Event
“Adapting Aid and Intervention in Yemen”

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FEATURING
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CSIS EXPERTS
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Jacob Kurtzer: Good morning and good afternoon, and welcome to the Center for Strategic and International Studies. My name is Jacob Kurtzer. I’m a senior associate with the humanitarian agenda.

We thank you all for joining us today for this important conversation on the humanitarian situation in Yemen and the way in which the international community needs to adapt and evolve our aid portfolio. We’re lucky and grateful to be joined today by David Gressly, the resident and humanitarian coordinator for Yemen, as well as Fatima Abo Alasrar, a non-resident senior associate at the Middle East Institute.

Today’s conversation comes in the wake of the expiration of a humanitarian truce. For those of us who have worked on Yemen or covered Yemen’s humanitarian crisis for many years, we’ve, in a way, run out of negative superlatives to talk about the humanitarian crisis there.

The conflict in Yemen, which has taken so many lives and caused such great humanitarian catastrophe manifests in a country that was already quite poor and quite underdeveloped and facing many severe development and human development challenges. And on top of that, you then had a devastating armed conflict with the impacts on civilian infrastructure.

And as our program at CSIS has had a focus on humanitarian accidents, we’ve seen in Yemen throughout the conflict the various different ways in which all the manifestations of access denial have emerged from the very simple blocking of trucks or workers at checkpoints and borders, to the more substantive blockades, to the infrastructure challenges that are faced, to the decision by organizations to take difficult but necessary decisions not to act for safety and security reasons.

We’ve also seen the challenges that manifest as a result of donor decisions. Bureaucratic regulatory constraints related to counterterrorism regulations and otherwise have also had their impact on the ability of the humanitarian community, but also the, you know, civil society and business communities to support the humanitarian unease in Yemen. So we’re very grateful today, again, for your joining us and to be with Mr. Gressly and with Ms. Abo Alasrar to discuss these very important issues.

So I want to start with you, David, joining us from Yemen. In your capacity as the U.N. representative, can you tell us about the current status and the challenges for the Yemeni people and what, if any, notable ways you’ve observed those conditions changing since the breakdown or the ending of the truce in October.

David Gressly: Well, thank you very much for the invitation to be here today. Actually, I think it’s a tale of two separate stories, I think – the experience among the
population that's in the Ansarallah-controlled areas is actually different than those who are in the government of Yemen-controlled areas. And so I'll describe each of them separately in terms of impact.

And to summarize, it's basically a greater positive impact in the north than in the south – probably a reflection of the way the truce has been implemented – particularly the implementation of the opening of the airport and free movement of – relatively free movement of fuel vessels coming into the Port of Hodeidah, and also the cessation of the air campaign. These have all had significant impact on people in the north.

And the opening of the airport has given some hope for – certainly for medical treatment, educational access, et cetera – that did not exist before – so that's helpful for the individuals, of course, but also generally the moral of people as well. But the more significant support would be the opening of the ports.

We are no longer seeing fuel shortages. Sometimes they've been artificially created – I think you have to acknowledge that – by authorities in the north, but nonetheless, we've seen that problem cease much better than I saw January through March of this year, where there was actually very little petrol or gasoline to be purchased throughout the country – fuel oil, other essential petroleum products in an extremely short ordinary supply. That's no longer the issue.

So people are able to move freely now. They're able to keep businesses open, factories open that closed because they couldn't generate electricity. So people's incomes were better.

And then the third area is, actually, the cessation of the air campaign, which was quite brutal, in the period January through March, in terms of its impact on civilians. It was just the intensity of it and the wider spread of that was particularly hard. That, too, of course, has a major moral impact as well as, you know, not causing the disruptions that it did before.

And moving around Sana'a or other parts of the country, places like Hodeidah, for example, have come back to life. People are moving back there, and it's become a city again. Sana'a – people seem to be more relaxed moving around. You see work to remove rubble of the air raids of the past years, which I think is a forward-looking kind of approach.

Streets in the city are being paved. So there are some adjustments coming in and so forth. I say that, understanding that the overall context from a human
rights point of view, good governance point of view, is still very poor. So I don’t want to paint a totally rosy picture, but certainly for individuals it’s much better than it was prior to the truce.

In the south, it’s interesting we’ve had colleagues do surveys of IDP intentions, and they’re actually quite negative – partly because some of the aspects of the truce that were intended was the opening of the roads in Ta‘izz, for example. So IDPs in that area are quite disappointed.

They’re not seeing a benefit. They saw a drop-off in food assistance, which was not really linked to the truce. It was much more linked to the drop off in regional support for humanitarian assistance in the first part of the year, but people make the connection differently because it coincided with the truce. Some have even said they would prefer going back to war because they were better supported at that point in time.

So I think we have a problem of dichotomy of both expectations and what’s been realized. The benefits of peace are much more apparent in the AA-controlled areas than they are in the government of Yemen-controlled areas, which remains divided, increased criminality. We know the military campaigns that are going on in the south not as disruptive as perhaps the air attacks in the north, but nonetheless an element that people have to live with.

So it’s really two different stores in Yemen in the overall impact, and I think it’s important that we focus on the south and how they, too, can benefit from this is one of the key things I would take from this. But that’s probably a long answer to your question. I’ll stop there.

Mr. Kurtzer: No that’s great, and there’s a lot of points that I’d like to pick up on there, but I want to turn to Fatima.

Before I do, I was remiss in my introduction in not acknowledging this partnership with USAID’s Bureau for Humanitarian Assistance that allows us to put on events like today’s. So just want to flag that.

But let me turn to you, Fatima. You’ve – your research and your background has engaged both questions around international development, but also about violence prevention. And I’m curious, from your perspective, having written quite a bit about the conflict in Yemen and the truce, how have you seen the truce impacting humanitarian needs? And the expiration of it, how has that impacted the situation on the ground?

Fatima Abo Alasrar: Thank you, David – sorry – Jacob – for the opportunity, and a pleasure meeting you virtually, David. So the truce was not perfect in any way, but it had, undoubtedly, some positive outcomes. David touched upon them.
You know, in the Houthi-controlled areas certain, you know – just life has come back to the city, and as we know, there has been a conflict going on in the city of Ma’rib for the past couple of years due to the Houthis’ interest in the area and expansion. And seeing that stop momentarily was a huge issue for the citizens in Ma’rib.

So it allowed people some rest. You know, it allowed – I think it was really positive in many ways. We also saw some positivity in Shabwah, where earlier on in this year there was attacks by the Houthis, and now all of these have dissipated to a huge extent during the truce.

Where there is a dichotomy, as mentioned, is that this has not impacted or not felt everywhere in Yemen, so, as David mentioned, the city of Ta’izz remains one of the cities that are greatly affected by the blockade – or the siege that the Houthis have implemented. And Ta’izz is no small city; it’s the third most populated city in Yemen.

And there were some political messages that people were basically taking from the truce. Given the lack of implementation in Ta’izz and given its failure in Ta’izz, is the idea that, you know, the airports were open for the Houthis to travel regionally.

But at the same time in Ta’izz, people cannot travel within their own city to go to the hospitals or go to meet family members that are 10 minutes away from them, but due to the blockade it – their journey becomes six to eight hours to travel and to cross.

So there’s also other political messages that were coming through – is that the international community might have overfocused on the truce from the perspective of ariel attacks by the Saudis and also cross-border attacks from the Houthis to the Saudi areas somewhat neglecting the skirmishes that are happening on the ground, and the continuous shelling by the Houthi militia.

According to international organizations, the Houthis were responsible for over 93 percent of violence, artillery shelling, drone attacks, and about 95 percent of the death toll in Yemen during the truce period. There were 500 people – 504 people reported to be killed, of which 479 were killed by the Houthi militia.

So from that perspective, people saw the failure. They saw the failure, you know, more pronounced in Ta’izz, and the political messages that came with that is that political – or instability is going to be created by the non-state armed group without having any type of security guarantees from the government or from the coalition to help stabilize these areas. And we see
this also in the delivery of humanitarian aid, where there’s a lot of interest in supporting the areas under the rebel but the areas under the government control become extremely difficult to work in.

And again, Ta’izz is a prime example of that. You worked for ICRC. You probably know this about – I think three years ago ICRC closed their mission in Ta’izz when one of their staff members were killed, so – and there was shelling in the city of Ta’izz during the time of the truce.

So these political messages are not very helpful because it kind of gives the impression that the Houthis are more in control. They’re able to extract more concessions from the government, more concessions from the international community just by being able to have monopoly of violence in the territory they have.

It also sort of frees them up more time to recalculate and basically just decide what they want to do with their time now that, you know, this aid has been delivered by humanitarian organizations. They’re reshuffling all their priorities toward war as we have seen as soon as the truce expired.

The Houthis have promised to launch regional attacks on Saudi Arabia and UAE, and that hasn’t been particularly helpful. So the tone has gone up, and also we’ve seen that there was no political willingness on the part of the rebels to implement their promises. And all of this ended up impacting, I would say, really, long-term issues like the truce, and the peace in general.

The final point I would make is that this was never supposed to be a permanent solution. It was supposed to build confidence among the warring parties in order for it to be a launch pad for political talks that would end the conflict in Yemen or would just start some type of power sharing between people.

This definitely is not the case because I think – I truly believe that the Houthis felt that they have nothing more to offer and that they don’t want to offer what they have – (audio break, technical difficulties). So, from that perspective, this has been, again, something that is a new hurdle, both to the peace agenda, to the development agenda, and to the humanitarian agenda.

Mr. Kurtzer:

Thanks for that, and apologies, for the sound issue. Both – Fatima, both you and David have described a bifurcated situation in terms of the regional impacts of the truce, but also in terms of – the general sentiment about the overall impact of this negotiated political process on a humanitarian situation.
And so I want to come back to you, David. I was struck by what you said, that your colleague reported folks saying, you know, we had better services during a period of war. Can you speak to how, in your capacity as overseeing U.N. operations, you can pivot now for people in the south who are still navigating the complexities of ongoing violence, but also who are not seeing the – you know the – well, the truce dividend, and talk a little bit about what the humanitarian agencies can do differently or can do going forward to respond to that sentiment expressed by the civilian population?

Mr. Gressly: Yeah, thank you. Yeah, I should say, just to further elaborate on my first point, which was – it was linked to the perception of receiving food assistance, which WFP really had to reduce throughout the whole country in the period just before and after the truce, but that was really due to funding limitations and primarily limitations coming out of the UAE and Saudi Arabia, which at that point really have not kicked in.

So it’s a perception created by a coincidence – (audio break, technical difficulties) – one that was felt. Hopefully that will partially change that attitude, but it was very unfortunate that those two things coincided because it helped create that perception.

Now more specifically to your question, I still think it’s a call to action that we try to find how we can do more in such – in that circumstance, and particularly in the Ta’izz area – and going all the way to the coast. I’m talking about the whole government, basically, over to the Hodeidah government.

The – I just led an interagency mission to Ta’izz – about two weeks ago, I think, it is now. Our intent is to establish an actual office in Ta’izz, which is partly symbolic, partly operational, that we want to be close to the people there.

As was mentioned, it’s the third largest city in the country – one that’s largely neglected, frankly, and bifurcated on the north side of the city – and so we’re working with the governor. I had a team come in to look at the – not only the humanitarian, but also the more recovery-oriented requirements of the area, and we hope to utilize that to generate interest and greater funding, particularly in areas where mine action is a big one.

There’s a lot of land mines in that area laid by AA forces that were pushed back at one point in time, but I’ve been to IDP camps surrounded by land minefields. So that’s an issue.

Sanitation is a big issue like it is in almost every city in Yemen these days. Water treatment and the treatment of waste is becoming a major health problem. Electricity is a major problem there. Access to clean water is probably the biggest problem.
The unfortunate truth about Ta‘izz is the water production has historically been on the north side, which is occupied by AA, and most of the consumers are on the south side. That no longer exists.

And then, of course, they’re facing a Dengue fever outbreak and other health issues there compounded by all these other factors that I’ve mentioned. So I think there’s a real opportunity to start addressing this, and the water issue is kind of an interesting one.

We’ve been testing the waters, if I could make an unintended pun, on both sides to see if there’s some interest in trying to reconnect water systems, which could be a contributor to building a – not only a better system of water – clean water access, but one that could, perhaps, improve the relationship and contact between both parties. And there seems to be an appetite for that. Of course, it would require monetary resources, and we continue to look for that.

So I think – we need to do that. We’re doing this in other locations such as, you know, Al Mokha, of course in Aden, and in Hadramaut. We’re looking for opportunities where we can increase – go beyond just humanitarian kind of emergency support to more resilience recovery type of action, which I think people will see as more tangible benefits for peace.

But let me conclude that peace dividends must come from the parties to be really confidence building. Peace dividends that come from donors do not have the same – do not carry the same weight. People recognize them for what they are.

They appreciate it, but they know that it doesn’t represent a change in attitude in the other party, and that’s what really builds political confidence. That’s often overlooked by donors. Donors themselves can’t do that.

And it has to be the parties that build the political confidence that there will be a sustained peace, and I think we have to keep our eyes on it. I’ve seen that in many countries, where that misperception is there – that it’s the donors that have to rush in and make sure there’s a peace dividend. No, it’s the parties in conflict that need to do that. We can complement, supplement, and we should, but there’s nothing that substitutes for the political will for a settlement.

Mr. Kurtzer: Thanks. I want to come back to you on both the funding question and on this nexus between the humanitarian and development work, but while we’re talking about this peace dividend or the role of external parties, you know, I want to come back you, Fatima. There was, in some ways, somewhat of a negative tint to the discussions of the impacts of the truce here, and in your
recent commentary, you wrote about the breakdown and – of the national dialogue and the rejection of it by the Houthis.

What is – what do you see as the political importance and the humanitarian importance, more importantly, of establishing and maintaining such a dialogue? What is the tangible benefits that we could see from a humanitarian perspective, if there are, and how should we think about that when we think about our humanitarian analysis and advocacy?

Ms. Alasrar:

Thanks, Jacob. That’s a very important question, and it’s a complicated one, too.

So what we've – from what we've observed from the Houthi militia and non-state actors in general is that they tend to advance their own interests behind closed doors, and that’s where real policymaking happens. And the national dialogue was open to everyone, allowed for the discussion for everyone, and although they participated, they were more observant of the process rather than fully heartedly engaged.

It allowed them the opportunity to create more deals with other informal actors and even with a former ousted president Ali Abdullah Saleh. So, in a sense, it was a counter revolution to what people had in the Arab Spring.

It backfired, and this was – the national dialogue in Yemen was one of the most critical events because of its openness and its inclusiveness. But we had an event where the outcome really led to nothing but more – even more suffering.

Part of the reason why is because of the economic factor, and the public service factor. When we pay so much attention to the political process and not understanding what the people’s needs are on the ground are, there comes a real disconnect that other political parties can use to their advantage.

And you know, I’ll give you just this small story. When I was – during the national dialogue, I was in Yemen monitoring food assistance by USAID, food vouchers to people in Advian who had been affected by the conflict and the surrounding areas and people, like in Lahij and other areas in the south of Yemen who were affected by Ansar al-Sharia that came in at that time around the Arab Spring prior to this conflict, and what I’ve realized is that – people were asking me this question, is that why is the international community neglecting them and focusing all their attention on a political process in the capital when they could not eat? There was literally no food. In Lahij, big parts of it were just arable land where people lost their livelihood from agriculture.
There were – you know, they were just selling a few guavas and a few limes, but had nothing else to live and survive on besides the food vouchers that were given by the humanitarian agency. And part of what I was doing for USAID is evaluating the effectiveness of the food voucher program, but also trying to find sustainable ways where we can continue this and increase the resilience of the communities.

And to that, you know, as we had focus group discussions, the Sheikh and the other people were telling me there is no sustainability because they have nothing, and they were expecting us to come with answers to real structural problems that in my mind I thought, you know, the only way that this could be remedied is if you move out of your city to another city because there’s no water. And what was even more revealing is that they had water all the way up until the ’90s until a dam was built in the city of Ibb that had harvested water in that area, but stopped it from coming down to – and trickling down to Lahij in the south.

So everything that we do is sort of connected and has policy impacts, and as David was talking about, the openness of the idea of just connecting water, I got really excited because water is one of the main sources and drivers to the conflict.

So, you know, going back to the point of, you know, the national dialogue and what can be done, if we really need to strengthen the communities in Yemen – and think about the communities, not the parties of the conflict – we need to increase also the accountability factor of pushing the people who are controlling these communities to serve them properly because USAID, with all of its voucher programs, could not provide what these people needed. They needed – you know, and I can imagine their situation from 2014 until now hasn’t really improved.

So we need to push the government and the authorities – the de facto authorities that are there to plan for their constituents. They cannot continue relying on humanitarian aid as a bailout, you know. It relieves the pressures, from both the government of Yemen and the militias, to be responsible for the people that they’re governing, and it allows them more time to fight – to fight each other.

So the – I’d highly recommend as we’re looking at, you know, dialogue processes is looking at strengthening the community, the resilientities, and the capacity, through pushing the governments and the de facto authorities in the north to provide services for their citizens – and not just for their loyalists, but for all the citizens.
And you know, that’s an important point I wanted to make. If I would – the last thing is – maybe just to plug in for the work that Peace Track Initiative is doing in Yemen with local organizations.

On the issue of sort of having a sustainable roadmap for peace, that would also include women’s voices. As I mentioned, most of the policymaking is happening – I mean, you know, the informal policymaking is happening behind closed doors, and you know, women like me had often struggled to find access to important – you know, sort of to push for policy agendas that affect women and that affect families in Yemen.

And we’re working with nongovernmental organizations in Yemen, both in the north and the south, and the east and the west, to give us – their recommendations on what needs to best happen to support the peace process locally, and to help basically, you know, have more sustainable and robust peace talks in the future.

Mr. Kurtzer: Thanks. You talked a little bit about the need for the parties themselves to take on that role and responsibility of service provision and meeting the needs of the affected population, which I think reflects, David, what you were talking about in terms of the peace dividends have to come from the parties themselves, and they can’t be just, you know, brought in by the donors.

But you also talked about what we all know of a major humanitarian funding gap, and a gap that’s driven by outside factors. And so I’m kind of curious, David, if you could talk us through a little bit how you, in your position, navigate some of these dual responsibilities in the sense that part of your function is to take that call to action and go out and drum up the necessary resources to meet those emergency humanitarian needs.

And part of your hat is also political, and it’s to go into some of these folks’ offices and say, you need to do it. And how do you balance that tension a little bit between responding to the – you know, the acute emergency needs for the affected population, while also making sure that the parties to the conflict know that they ultimately bear that responsibility, you know, as governing authorities?

So how do you reconcile that tension in your work, and how do you see that going forward?

Mr. Gressly: (Off mic) – that I hold on, you know, multiple, multiple fronts, basically, but that’s certainly one. That’s not a message that I think has been passed too much in the past – about there’s accountability by the two parties for service delivery simply because of crisis of such a magnitude and frankly the lack of a real government in the south.
And unfortunately, I think we’ve created – or what has evolved – maybe that’s the better word – over time is an expectation that it’s international assistance that has the first accountability for provision of services, not the second level, and that’s the message we’re now trying to get across. It’s a difficult one because you’re sometimes dealing with entities that want – like in the north, they have other aims in mind with their resources that they would like to utilize those resources for. In the south, they have restricted amounts of resources, but also internal divisions that make coherence extremely difficult, and frankly a lack of presence in Aden.

So nonetheless, we have been working on that, and for example, where we have been providing all the fuel to keep major hospitals and water systems running throughout the country – you know, both north and south – we decided earlier this year with the truce – and particularly with the freedom of movement of petroleum products into the north – to phase out that particular kind of assistance and call on the authorities – particularly in the north, where they have the resources – to take that on.

And we’ve done that so far without any negative repercussions, and I do think we need to start testing the boundaries of where humanitarian assistance is still required and where we may be substituting for the authorities on both sides in an appropriate way. So that’s what I’m hoping we can start working on in a more comprehensive way in 2023, and I’ve been talking to our colleagues in the agencies in that regard. You don’t want to move too fast because you can cause major suffering if you’re not right, but I do think we could start testing it and just see how far we can push that.

And secondly, of course, is you want them in both parties to accept that they have the first responsibility for that, which is often not an easy argument to sell up front – though they will privately acknowledge it in private after clear discussion. So yeah, there’s a real tension there going forward, and I think you really have to test that in the north where I think they have both the control as well as the access to resources at this point in time.

But back over to you.

**Mr. Kurtzer:**

Thanks. Fatima, you mentioned your work with Peace Track. You’re a board member with this organization, and thinking about this question, there is, you know, throughout the totality of the humanitarian sector, but also in the development world, there’s an acknowledgement of the need to, you know, to really embrace not the authorities here, but also those local organizations – civil society organizations – be they NGOs or community groups, or otherwise.

And so can you talk a little bit about what it is that Peace Track is doing, and how you see your work with these women leaders potentially helping to fill
that gap between what the international humanitarian actors can provide and what the governing authorities – or the de facto authorities can provide? Where’s the space in Yemen for Yemeni civil society organizations to meet the needs of their neighbors and community members?

Ms. Alasrar:

Yeah, thank you for that question, Jacob. There is an important need to support civil society organizations that are working on, you know, critical – both policy issues and lifesaving issues.

So Peace Track Initiative have had the pleasure of connecting with many women who are working on, for example, the issue of prisoners release. You know, this is championed by the Mothers Abductees’ organization, and they work on the grassroots level. They’re really involved with the U.N. as well in, you know, either reporting the need, advocating for the prisoners’ release, and they are, to some extent, involved in high-level policymaking opportunities, but not as much as would like them to be.

So pushing for more inclusion of these organizations, other organizations that are talking about women’s prisoners in Ansarallah area, or political prisoners in government area. We can also look at, you know, women who are doing service delivery, on the issues of water, on the issue of sanitation, and also women groups who are working on the economic issues – on the educational, health.

There is no shortage of civil society organizations, but there are some constraints that are put forward by the operating environment that they are, you know, working under. So there are constraints for people who are working under, you know, the Houthi militia areas, and with the government it’s usually – the complaint that I keep hearing over and over is that international organizations often assume the responsibility for organizations operating in government areas to either Saudi or Emiratis, which is not really helpful.

So more access to funding from international organizations would be really something that could help more participation within the society. You know, the IDP issue is also a critical issue that women groups are working on, and there is a deficiency in supporting humanitarian need in these areas.

And finally, I would say, like in places that are somewhat lost in limbo – like Hodeidah or Ta’izz – Hodeidah is lost in limbo because the Houthis maintain control over it. At the same time, the civil society organizations working in that area are having real problems in advancing their work, whether it’s working on landmine issues or on other citizen participation.
And in Ta’izz, the humanitarian organization there are having a problem in both funding and access because they are trapped within the city. So as much as we can, we try to highlight their voices, and one of the things that Peace Track is working on at the moment is taking feedback from all of these organizations that we’re working with and having that feed into a paper of a feminist peace roadmap.

And what the roadmap does is that it – the aim for it is that – really to give, you know, people like the U.N. Resident Coordinator David or the U.N. Envoy Tim – or the U.S. Envoy Tim – an idea of what would be the best way to negotiate on political issues using women voices that have long been marginalized. So you don’t have to meet every one of us, but be sure that all of the voices of, you know, maybe around 800 women, are reflected in that document, and I think that’s really some critical work.

And again, I’ll emphasize that we work with everyone and not just with, you know, people in government-controlled area.

Mr. Kurtzer:

Thanks. Thanks very much for that. And you spoke to the need for, you know, the financial resources not to replace these organizations, but to support them.

And David, you talked about the funding gap and getting those contributions from external actors, and in particular in this case for the contributions from the Saudis and the Emiratis. And I’m just wondering a little bit, you know, when you take your message outside, what has resonated and what should we be thinking about? What messages should we be putting out there to close this gap, and how does the gap impact the work of the U.N. agencies?

Our program here in Washington is global, right. We do these events on all sorts of different contexts. And regularly we start with this is a terrible humanitarian crisis, and there’s a huge funding gap. And people can point to all sorts of reasons – the economic impacts of COVID-19, the reduction of spending by the Brits and some other traditional donors, the impact of Ukraine, in particular – but something’s got to give. And actually, we all need to sort of think about how we can generate more funding for these devastating humanitarian crises.

So when you think about going in front of donors or thinking about messages that resonate, you know, what would be your top lines to, you know, reengage and reinvigorate that sense of urgency for the funding that’s necessary, where humanitarian action is a solution?

Mr. Gressly:

Well, ironically – I’ll start off with a list of facts. We’re currently at 3.3 (billion dollars) – $2.4 billion dollars mobilized out of – this is roughly 55-56
percent. So not radically – not, actually, at all different than last year – even though we got no funding from the UAE and reduced funding from Saudi Arabia.

Why? Because we got, among the Europeans, not a bad increase despite Ukraine. That’s – there’s a perception that Ukraine that’s the factor; but in fact, European countries have contributed more. The United States doubled, practically, its contribution from around 500 plus (million dollars) to over a billion dollars this year, which made up for the regional gap that I described.

So I think those donors have been receptive to the discussions that we’ve had. Key to that was the – which I believe was – it was the first time that we’ve had comprehensive humanitarian assistance – assessments – excuse me – across all 333 districts in the country, which gave an evidence-base that did not exist before that confirmed what – more or less what had been said before, but gave a higher level of confidence that that was an accurate reflection of the current situation. And I think that was fundamental to securing the kind of resources that we have.

Secondly, there’s a need to demonstrate that we’ve actively looking for diversion of this assistance because that’s the most common rationale for not providing funding, particularly in the region, and so I do think we have to reinvigorate not only our efforts, but also our ability to describe those efforts so that there – that doesn’t become a rationale for cutting assistance.

The third argument I hear against assistance – largely in the region but not exclusively – is what’s the exit strategy for the humanitarian assistance? There is no end in sight. Nothing changes.

Well, two things I would say to that. Actually, things do change. Number one, this year we projected at the beginning of 2022 160,000-plus people in IPC 5, which is putting you on the doorstep of famine. Our current projection is now zero. So effectively we’ve averted famine.

IPC 3 and above, the projection was 2 million higher than our current projection. So 2 million people left that IPC 3, 4, and 5 category over the last few months. So the assistance does work, and it works at pushing things in the right direction.

The second thing I’d say is, it’s not for humanitarians to end a crisis. It’s for the international community and the parties in conflict to end the conflict, so that we can rebuild a get out of the humanitarian crisis that we face. But no amount of humanitarian assistance will end the need for humanitarian assistance; it’s lifesaving is the intent. So we need to have a very careful narrative.
And then secondly, more broadly, we need to understand what's driving the attitude of those who are not contributing as they have in the past because it's not just linked to the questions I raised. There's many political considerations about what should be done.

Is there still a belief in humanitarian assistance, which is a question mark with the UAE? And you know, what are the political calculations of the parties? I maybe hear from UAE, for example, we don’t see anything in this for us when we provide humanitarian assistance, which kind of defeats the whole point of humanitarian assistance. So I think some higher level political discussions to try to see if those views, perceptions, can be changed will be important.

Prospects for 2023 – it’s not your question, but it – maybe it’s implied – I’m not so optimistic because I don’t think the United States – though I hope they would – but they’re not likely, A, to be able to sustain the same amount of funding coming in as it did this year. It was pretty much a one-off because of the Ukraine situation. And the gaps that I described regionally will likely stay.

The global economy is not strong, so it’s going to be difficult to maintain, let alone increase, European contributions. So it’s going to be much more difficult in 2023 to sustain where we are today. So we have our work cut out for us, quite frankly.

And if you would, just give me one second to maybe compliment the prior point on local organizations and just to let you know that we use a Yemen Humanitarian Fund, which is now about $100 million for the current year. About almost 60 percent of that funding goes to – directly – not through NGOs or U.N. agencies, but directly to national organizations, and we have like a hundred or so that we work with.

And one of the – I had a couple of objectives in mind with that. One is to continue to work on the right kind of capacity building. One of the common critiques we had with our capacity building is we built capacity to write grants, but not necessarily to manage procurement and programs, and so forth, and there’s a demand that that capacity building be modified.

Number two, we intend to focus on those NGOs that are more headquartered in Aden and in Sana’a, particularly in the south, it’s important to talk to the NGOs that are in Ma’rib, and Ta’izz, and others that are quite active. And so we’re doing outreach by having people based in those locations to help them identify potential grants that we can fund.

And then, thirdly, we’re requiring that a percentage of funding go to women-led organizations, and we’re encouraging our participation on our advisory
board, as well as humanitarian country team, to have representatives from women-led organizations to ensure those voices are up front and center in our own policymaking as we go forward.

I thought that might be of interest, so I just added that. Back over to you.

Mr. Kurtzer: OK. Thanks very much. That's really good to hear in an otherwise bleak picture. At least the figures that you shared on the food security picture being not quite as dire I think are positive trends, and you know, there's probably a lot of analysis to be done on the role of the truce and the role of humanitarian action, but together, the fact that those numbers of people have come off those rolls, I think, is really important.

Certainly there's work for the humanitarian community to do with donors to get out of a what's-in-it-for-us mentality, and I think that's a pretty important call for action for folks who have dialogue opportunities with donors to remind them of the humanitarian imperative -- their obligations under international humanitarian law and others -- what the goal of humanitarian assistance is for. And thanks for flagging the Yemen Humanitarian Fund.

So let me just turn it to you, Fatima, maybe for some final thoughts and comments. As you think about the path forward, I mean, what would be a key takeaway or key point that you would want to resonate with listeners from, you know, the U.S. government or across the policy spectrum as people think about 2023 and beyond for Yemen? What's kind of your topline message for folks thinking about this humanitarian crisis?

Ms. Alasrar: I think we've seen some positive changes in -- you know, in the past few -- during the truce. We've seen some positive changes that really need to be maintained, and one of the greatest positive changes is really the transparency from the United Nations in discussing, you know, issues that it has often not discussed in the past by sort of just, you know, maintaining, maybe, a neutral role that did not assign responsibility to the parties whenever they committed violations. And I think the increased transparency helped in building trust. So the leadership that we have seen from the United Nations and from the United States is really a welcome change, and that's great.

With respect to pushing on peace talks and on the peace process, they should continue always being on the agenda regardless of any truce agreement. We should be always pushing to find a way out of this quagmire and not use, you know, any type of formal agreement or confidence building measure to have, you know -- achieve our objectives in humanitarian aid or in stability for the country.
You know, it’s hard to be optimistic about the future of Yemen given the different variables that are there. What I would say is that we really cannot push Yemenis to accept a solution that they’re not ready for, and therefore, we must find ways for them to talk to each other. But if that doesn’t happen, we cannot force it.

I think an element of that was forced during the Stockholm Agreement, which it’s too late to talk about right now. But the current agreement has been, I think, a little bit more mature in not pushing the parties, not pushing the Yemen government to accept, you know, more – presenting more concession than is needed.

So you know, with that I think I'll close probably with just being really hopeful that the international community is going to take more of a leadership role in attempting to push the parties positively to end the conflict.

Mr. Kurtzer: Thank you for that and for your contributions today. You’ve both given us a lot to think about, a lot to digest in terms of how we harmonize the political agendas while not losing focus over the humanitarian agenda – how we do the humanitarian action differently, how we engage those local voices in a meaningful way – putting the perspectives of the civilian population forward.

So let me just say once again, thank you to Fatima Abo Alasrar from the Middle East Institute.

(END)