to be seen is that sort of de facto movement towards a more balanced approach versus a more formalized approach in the Security Council enough to sustain this? I think it's an open question. But I think right now, for my money, investing in diplomacy in the region, versus investing in diplomacy in New York, might be the right move. And we'll have to see how that bears out. So I do think it's about the funding. It's about rallying others, given

the generosity that the U.S. can leverage and point to. And it's about taking this process of – this political process very, very seriously, investing in it – despite all the distractions globally.

And then I think it's also, you know, thinking about humanitarian diplomacy as well, and recognizing that the need to push for access, the need to push for getting to people in, quote/unquote, "hard to reach places," which we all know is a euphemism for being made hard to reach, that that doesn't fall away while attention gets put on the political process. So I think those are tangible ways that the U.S. can and should be engaging and focusing, despite distractions globally.

Mr. Kurtzer: Thanks, Amanda.

I mean, we talked a little bit about, just now, the region and investing in the region, and regional diplomacy. And so I want to come back to you, Radhya, and ask you a little bit about the – you know, from a human rights perspective, and your organization's perspective, you know, again, the complexities of this conflict is that while there's certainly a Yemeni-Yemeni dimension here, it's become in many ways also a proxy for other international disputes. And so I'm wondering if you can speak a little bit to what extent the neighboring countries or those parties playing a role in supporting the different actors, do you see their potential to also support the accountability that you're pushing for?

And I want to also ask you a separate question. One of the major points of contention in Washington has been about whether or not the United States administration should designate the Houthis as a foreign terrorist organization, with all the implications that it has for funding and bureaucratic challenges, and so on and so forth. And so, from your perspective, how does a step like that help or hurt the efforts to achieve basic human rights and accountability for human rights violations, number one? And, number two, do you think that the neighboring countries can play a meaningful role in, you know, the pursuit of a more peaceful future?

Ms. Al-Mutawakel: As you said, Jacob, the war in Yemen is not only a civil war. It's a civil war and a proxy war, and it has an international dimension. So it's the responsibility of all these parties to the conflict – the Yemeni, the original countries like Saudi Arabia, the United Arab Emirates and Iran, and their allies, like mainly the U.S., France, U.K. – those, I mean, countries who are sending weapons and have influence, and some parties to the conflict. They all have – had the responsibility to stop the war in Yemen. For the first time maybe in Yemen that it's very sad that Yemeni parties to the conflict are not controlling their decision 100 percent. It's a proxy

war, and it's not any secret that all these regional countries have a very, I mean, direct influence in the war.

That's why also they have direct influence to stop the war, and they have direct influence when it comes to violations. They have – they have their own – I mean, like the Saudi and Emirati-led coalition, they are not only neighboring countries. They are part of the war, and they, just, like – they're committing horrible violations, just like Houthis and the Yemeni government. Also those states, as I said, who are sending weapons have their responsibility also. So the U.S. can do a lot in order to change the situation in Yemen, much more than going to the designation again. I don't know how the designation is going to have an effect. It can be used by Houthis like propaganda, but it will influence civilians in Yemen a lot.

I mean, by the administration or – President Biden in his first speech when he became the president, in the middle of his speech he said: This war should end. I was not naïve to the extent that I believed that he would just directly stop the war but, honestly, I expected a lot from the U.S., much more than they are doing now. They can play bigger role to ensure accountability, bigger role to ensure peace process, and bigger role to push in all parties to the conflict equally. To be biased to any party to the conflict, it will make you weak. It will just minimize your influence in this conflict zone.

So to be very – to be – when you want to use the Security Council, you should use it against all parties to the conflict. You have to have the same language against all parties to the conflict, or with all parties to the conflict, to be independent and to have a very serious steps towards re-accountability. It will make you some influence. If you are biased to some parties to the conflict, then you will do nothing. You will not be even different than Trump administration. So because we are talking to humanitarian aid, so it's – humanitarian aid is, like, a lifeline for Yemenis. But you cannot feed a nation.

So, now, most Yemenis, they are in need of a certain kind of humanitarian access – I mean – help. This cannot be solved by humanitarian aid. This war, as President Biden said, should stop. And I know that peace in Yemen is very possible. It is part of all complications. If there is a real political will from the international community, and especially from the U.S., there are a lot that can be done in order to stop the war in Yemen, in order to enhance accountability and to make the situation much more miserable.

I mean, going to accountability mechanism is much more than going to designation. Ensure the accountability mechanism. The accountability mechanism is against the violations by the Houthis, by the

Saudi and Emirati-led coalition, by the Yemeni government, by the STC, by all parties to the conflict. It's like a very independent, balanced mechanism that can hold all parties to the conflict accountable. In short, much more than to go to any political steps in order to punish this party to the conflict or that party to the conflict.

Mr. Kurtzer: Thank you, Radhya.

I want to ask you, Summer, kind of the same question I put to Amanda. Since you are a U.S.-based organization, you know, how do you look at USG policy currently? And what do you think – you know, what are two or three things U.S. government could do differently or better with respect to the humanitarian situation, be it at a funding, policy, or politics level?

Ms. Nasser: Yeah. This is a good question. It's a lot, but we'll try to kind of go in. As you guys are aware, different administrations, different political parties have different agendas. We obviously have a Biden administration. We know that they are focused on, as Radhya said, it was one of the memos of the campaign where it was ending the war in Yemen, to get the attention of voters. And that was a typical move, but also we expect more – even as Americans, and Yemeni Americans – we expect more to be done. But unfortunately, with neighboring countries, there comes a lot of different, you know, favoritism, there's a lot of biases in regards to how that is approached.

I think, honestly, Tim Lenderking is doing a decent job. I'm very much in support of his movement. And he is working relatively hard with the U.N. envoy to secure some ceasefire. I do believe that Yemenis in Yemen are looking at America in disappointment, unfortunately, at this time, because they believe that the U.S. can make the biggest change in driving these countries and different even larger organizations who strive for that accountability, as an "American ideal," quote/unquote. And I think one way to do it is, yes, the funding continues. It should continue, especially right now with the Ukrainian crisis, trying to ensure that a mechanism is in place.

And then lastly, I think the third would be pushing to understand that, you know, larger countries are watching very carefully these parties, and that they shouldn't think that that's a – you know, it's a quick pass. So I believe, you know, putting the word into the statements at the U.N., and saying, you know, what? This is a mechanism. This is how we're going to approach things. Unfortunately, Yemen War is being prolonged. And this is why the funding is decreasing. There's a fatigue. There's a big fatigue. And not only for larger organizations like IRC. IRC, IOM, U.N. UNICEF – all the U.N.-funded organizations, including Yemen Aid. We are

an entity, smaller one. And we see it even from a local level and even from an individual donor level. It doesn't have to be larger funding.

So pushing more funding, pushing more accountability. But, lastly, really, really, it's two things, and I think I'm going to end it here: political solution. It has to be done. Whatever happens on the political will always impact humanitarian work. Right now planning has changed subtly, however operations – there's no positive changes. There's still a lot of complications. We have the city of Taizz as well under humanitarian siege. That's the big one right now. And then lastly, we have an issue of making sure the access is cleared. There's no – unfortunately, there is little to none, and practically zero respect for humanitarian IHL, humanitarian law and principles. And this is impacting the safety of our staff, our staff across the country, but also organizations like the ones represented here. So there needs to be a push. And without it, we will, as an organization, all those are going to be impacted.

Mr. Kurtzer: Thanks so much, Summer.

I'm going to come back to you, Paul, and then ask the rest of our panel for final thoughts because we're going to be running into time. So giving you a heads-up, you're going to have, you know, another minute or two to give the – you know, the key takeaway for our audience listening today. But, Paul, we just heard a little bit about the U.S. role. And in your first comment, you talked about the – you know, the role for the U.S. and the U.N. to play with the red tape.

So I want to actually take it back to the United Nations, because we do have – we did hear from, you know, Hans Grunberg talking about the truce holding, the truce having a considerable impact on the daily lives of many Yemenis. So when we think about the challenges here, political and operational, can you just talk a little bit more about what you see as the potential positive role for the U.N., what the different U.N. entities – be they Security Council, secretary-general, or even the leaders of the humanitarian organizations – should be doing differently than what they're doing today?

Mr. Harvey: Yeah, so we didn't – I'm less qualified to talk about the political side of it, so I'll focus on the humanitarian side of it. The interagency humanitarian evaluation will hopefully be coming out soon, and is – you know, I think will be fairly trenchant in some of its criticisms about the sort of quality of the overall humanitarian response. And so whilst I totally take Amanda, and Summer's, and everyone else's points about the need for sustained funding and possibly greater funding, and for humanitarian diplomacy on the part of the U.S. and other actors around political solutions, I think there's also a need for humanitarian actors to look at themselves and to

look at the quality and effectiveness of their response, and how well, you know, \$14 billion worth of aid is spent over the last seven years, and ways that could be improved.

And certainly, what the IHE has found is some problems with the quality of the response. And so I think what the humanitarian leadership can do is make all those points about the need for humanitarian diplomacy, and make the points about the need to advocate with parties to the conflict for improved humanitarian access and fewer bureaucratic constraints. But also to look at the quality of their own programming and how to improve it. And there is scope to do that as well.

Mr. Kurtzer: And before I turn to the rest of the panel, is there a key takeaway that you want to leave the audience with as we wrap up, Paul?

Mr. Harvey: I think I just gave mine. I'll hand over –

Mr. Kurtzer: OK. So let go back to Amanda. Do you have – you know, if you had one minute to – what's your – what's your key takeaway or key point that you would want folks listening to the call today and hopefully watching later to think about or take away from the situation right now? What would that be?

Ms. Catanzano: I think maybe trying to think about this in the global context, and not letting Yemen become a forgotten crisis. The IRC puts out an annual watch list, called the Emergency Watchlist, each year. And for a number of years, Yemen was number one. And it's not just a what's the worst crisis in the world, it's what's at the risk of deteriorating the most over the course of the coming year? And for 2022, for the first time in a long time, we dropped Yemen to number three. And what we said at the time and what we continue to say is that's not a reflection of things improving in Yemen. It's a reflection of other crises deteriorating equally or even maybe a tad faster.

And so I think really trying to find ways to keep this conversation going, for all of the challenges that we laid out today, whether it's lack of funding, whether it's – whether it's the quality of the programming, as Paul talks about – which I think those are not unrelated issues, quite frankly, and neither the access constraints. We can't reach the people who need it most, then that's a big question about the quality of the programming. Or for the accountability issues that were raised. All of these things are reliable presence still in Yemen, and just because it's fallen off the front page of The New York Times doesn't mean it's any less so. So trying to connect it to other crises, trying to keep the focus on it, I think is really, really important in the coming year. We're really at a crossroad.

Mr. Kurtzer: Thanks, Amanda.

Summer.

Ms. Nassar: I think, you know, we spoke a lot of the negatives – (laughs) – throughout the panel. However, I do want to shed light that there has been changes. There has been positive changes in terms of the humanitarian mechanism, in terms of what the projects look like. I know between 2017 – or, no, I’m sorry, I apologize – 2014-15, up until 2018, there was more focus on urgent support. And that was given the freshness of the conflict. However, there is – due to thanks, honestly, to civil society in Yemen and activists, there has been a push to more sustainable approaches. And this is creating longer, you know, longevity in terms of economic livelihood, and trying to get people back on their feet instead of depending on organizations for their food, or for their livelihood. And it’s a positive.

I’m hopeful that there are more ways that we can advocate, all of us here on the panel, to discuss those mechanisms. I think we all have a skill to play, and we can utilize our efforts to ensure that all these angles are taken care of over time. But, yeah, I’m happy to say that while quality is not that great, the change in direction is getting a little bit better, so.

Mr. Kurtzer: Thanks, Summer. It’s a lot – these discussions are very often pessimistic and focusing on the challenges, so it is – you know, I’m grateful for your bringing in that perspective of, you know, even if it’s small, that perspective of optimism.

Radhya, let’s finish with you, you know, from your perspective. Is there a key takeaway that you’d want the people listening in on the call today to have about the situation in Yemen today?

Ms. Al-Mutawakel: I just don’t want all the horrible details to make people forget that Yemenis – all Yemenis – they still hope to have a state that is based on the rule of law and democracy. We are not very far away from this. We know what does it mean. And we used to have a stable state just before 2015. So we don’t want to be seen like the conflict zone that is very complicated, and will never be solved, and the only discussion is accountability and humanitarian aid. We want our state to be built, not, again, because the last one was not perfect. But we want a state to be built on the rule of law, based on the rule of law and democracy. This is what Yemenis deserve. And I hope that all the efforts – the humanitarian, the human rights, and the political – will just push us to that end one day. Thank you.

Mr. Kurtzer: Thank you. Thank you so much, Radhya Al-Mutawakel, from Mwatana Center for Human Rights, Summer Nasser from Yemen Aid, Amanda

Catanzano from the International Rescue Committee, and Paul Harvey from Humanitarian Outcomes. Thank you all for taking the time to share your thoughts with us, for keeping Yemen in the spotlight. I noticed a comment in the chat from Argentina. You know, so we're being broadcast around the world, and really doing the part of making sure that, you know, these messages about attention, about need, but also about the positive and optimistic future are being received, not just in Washington or Sana'a, but elsewhere around the world.

So thank you for joining us. And thank you, again, to USAID for your humanitarian assistance, for supporting our work. And just to flag that the event will be posted on the CSIS website in its entirety within about 24 hours. Thank you and wish you all a great day.

Ms. Al-Mutawakel: Thank you.

(END)