

Political Alert
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Yemen is on the Brink of a Major Famine. What Can Be Done?

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We are a research institution concerned with studying Yemeni affairs and the regional and international influences on it. Through interpreting history, analysing the present, and predicting the future, in the aim of positive participating for better future of Yemen

Abstract

Many reports and data indicate that a significant portion of the Yemeni population is now suffering from hunger, and the situation continues to worsen, raising the alarm that Yemen may soon experience a widespread famine. Despite the grave risks and threats associated with this development, it is being met with complete disregard by the Houthi authorities and limited attention from the legitimate government. The same applies to regional and international actors involved in one way or another in the ongoing Yemeni conflict, making it necessary to issue this urgent alert.

What are the dimensions of this serious development? What factors have contributed to it? What could be the consequences? And how can it be addressed?

Warning of widespread famine

Yemen has long struggled with poverty, rooted in its limited and underutilized resources, and worsened by a rapidly growing population. Since the 1970s, the country has seen its population multiply several times over, placing enormous strain on its resources and infrastructure. Decades of poor governance, mismanagement and cycles of violence and instability have only deepened these challenges.

While the ongoing war has undoubtedly worsened poverty, deprivation and hunger, the situation has become particularly dire over the last two years, especially in this current year (2024). Though it is difficult to obtain accurate statistics — especially in areas controlled by the Houthis — firsthand accounts, personal conversations and widespread discussions across Yemen, both in person and online, confirm that

hunger now affects a vast majority of the population. Social groups that were once spared are now feeling the impact, particularly government employees who have either lost their salaries or seen their wages lose significant value. Hunger has taken root in the cities and is even more devastating in rural areas. Social media is increasingly filled with desperate calls for help, as the crisis grows more severe.

The available statistics only scratch the surface of the true scale of hunger in Yemen, as organizations face significant challenges in conducting surveys, particularly in Houthi-controlled areas. Additionally, the worst of the food shortages and hunger crisis has unfolded in recent months. Despite these challenges, many organizations have raised alarms about the growing hunger crisis. The Food and Agriculture Organization, the World Food Programme and UNICEF have all warned that Yemen is teetering on the edge of a catastrophic famine, with 17.4 million people now in need of food assistance. A growing portion of the population is experiencing emergency levels of hunger.

It's important to note that this warning was issued in late 2022, and, as mentioned, the last two years have seen the most alarming and widespread escalation of hunger, driven by the country's economic collapse.

Much of this crisis remains hidden, with only a small glimpse of the true extent of hunger coming to light. The situation is made somewhat more bearable by solidarity within communities, especially from expatriates who have shouldered much of the burden. Additionally, the resilience, dignity and adaptability of Yemenis in the face of adversity allow many to endure hardship with remarkable patience, even as conditions worsen.

Factors Leading to the Expansion of Hunger

Structural and emergent factors share the responsibility for the widening circle of hunger and placing Yemen on the brink of widespread famine. However, the emergent factors, particularly those related to the policies of the parties involved in the war, are the most influential. Therefore, it can be said that a significant part of the suffering from hunger is the result of artificial political factors. The most prominent factors include:

War:

The ongoing war is a primary factor in the deterioration of living conditions for the vast majority of Yemenis, leading to suffering from hunger. It has resulted in extensive destruction of public and private resources and infrastructure, disrupted economic life and halted the livelihoods of many citizens. The war has also caused the displacement of millions from their homes and the abandonment of their sources of income. Its direct and indirect repercussions have contributed to the largest humanitarian crisis in contemporary history, according to international organizations.

Millions of Yemenis have been moved from a state of subsistence and self-sufficiency to poverty, while hundreds of thousands, perhaps millions, have transitioned from poverty and then extreme poverty to hunger. Furthermore, most of the other factors, such as the cessation of salary payments, the inability of the legitimate government to export oil and others, are consequences of this war and its aftermath.

Disruption of Salaries and Erosion of Their Value:

The disruption of salaries and wages for government employees in areas controlled by the Houthis since 2016 has resulted in a shocking transformation in the lives of hundreds of thousands of public sector workers. This situation has abruptly moved them into the realm of poverty and hunger, especially for those whose salaries represented their sole or primary source of livelihood. As a result of the interruption of salary payments, many families who were living a life of modesty and subsistence are now suffering from the hardships of life and the pains and suffering of hunger, especially since the interruption of salary payments has lasted for more than seven lean years, during which some of them have run out of their savings.

Many sources indicate that the circle of hunger is vastly expanding among employees in both the private and public sectors, as the war has led to many losing their jobs, while government employees are left without salaries, especially in Houthi-controlled areas. Citizens in areas under legitimate authority, including employees, have not been in a much better situation than their counterparts in Houthi-controlled areas; the last three years have witnessed a terrifying decline in the value of the national currency, which has lost even more of its purchasing power, making its presence nominal without the ability to secure life's necessities.

Meanwhile, prices of goods have surged significantly due to external shocks, internal disturbances and the conditions of the region and the world.

Decline in Financial Support from the Arab Coalition Countries:

In the first three years of the war, there were significant financial flows from the Arab Coalition countries, namely Saudi Arabia and the United Arab Emirates, in the form of support for military formations, including salaries, construction and equipment needs, as well as food and logistical support, as well as military requirements, in general. These inflows contributed to revitalizing the economy and improving the financial and living conditions for a large number of people in areas under the legitimate government. However, the volume of financial inflow from the Coalition countries has declined in recent years, particularly since the beginning of 2020, making this support increasingly scarce. This situation has negatively affected the economic cycle in areas governed by legitimate authority, especially in cities with a concentration of armed formations, such as Aden and Ma'rib, and to a lesser extent in the cities of Mukalla and Seiyun. This decline has impacted the living conditions of people in these areas, with many losing a significant portion of their income, particularly members of the National Army.

Decline in Food Aid:

The level of food aid that Yemen receives from international organizations has decreased, partly due to the escalation and proliferation of conflicts and humanitarian crises around the world, including the Ukrainian crisis, which has received the most attention from international organizations, as well as humanitarian crises in Sudan, Gaza, Syria and others. This situation has contributed to the fragmentation of humanitarian tasks and the prioritization of various issues, forcing international organizations to reduce the scope of relief work designated for humanitarian intervention in Yemen.

The policies of the Houthis have also played a significant role in the decline of humanitarian interventions in Yemen. They have adopted a series of measures aimed at restricting the work of international organizations in the country, particularly since most organizations operate from their main offices in the capital, Sana'a. Among the policies implemented by the Houthis against international organizations is the abduction of their staff, which has contributed to reducing the level of humanitarian interventions and the volume of relief efforts in Yemen, as well as diminishing initiatives that could alleviate poverty and hunger.

Climate Changes:

Climate change, which has been characterized by turbulence and severity, has contributed to the aggravation of living conditions in Yemen, as the climate in Yemen has tended — in recent years — to be drier most months of the year, adversely affecting the agricultural and pastoral sectors, which are the two most important sectors in the Yemeni economy, employing a large number of citizens.

Additionally, heavy rains often fall in significant amounts, accompanied by thunderstorms and winds during the rainy months, leading to floods that wash away land and crops, destroy homes and properties and damage some wells, dams and water barriers. As a result, citizens suffer considerable losses. The disruptions occurring in the climate and their resulting implications often cause various damages to vital sectors affecting citizens' lives, exacerbating their suffering and rendering their conditions more fragile and vulnerable. This leaves them unable to meet the requirements and necessities of life, making them susceptible to hunger and its consequences.

Persistence of Hunger-Generating Factors:

Current data indicates that the factors generating poverty remain unchanged and are even likely to increase. The economic situation is stagnant, or, more accurately, deteriorating, with no signs of positive change. The prospect of a political settlement remains distant due to the complexities created by the conflict in the Red Sea, the Houthis' entering the war in Gaza, and the shift in the stance of the United States and other Western countries from supporting a political settlement in Yemen to hindering it, contrary to their previous pressure to enforce it. Additionally, Saudi Arabia's diminishing enthusiasm and acceptance of the current "no war, no peace" state while securing its borders and interests from potential Houthi attacks contribute to this stagnation.

The political stalemate means there is no prospect of improving the economic situation. The legitimate government will not be able to resume oil or gas exports, nor will it be able to enhance its financial resources, except for the minimal Saudi support provided as a deposit to pay salaries and secure the import of essential goods. There is little hope for improving the value of the national currency. Meanwhile, the Houthis will continue to refrain from paying salaries to many government employees in areas under their control.

All of this will lead to a further expansion of hunger, and Yemen may face widespread famine.

Neglecting the current situation in Yemen could lead to catastrophic outcomes. It could plunge the country into uncontrollable chaos that could destroy what remains of political and social ties. Furthermore, Yemen could turn into a ticking time bomb, ready to explode and fragment, with repercussions that extend beyond its borders to the entire

region and the world, resulting in new waves of migration and asylum to neighboring countries and Europe, as well as new influxes of violent groups.

Recommendations for Policymakers

Arab Coalition States and GCC Countries:

The two primary members of the Arab Coalition bear the greatest responsibility for the current situation in Yemen. In addition to the obligations of neighborhood, religion and Arab solidarity, they also have ethical, political and legal responsibilities. Their policies have been among the main causes of the suffering endured by the Yemeni people, and they must implement broad humanitarian interventions to save Yemen from hunger, including the following:

1. Allocate sufficient financial aid to be deposited in the Central Bank of Yemen in Aden to ensure the importation of essential goods and supplies and to pay government employees' salaries until the government can resume oil exports.
2. Establish a Gulf fund, to which Saudi Arabia, the UAE and other GCC countries contribute to secure sufficient financial resources. This fund should support economic policies and implement extensive humanitarian and development interventions through charitable arms of the GCC countries and international relief organizations.
3. Grant Yemeni expatriates exceptional exemptions and privileges to allow a greater number of expatriates to be accommodated in GCC countries, particularly Saudi Arabia. This factor has a strategic and long-term impact on improving Yemen's economic situation in both the medium and long term.

The International Community:

The international community bears significant responsibility in exerting pressure for a political settlement, as this is the key to overcoming the immediate hunger crisis. Donor countries and humanitarian organizations must enhance their humanitarian and relief interventions in Yemen to address the growing hunger crisis that is expanding by the day.

The Legitimate Government:

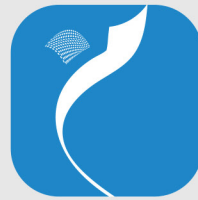
The legitimate government must assume its responsibilities in organizing and activating governmental revenues, addressing imbalances in public spending and directing efforts toward paying salaries and ensuring the provision of basic services.

Political parties, civil society organizations, journalists, human rights advocates and thought leaders bear a great responsibility in highlighting the suffering of Yemenis due to hunger and its consequences. They must turn this issue into a public concern at the local, regional and international levels, generating public and official pressure toward ending the war and addressing its aftermath.

The Houthis:

The Houthis must remove humanitarian work from the conflict and refrain from policies that restrict humanitarian interventions. They should also ensure the payment of government employees' salaries and refrain from halting or obstructing their disbursement.

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