Urging a Comprehensive US Strategy to Prevent Deterioration in the Yemen Crisis

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The conflict in Yemen has led to a fast-moving and complex emergency. Over 1.25 million individuals have been internally displaced, 4,000 have been killed, upwards of 19,000 injured and over 80% of Yemenis are in need of humanitarian assistance. In response, the Inter-Agency Standing Committee has categorized Yemen a Level-3 emergency, the most severe classification in the international system. Yet as grave as the situation is today, without proactive and strong measures, conditions will spiral deeper into widespread violent conflict and humanitarian need. Conflict-sensitive humanitarian assistance is desperately needed, and this traumatized and deeply divided population is also in need of international support to reinforce civilian leadership across dividing lines that can help prevent the further deterioration of the situation.

As advocates and organizations dedicated to preventing violent conflict, achieving sustainable peace, and alleviating humanitarian emergencies, the Yemen NGO Working Group is deeply disturbed by the ongoing situation in Yemen. We urge the US government (USG) to recognize the severity of the crisis and to act swiftly to ensure its peaceful resolution. To this end, we urge USG engagement to focus on supporting these areas:

1. Achieving and Sustaining a Lasting Peace
Yemen will only be able to move forward and rebuild if a lasting ceasefire is achieved and is taken as a first step to serious political negotiations. While humanitarian pauses are welcome and may provide opportunities for expanded humanitarian access, none of the three announced pauses thus far has meaningfully facilitated the work of humanitarian agencies.

Rather than push for a series of humanitarian pauses, the US should demonstrate support for an immediate ceasefire by 1) maintaining high-level diplomatic engagement with all parties; 2) making
technical assistance, such as mediation experts, available upon request; 3) sponsoring civil society, women’s groups, and youth to provide input into an inclusive negotiation process; and 4) encouraging GCC allies to come to the negotiating table.

2. Increasing Humanitarian Access and Funding for Conflict-Sensitive Assistance
While 21 million Yemenis are in need of assistance, humanitarian organizations have only been able to reach 4.4 million of those in need in the past three months. The conflict has resulted in a critical lack of food, fuel, safe water, medical supplies, and other goods necessary for survival. As the UN Special Rapporteur on the right to food recently noted, the denial of access to food, water and health services could amount to crimes against humanity if carried out as a deliberate and systematic effort to cause civilian suffering.

To help increase the flow of goods and humanitarian aid throughout Yemen, the US should insist that goods and aid be allowed to flow through all Yemeni ports. Further, the USG should ensure that aid is distributed impartially and without conditions by working with the UN to gather on-the-ground documentation of aid distribution and offering technical assistance to new donors on compliance with Do No Harm, humanitarian principles, and Sphere standards for humanitarian aid. The USG’s own contribution to the UN Yemen Humanitarian Response Plan must be significant, and Congress must ensure that the Office of Foreign Disaster Assistance (OFDA) has adequate funding in FY17 to respond to multiple complex and severe humanitarian emergencies.

3. Prioritizing Protection of Civilians and Enforcement of International Humanitarian and Human Rights Law
All parties in conflict have a duty to ensure civilian protection and abide by international humanitarian law (IHL) and international human rights law (IHRL). Since the start of the conflict, civilian infrastructure has been damaged in air strikes and ground fighting, including UN facilities and civilian infrastructure including markets, banks, warehouses, hospitals, and schools.

Having made the prevention of genocide and other mass atrocities a national priority and core moral responsibility of this country, the USG should align its policy and public statements on the Yemen crisis with its broader championing of the protection of civilians within the international system as well as its commitment to the Responsibility to Protect. As Presidential Study Directive 10 notes “our security is affected when masses of civilians are slaughtered, refugees flow across borders, and murderers wreak havoc on regional stability and livelihoods.” In support of this directive, the USG should strongly reaffirm the inviolability of IHL and demand accountability, including through appropriate international mechanisms.

4. Respecting Local Solutions and Working with Civil Society
Yemenis must be leaders in creating and implementing sustainable, effective solutions to the current conflict. With a deep culture of conflict resolution, strong local leaders from across society, and over 8,000 registered civil society organizations, Yemeni civil society has the skill and knowledge to design and implement local solutions. It is in the USG’s interest to support on-the-ground, Yemeni-led initiatives as they have a clearer, more nuanced understanding of the conflict dynamics. In tandem,
local efforts should also leverage the role of INGOs as international civil society institutions, especially those staffed predominantly by local nationals; this hybrid identity can open up unique possibilities to influence change and INGOs can play critical bridging, convening, and technical capacity building roles.

It is also essential that Congress and the Administration budget adequately to support work within Yemen. To that end, 1) the Administration, including the OMB, should ensure that future US budgets take account of crises’ recovery needs and allocate future resources in accounts such as ESF for community protection, a transition to post-conflict reconciliation, and social cohesion; and 2) conference committees revisit discrepancies between the House and Senate appropriation bills and ensure that assistance efforts are well-funded to ensure support to NGO operations in the country.

5. **Employ Known Best Practices for Engaging in Complex Emergencies**

Yemen isn’t a unique case – the international community needs to learn how to consistently support development and peacebuilding during ongoing conflicts that addresses the conflict’s root causes. Withdrawing assistance from these activities when there is still potential for positive, impactful work will undermine efforts to resolve ongoing conflicts.

Assistance needs to target the root causes and drivers of conflict to ensure that the situation does not spiral into greater violence. Yemen can serve as a pilot that demonstrates the effectiveness of smart aid reform, including ending extreme poverty, applying smart strategies for countering violent extremism, and supporting flexible, conflict-smart humanitarian assistance.

Signed,

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