

One-Year into the COVID-19 Pandemic in Yemen: An Opportunity to Refocus Foreign Powers' Attention and End a War?

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Key Points

- Saudi Arabia is trapped, the Internationally Recognized Government of Yemen (IRGY) is impotent, and the Southern Transitional Council (STC) is torn back and forth. Air attacks alone will not end this war. The dire COVID-19 situation in Yemen is an opportunity to refocus foreign powers' attention.
- The Houthis clearly feel that they have nothing to lose by rejecting the recent Saudi peace initiative nor by increasing their offensive actions in Yemen. The international community needs to change that perception.
- Tangible action must replace rhetorical condemnation. The US and its European partners should step up to make the Houthis understand that Yemen's future will not proceed according to the Houthi's terms.
- Russia sees a military path as counterproductive, and favors a political approach.
- China could provide much of what Yemen needs in the short term, i.e. cheap loans and humanitarian support. However, Beijing is not genuinely interested in this part of the Arabian Peninsula, yet.

Introduction

More than six years into the Saudi-led intervention, the situation in Yemen is no longer a concern to Yemenis alone. This conflict is a clear example of the permanent struggle between regional powers with consequences radiating far beyond the Arabian Peninsula. Although the Saudi-led coalition successfully counters Houthi missile and drone attacks on a near daily basis, the coalition has lost grip of the overall goal to end the war. Major shifts throughout the past years of war such as the Southern Transitional Council's (STC) wavering in southern Yemen, the United Arab Emirates' (UAE) withdrawal from the coalition, and above all the Houthis' increasingly strong position bolstered by military gains, raise doubts about a timely solution to the conflict. These developments also influence alliances and interests among regional and global powers. The Arab coalition is fragmented, and Tehran's proxy (the Houthis) is getting stronger, largely because of the new US administration's shift regarding Riyadh, its closest ally in the region.

Many analysts call Yemen a forgotten or unseen war. This can be clearly observed through the result of the recent virtual UN-led donor conference. UN Secretary-General Antonio Guterres had aimed for \$3.85 B this year to

address the poverty-stricken country's desperate demand. Donor countries pledged less than half that amount.¹ The situation in Yemen has not tangibly improved. There is a clear risk that the screams of the Yemeni people are silenced due to lack of major development. The world tires of listening over and over to the same frustrating reports – ceasefires, violations, and pervasive references to the world's largest humanitarian crisis.²

The ultimate question is, will the international community allow Yemen to fall off the cliff? Several regional and global actors have the power to exert influence, rather than leaving the responsibility with international organizations (IO) or non-governmental organizations (NGO). Such global actors are using the COVID-19 pandemic as a vehicle to follow both national agendas and also put an end to the Yemeni conflict seems feasible – at least in theory. So, what could incentivize players from inside and outside the Arabian Peninsula to follow such a path?

What is the current situation in Yemen all about?

Since 2015, when the Houthis took over Yemen's capital Sanaa, Yemen has been in civil war. Far more than infrastructure was destroyed during the conflict. The majority of its people are at the brink of a humanitarian disaster. Yemen is just a step away from an absolute catastrophe. Yemeni schools, factories, hospitals and businesses have been destroyed, depriving hundreds of thousands of their livelihoods. Nearly an entire generation of children have been denied an education, and thousands have been recruited to fight.³ Each day, Yemen is pushed a bit closer towards the brink by struggling internal factions backed by regional powers, or from elsewhere in the Middle East and beyond.

Previously, this war was seen as a binary lethal conflict between the Houthi movement and the Internationally Recognized Government of Yemen (IRGY). But this perception changed in 2019. In mid-2019, Saudi Arabia's nominal ally, the United Arab Emirates (UAE), withdrew almost all its Arab coalition forces. This significant step by the Kingdom's primary partner was prompted by Iran's continuous threat, and severe international criticism against the coalition's fighting. However, the UAE maintained close links to its local partner, the STC. Suddenly, violent confrontations between former allies became the new normal. The STC's actions could have been easily described as mutiny since it took up the fight against its former comrades-in-arms. This peaked in April 2020 when the STC announced self-rule in the south. Subsequently, the STC attempted to seize power in the interim capital of Aden. It captured millions of riyals from the Central Bank of Yemen, and forcibly took over the island of Socotra. As a result, the Riyadh Agreement parties put the power sharing deal on ice for months. In late 2020, Saudi Arabia orchestrated recognizable rapprochement. The STC agreed to resume Joint Implementation Committee meetings, return Central Bank of Yemen funds, as well as return Socotra to Hadi government control. In return, IRGY appointed an STC leader, Ahmed Hamid Lamlas, as Aden's governor.⁴ However, the ceasefire has been violated repeatedly and remains fragile.⁴

¹ AP, "UN chief slams 'disappointing' \$1.7 billion aid pledge for Yemen," *France24*, March 2, 2021, <https://www.france24.com/en/middleeast/20210302-un-chief-slams-disappointing-1-7-billion-aid-pledge-for-yemen> (accessed March 3, 2021).

² "Yemen crisis", *UNICEF*, <https://www.unicef.org/emergencies/yemen-crisis> (accessed July 8, 2020).

³ AFP, "War turning Yemen into broken state, beyond repair: UN," *France24*, February 28, 2021, <https://www.france24.com/en/liveneews/20210228-war-turning-yemen-into-broken-state-beyond-repair-un> (accessed March 1, 2021). ⁴ "Yemeni president swears in STC head as Aden governor," *The National*, August 11, 2020, <https://www.thenational.ae/world/mena/yemeni-president-swears-in-stc-secretary-general-as-aden-governor-1.1062416> (accessed February 12, 2021).

⁴ "Urgent: Consensus in Riyadh on the names of the next prime minister and the governor of Aden (get to know them)," *Mareb Press*, July 6, 2020, https://marebpress.net/news_details.php?lng=arabic&sid=165136 (accessed July 8, 2020).

In addition to the Houthis' control over the north, the STC ensconced in the south, and the IRGY struggling to cope with several challenges at a time, Yemen was hit by the corona virus in April 2020. There are no reliable figures to show exactly how hard the Yemeni people were hit. Those available numbers likely do not reflect reality. Moreover, COVID-19 is spreading uncontrolled. Of major concern is that after more than half a decade of war and hardship, people's immune systems are weakened.⁵ In Yemen, COVID-19 is even more life-threatening than elsewhere since malaria, cholera, and dengue fever already affect the weak and those with pre-existing health conditions. The situation in Yemen is reaching a point where the international community has to take a clear stand. Resumed funding for humanitarian operations is a prerequisite to save millions of lives. A lack of funding is literally a death sentence. But the real problems lie deeper. The whole world is struggling on various levels – economic, social, and political.⁶ Even highly industrialized countries encounter tough financial challenges. For example, the German economy is losing approx. €2.5 B per week due to the lockdown.⁷ This reinforces the common perception of Yemen as a forgotten war. Since the entire world is overwhelmed, it is difficult to get traction for long-term solutions to multifaceted challenges in Yemen. Despite, or perhaps even because of, all these dire conditions, is it possible that regional and global powers will be tempted to act?

Below, various opportunities to impact and exploit the situation in Yemen are outlined.

Regional Powers

Saudi Arabia

Saudi Arabia's intervention has become a grueling situation. The Kingdom must accept the Houthis' territorial gains across north Yemen close to the Saudi border, particularly the oil-rich Marib region. Saudi Arabia would prefer a unified front against the Houthis, but after several years of conflict, the Kingdom has lost much of its credibility in the public eye. Riyadh finds itself increasingly in an unrewarding position – fighting Iranian-backed rebels in the north while simultaneously trapped in the south between the IRGY, led by an exiled president, and a frequently rebelling STC.

The fact that Saudi Arabia - the largest economy⁸ on the Arabian Peninsula, with the most advanced military - remains unable to defeat the Houthis has created an embarrassing image. Saudi Crown Prince Mohammad bin Salman's (MBS) reputation has certainly been damaged. The outcome of Saudi Arabia's military engagement in Yemen does not support the prince's ambition to become king.

No military solution is in sight. After the UAE and Sudan withdrew almost all their forces, Saudi Arabia must accept that a political solution is the only plausible way to end this conflict. This requires an inclusive approach incorporating all involved parties.

⁵ "This is the darkest moment I've ever seen: UN official describes crisis in Yemen", *Yemen Press*, June 27, 2020, <https://www.yemenpress.org/yemen/this-is-the-darkest-moment-i-have-ever-seen-un-official-describes-crisis-in-yemen/> (accessed July 8, 2020).

⁶ AFP, "UN warns Yemen on brink of famine again", *Voice of America*, July 8, 2020, <https://www.voanews.com/middle-east/un-warnsyemen-brink-famine-again> (accessed January 14, 2021).

⁷ DPA, "Immense Kosten: 2.5 Milliarden Euro Lockdown-Verlust in Deutschland – pro Woche," *Tageszeitung*, March 7, 2021, <https://www.tz.de/wirtschaft/lockdown-coronavirus-kosten-deutschland-milliarden-euro-wirtschaft-krise-zr-90231189.html> (accessed March 10, 2021).

⁸ The Worldbank, "GDP (current US\$) – Middle East & North Africa," [GDP \(current US\\$\) - Middle East & North Africa | Data \(worldbank.org\)](https://data.worldbank.org/ny.gdp) (accessed March 15, 2021).

Further, until recently the path of economic pressure was only successful to a very limited extent. Saudi Arabia pressured the Houthis by preventing ships from unloading in Hodeidah port. In summer 2020, almost two dozen ships were holding up waiting to moor. These ships carried gasoline, food, and medical supplies as cargo. The denial of ships' entry has substantial consequences and is hurting the Yemeni people more than the Houthis.⁹ Furthermore, the Saudi Navy has not allowed any oil tankers to offload cargo since the beginning of this year. That oil is needed to keep hospital generators going and provide a minimum of health services.¹⁰ However, Riyadh is this year (and once again) the biggest donor contributing \$430 M to the UN's appeal for aid to Yemen.¹¹ Additionally, the Kingdom is coordinating with vaccine producers to provide the COVID-19 vaccine to low-income countries, including Yemen. The latter is a thorn in the Houthis' side who downplay the disastrous humanitarian situation and continuously provide false figures about infection rates and numbers of deaths.¹²

Saudi Arabia, including its economy, has also been hit hard by the pandemic. The diminished economy prevents Yemeni migrants in Saudi Arabia from providing remittances to support their families. Migrants either lost work or traveled home without any money.

Saudi Arabia's options to end this war became more limited after COVID-19 impacted the entire world. Most importantly, the Kingdom has to keep its word and continue providing pledged donations. In 2021, Saudi Arabia remains the biggest donor. However, more money is needed to alleviate Yemen's suffering. But it requires openness for a diplomatic and political approach towards peace. Anything else will only prolong this war.

Conclusion: Saudi Arabia is trapped in a war that cannot be won – at least not militarily. Mediation and diplomatic efforts under a single “non-Saudi Arabian-led” process bear the chance of a return to a political process that may lead eventually to an end of war.

Iran

Iran's transfer of knowledge and military aid has increased the Houthis' ability to fight the Saudis. Over the past decade, the rebels have continuously received military support from Tehran. With its advanced weaponry, including drones (fixed wing and UAS), missiles, and air defense systems, the Houthis are able to project power beyond Yemen's borders.¹³ So far, Saudi Arabia has successfully intercepted bomb-laden drones, as well as shortrange ballistic missiles. But it is just a matter of time before the Houthis execute a strike causing massive damage to Saudi infrastructure or high numbers of killed and wounded people.

⁹ Steve Bell, “Yemen's Catastrophe & the Saudi's Fiasco”, *Stop the War Coalition*, July 3, 2020, <https://www.stopwar.org.uk/index.php/news-comment/3724-yemen-s-catastrophe-and-the-saudi-s-fiasco> (accessed July 23, 2020).

¹⁰ Nima Elgabir, Barbara Avanitidis, Angela Dewan, Nada Bashir, Yousef Mawry, “Famine has arrived in pockets of Yemen. Saudi ships blocking fuel aren't helping,” *CNN*, March 11, 2021, [Yemen: Famine has arrived and Saudi ships blocking fuel aren't helping - CNN](https://www.cnn.com/2021/03/11/middle-east/yemen-famine-saudi-ships/index.html) (accessed March 12, 2021).

¹¹ AP, “UN chief slams ‘disappointing’ \$1.7 billion aid pledge for Yemen,” *France24*, March 2, 2021, <https://www.france24.com/en/middle-east/20210302-un-chief-slams-disappointing-1-7-billion-aid-pledge-for-yemen> (accessed March 3, 2021).

¹² Lisa Barrington, Mohammed Ghobari, “Yemen to get first COVID-19 shots by March through COVAX, Saudi could pay for others,” *Reuters*, February 4, 2021, [Yemen to get first COVID-19 shots by March through COVAX, Saudi could pay for others \(reuters.com\)](https://www.reuters.com/article/yemen-covid-19/yemen-to-get-first-covid-19-shots-by-march-through-covax-saudi-could-pay-for-others-idUSKBN252001) (accessed March 10, 2021).

¹³ Seth Frantzman, “Yemen caught in the crosshairs of Iran and others – analysis,” *The Jerusalem Post*, June 22, 2020, [Yemen caught in the crosshairs of Iran and others - analysis - The Jerusalem Post \(jpost.com\)](https://www.jpost.com/Israel-news/Article-718883) (accessed March 23, 2021).

Currently, there is no reason for Iran to stop projecting power into the region via the Houthis. This has proved to be a low-cost and successful way of challenging Saudi Arabia, the close US ally. Therefore, Iran sees this relationship, though less tight than Iran's relationship to other proxies like Hezbollah, as worth being cultivated and kept alive.¹⁴ On one hand, targeting Saudi Arabia and creating unrest and turmoil across the Arabian Peninsula can be achieved with little effort and low visibility. On the other hand, coordination and cooperation between the Houthis and Teheran has intensified. Considering current tensions between Tehran and Riyadh, the Iranian leadership might feel a need to push even harder on their proxies. Without doubt, the "array of proxy politicalmilitary organizations maintained by Tehran across the region is useful, among other reasons, for the cloak of deniability they afford the Iranians in their assertion of power across the Middle East."¹⁵ The Houthis currently favor Iran's low-profile support since they do not want to be seen merely as an Iranian puppet.

The war in Yemen has not just changed the political situation; it has also changed the country's geography. Shifting land and maritime borders incite rivalries between warring parties. This conflict has left its mark all over Yemen, on its strategic island of Socotra in the Arabian Sea, as well as along naval routes in the Red Sea. These areas became issues of key disputes between regional powers. There is no obvious reason why Iran should stop doing what it's doing. To the contrary, the nearing economic and security partnership between Iran and China will clear the way for several billions of dollars in Chinese investments in energy and other sectors as part of Beijing's Belt and Road initiative (BRI). This further emboldens Tehran's confident outlook.

Conclusion: As long as Teheran achieves its objectives with limited and covert effort, it is unlikely Iran will stop its interference in the war in Yemen. However, a lift of US sanctions seems unrealistic as long as Iran follows its current path.

Turkey

Though Turkey currently denies any engagement in the war in Yemen, Turkey may soon have an incentive to get involved in the conflict.¹⁶ Turkey and Qatar, a close ally in its regional rivalry with Saudi Arabia and the UAE discussed future Turkish involvement in Yemen in July 2020. However, it is questionable whether Ankara is willing and able to add another campaign to its current military operations in Syria, Iraq, and Libya. Another such foreign commitment may be too costly. However, Yemen provides an attractive opportunity for Turkish influence where physical engagement of forces is not required to achieve foreign policy goals. This may be an opportunity for the Al-Ishlah Party, which represents the Muslim Brotherhood in Yemen.¹⁷ The party was brought into the government during a cabinet reshuffle by President Hadi. This change essentially marked a trigger point for the southerners to form the STC in 2017. Supporting the Al-Ishlah Party could be President Erdogan's leverage to move specifically against his main competitor in the region – Saudi Arabia. Further, Qatar, Turkey's most reliable ally, appears willing to back or even finance Turkish ambitions to impede Saudi Arabia's progress in Yemen. Again, a direct Turkish involvement with forces does not seem likely. However, since Ankara operates its largest overseas military

¹⁴ Jonathon Spyer, "Who bombed the Saudi oil storage yard at Ras Tanura?," *Jerusalem Post*, March 11, 2021, [Who bombed the Saudi oil storage yard at Ras Tanura? - The Jerusalem Post \(jpost.com\)](https://www.jpost.com/Who-bombed-the-Saudi-oil-storage-yard-at-Ras-Tanura?utm_campaign=JPost&utm_medium=Social&utm_source=Facebook) (accessed March 15, 2021).

¹⁵ Ibid.

¹⁶ "Turkey seen planning more active role in war-ravaged Yemen," *The Arab Weekly*, November 24, 2020, <https://theArabweekly.com/turkey-seen-planning-more-active-role-war-ravaged-yemen> (accessed April 6, 2021).

¹⁷ The Muslim Brotherhood is a political group with Islamist ideology across the Arab world with its leaders mainly pursuing subversive agenda against established monarchies. Egypt, Saudi Arabia, and the United Arab Emirates ban the Muslim Brotherhood as a terrorist organization.

facility¹⁸ right across Bab Al-Mandab Strait in Somalia, Turkey could easily deploy more naval vessels off Yemen's shore at President Erdogan's discretion.

Turkey's future actions are hard to predict. According to European diplomats, NATO's southeastern member has lately become the alliance's 'elephant in the room.' This appraisal is based on policy differences between Turkey and various other allies over Libya, Syria, Iraq, Russia, and eastern Mediterranean energy resources.¹⁹ Some analysts argue Turkey is compensating for its failed quest to join Europe by expanding into Arab territories that were once Ottoman imperial domains such as Libya, Syria, and Iraq. In addition, the southern tip of the Arabian Peninsula could become Turkey's next focus area. Besides promoting its influence and presence in the Arabian Sea, any support to or strengthening of the Muslim Brotherhood in Yemen will be understood by the Saudi-led coalition as provocation. However, as long as Ankara keeps one foot in the door in Yemen, Turkey increases its negotiating power in regional issues, particularly involving Saudi Arabia.

Conclusion: Turkey is showing more and more the tendency to increase its influence on the Arabian Peninsula and the Red Sea-Arabian Sea passage. Currently, there is no genuine effort on the part of Turkey to actively promote an end to war in Yemen.

Oman

Yemen's eastern neighbor is struggling domestically due to the current coronavirus pandemic. Oman currently has more than 28,000 'cases/1 million people',²⁰ largely because of its economic dependence on immigrants. The number of foreigners moving into Oman to become permanent residents exceeds the number of people leaving to settle elsewhere. In 2020, Oman's population was expected to increase daily by 1,500 persons.²¹ COVID-19 completely reversed this trend.

Generally, Oman maintains friendly ties with the US and Iran, and has previously been a go-between for the two feuding countries. However, expectations that Oman will exert significant effort to end this war are limited. Particularly regarding arms smuggling through Oman into Yemen, Muscat would have tangible leverage to improve the situation. Amongst many, the GCC Secretary General addressed positive developments of the overall situation in Yemen during 2020 and the great efforts of Saudi Arabia to keep the Riyadh Agreement alive. However, hopes should not only rest on Saudi Arabia, but moreso on the support of the international community. Notably, the Arab states recently restored ties with Qatar and enabled the GCC's full revival.²² The Gulf states now have the opportunity to follow a common political line. The Yemen conflict is a misery which has proven one thing above all to the warring parties – their limitations. The GCC should live up to its maxim of being the true backbone of Arabian Peninsula events. The other six council members could pressure Oman to play straight and prevent any

¹⁸ Camp TURKSOM is a Turkish military base and defense university in Mogadishu, Somalia.

¹⁹ Steven Erlanger, "Turkish Aggression is NATO's 'Elephant in the Room'," *New York Times*, August 3, 2020, [Turkish Aggression Is NATO's 'Elephant in the Room' - The New York Times \(nytimes.com\)](https://www.nytimes.com/2020/08/03/middleeast/turkey-nato-yemen.html) (accessed March 16, 2021).

²⁰ See Worldometers.info, <https://www.worldometers.info/coronavirus/> (accessed March 16, 2021). In the Middle East, Bahrain holds rank 1 with ca. 75,000 cases/1 million population, followed by Lebanon and Qatar (each ca. 61,000), Kuwait (ca. 48,000), UAE (ca. 43,000) and Oman (ca. 28,000). For reason of comparison, USA has ca. 90,000/1 million population, and Sweden – one of the hardest hit countries in Europe – finds itself with ca. 71,000 cases on a par with Bahrain.

²¹ Countrymeters.info, August 5, 2020, <https://countrymeters.info/en/Oman> (accessed March 12, 2021).

²² Vivian Nereim, Farah Elbahrawy, Reeema Al Othman, "Arab States to restore ties with Qatar as three-year rift ends," *Bloomberg*, January 5, 2021, <https://www.bloomberg.com/news/articles/2021-01-06/gulf-arab-states-agree-to-restore-qatar-ties-in-u-s-backed-deal>, (accessed March 29, 2021).

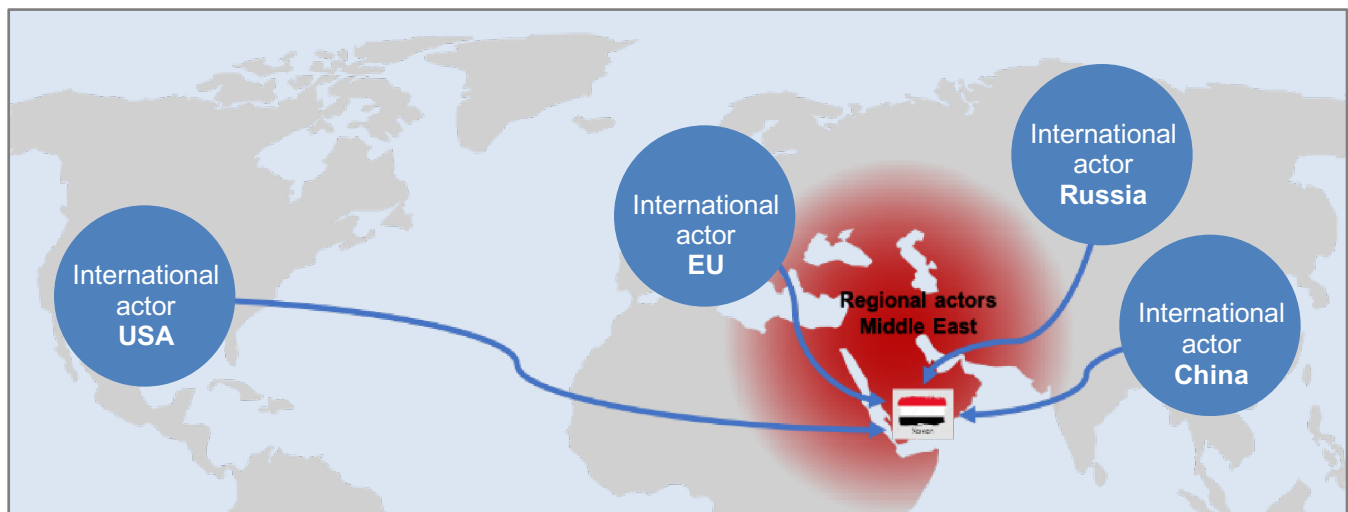
arms smuggling into Yemen. A genuine announcement that Oman may face Qatar's earlier fate may create adequate pressure (e.g. expelling Oman's citizens from abroad). Specifically, since Oman's economy depends heavily on immigration, such a move may motivate Oman to avoid economic detriments. Additionally, all GCC nations would be strongly reminded of their charter's most important article. Article 4 states that "... the alliance was formed to strengthen relations among its member countries and to promote cooperation among the countries' citizens."²³ Oman must understand that in the long run, following a Qatar-like path impacts its economy more than exterminating illegal arms deals.

Conclusion: Oman is not yet self-motivated enough to make a great effort to help end Yemen's war. However, adequate societal and economic GCC pressure will impact Oman's economy, and could force Muscat to abolish arms smuggling activities. This would have a substantial positive impact on Yemen's level of violence.

Global Powers

United States of America

Former USCENTCOM Commander General John Abizaid described the ties between the US and Saudi Arabia as "one of the most strategic relationships that exist anywhere in the world."²⁴ He emphasized that both countries are working together closely and constantly consulting each other regarding regional issues. However, the relationship underwent a sudden readjustment at the beginning of 2021.



Global powers' influence on Yemen

Former US President Trump classified the Houthis as a terrorist organization. President Biden, however, rescinded that designation shortly after his inauguration, saying the designation hindered efforts to provide humanitarian

²³ Gulf Cooperation Council, *Britannica*, August 5, 2020, <https://www.britannica.com/topic/Gulf-Cooperation-Council> (accessed March 10, 2021).

²⁴ Lojien Ben Gasseem, "US envoy slams Houthi attempts to undermine peace," *Arab News*, June 24, 2020, <https://www.arabnews.com/node/1695066/saudi-arabia> (accessed March 10, 2021).

aid to Yemenis living under Houthi control.²⁵ Additionally, the new administration temporarily ended US support to the Saudi-led coalition and halted offensive arms sales to Saudi Arabia.²⁶

US arms sales to Saudi Arabia and the UAE are part of the strong political and economic bond between the countries. Both countries overtly used those weapons in Yemen. This situation changed not long after President Biden took office. One of the US' new foreign policy goals is clearly to end the war in Yemen. With this, the US administration paused two arms sales to Saudi Arabia, installed a special envoy to revive diplomacy, and lifted the US designation of Houthis as Foreign Terrorist Organization.²⁸ But reality once again showed even when arms sales stop, wars continue. Further, unconditionally removing the leverage of blacklisting the Houthis was a generous but arguably a political move.²⁷ However, the US followed other European countries' example and terminated lucrative weapons businesses in this region. This was a strong signal not only to Saudi Arabia, but to the entire region. Democrats, and some Republicans, accused the previous administration of fueling the war with arms sales and military support.²⁸ Now the world could witness a pivot. Refraining from continuous weapons deals, especially with Saudi Arabia, is a strong signal regarding Yemen. However, the effect on the overall security situation has yet to be seen.

Regardless, the close relationship between the US and Saudi Arabia is vital. The strategic importance of Saudi Arabia for the US is unquestioned. The US operates five military bases in the Kingdom which makes Saudi Arabia crucial "to the priority axis in the Middle East to the U.S. military."²⁹ If Saudi Arabia were left without its close US ally, Tehran could more easily pull strings in Yemen. This could pave the ground for increasing turmoil in Riyadh's backyard. The Houthis already appear rather inspired, and believing the Saudis have lost US support, have recently increased military pressure on the Arab coalition.³² No negotiations are planned. The Houthis' goal is to expand their territorial gains before opening discussions about Yemen's future. Even though the US' maximum pressure campaign's real outcome is hard to pin down, it seems that sanctions and maritime interdictions pay off. Such operations at least made it more strenuous for Tehran to support its accomplices in Yemen.

Unfortunately, the US, like many other nations, reduced aid donations. As a result, Yemen's economic and societal situation grows more and more desperate. Draining the flow of money, which is required to fund international projects and deliver food, medicine, and other life-saving goods for Yemeni's people, will sow the seeds for public rebellion and open aggression. Thus, humanitarian support from the world's strongest economy is needed more

²⁵ Vivian Nereim, Dana Khraiche, "Saudi Arabia vows to protect oil facilities after drone strike," *Bloomberg*, March 10, 2021, <https://www.bloomberg.com/news/articles/2021-03-10/saudi-arabia-to-take-measures-to-ensure-oil-supply-after-attack> (accessed March 31, 2021).

²⁶ Asharq Al-Awsat, "Analysts, officials call on Biden to increase pressure on Houthis," March 7, 2021, <https://english.aawsat.com/home/article/2845896/analysts-officials-call-biden-increase-pressure-houthis> (accessed March 23, 2021).

²⁸ Connor Finnegan, "Biden's effort to end Yemen war hindered by continued fighting, funding shortfall," *ABCNews*, March 2, 2021, <https://abcnews.go.com/Politics/bidens-effort-end-yemen-war-hindered-continued-fighting/story?id=76202962> (accessed March 21, 2021).

²⁷ Andrew England, Katrina Manson, "Rebels step up attacks as Biden pushes for peace in Yemen," *Financial Times*, March 9, 2021, <https://www.ft.com/content/2a818a11-7200-4459-989f-449b8a966e41> (accessed March 21, 2021).

²⁸ "Peace Progress in Yemen," *Wall Street Journal*, August 3, 2020, <https://www.wsj.com/articles/peace-progress-in-yemen-11596496278> (accessed March 8, 2021).

²⁹ Dale Gavlak, "Analysts: Saudi ties remain vital to US, despite talk of recalibration," *Voice of America*, March 22, 2021, <https://www.voanews.com/middle-east/analysts-saudi-ties-remain-vital-us-despite-talk-recalibration> (accessed March 23, 2021).³² "Joe Biden's minimum-pressure campaign," *Wall Street Journal*, March 9, 2021, <https://www.wsj.com/articles/joe-bidens-minimum-pressure-campaign-11615332864> (accessed March 20, 2021).

than ever in times of COVID-19. Aside from peace, only funding can provide what is needed most: food, water, medication, and health supplies.

Conclusion: The US should continue its humanitarian aid to war-torn Yemen. Additionally, the US could use its still solid relationship with Saudi Arabia as leverage to pressure other GCC nations to interrupt resupply lines for Iranian weaponry into Yemen. The US is the only country with the ability and resources to combine funding for crucial humanitarian projects for Yemeni people, with impact on arms trafficking by land and sea into the only non-GCC member of the Arabian Peninsula.

Russia

Russia stays true to itself. As in other conflicts, Russia acts as the apparent impartial mediator getting along with all parties. While other country's sovereignty is respected, Moscow strives to find the middle ground and facilitate dialogue.³⁰ In Yemen, many countries have failed to bring peace or even tangible improvement to the dire situation. For many years, the conflict seems to have reached a dead end. This provides an opportunity for Russia to be successful where others failed. Upon invitation at the end of January 2021, Moscow welcomed STC officials as members of the newly-formed Yemeni government for political discussions. Russia kept its channels wide open and carefully followed its well-known foreign policy pattern.³¹

Russia has an operational history with Yemen. The Soviet Union operated military bases in the People's Democratic Yemeni Republic, a country that existed from 1967 through 1990. Yemen's political situation changed in the 1990s and led to Moscow abandoning its bases. However, Russia's main goal in the region is more to regain a position of military and geostrategic power in the Red Sea, rather than simply counter Western influence.³⁵

Currently, Russia acts on three levels: local, regional, and international. At the local level, Moscow maintains tight contacts with local Yemeni actors. It recognizes the legitimate Yemeni government, communicates with the Houthis, and stays related to southern factions. At the regional level, Russia consolidated its alliance with Iran while simultaneously continuing bilateral relations with Saudi Arabia and the UAE. Mediation by an outsider like Russia could help heal the damaged image of Saudi Arabia and the UAE, being incapable of fixing problems in their own backyard, without further embarrassment. Finally, on the international level, Moscow selectively picks carrots and sticks to avoid estranging any of its allies. Russia's ultimate goal is to keep favorable relations with as many stakeholders as possible. Russia likes to be seen as problem-solver, portraying itself as a positive global power and critical actor towards stability in the region. If successful, Russia's role in any future reconstruction process is an added bonus to its own engagement in the region.³²

Conclusion: Russia plays the role of proclaiming its non-alignment, and keeps all actors content. It evaluates the military path as counterproductive while the political approach is seen as the one and only alternative. On all levels, Russia has the potential to significantly influence the stagnant conflict and create extensive regional and Russian benefits by acting as problem-solver.

³⁰ Itxaso Dominguez de Olazábal, Leyla Hamad, "Russia's Multidimensional Approach to the Yemen War," *Institute for International Political Studies*, December 20, 2019, <https://www.ispionline.it/en/pubblicazione/russias-multidimensional-approach-yemen-war-24697> (accessed March 9, 2021).

³¹ "Delegation from Yemen separatists flies to Russia," *Middle East Monitor*, January 31, 2021, <https://www.middleeastmonitor.com/20210131-delegation-from-yemen-separatists-flies-to-russia/> (accessed March 16, 2021).

³⁵ Dominguez de Olazábal, Hamad, "Russia's Multidimensional Approach."

³² Dominguez de Olazábal, Hamad, "Russia's Multidimensional Approach."

China

China and Yemen have had diplomatic relations since the mid 1950s. Shortly after the beginning of the current war, China criticized the Houthis for their ambitions to form a new government, and instead urged them to form an alliance with the internationally recognized government. Last year, Yemen signed a memorandum of understanding with China to approve Yemen's accession to Beijing's BRI.

China is keeping all communication channels open. Although it supported the Hadi-led government carefully, China also kept close contact with the other two main agitators, the Houthis and the STC. Of course, the Gulf of Aden is strategically important for China's BRI. Like so many other places, China seeks Arabian Peninsula possibilities to invest in infrastructure which serves China's own benefit. In this respect, Aden was of major interest. And of course, China's interest in any activities in Aden not only requires contact with the IRGY, but also with regional rulers, i.e. the STC.

So far, Beijing's primary focal point is on the Horn of Africa are Djibouti and Ethiopia.³³ China may be following an approach similar to in the China Sea and consider, not now but in the long run, even military bases along the Bab al-Mandeb Strait. Before the war, China offered Yemen interest-free loans and defense grants. So far, this deal has not been implemented, but China's pursuit of multiple port deals and loans for political leverage is very well known,³⁴ not only in Central Asia and the Middle East. Additionally, Beijing's vaccine diplomacy has the potential to undermine nations' sovereignty and can be used to leverage deals for China's own benefit. Providing vast amounts of vaccine can create a basis to gain leverage, especially to less developed countries, and those whose location is geopolitically relevant. Yemen fulfils both of these criteria, having both the need and high geopolitical importance. In 2017, China delivered humanitarian supplies to address food shortages and fight a cholera outbreak. This was before COVID-19. Although no such support has been reported through the current pandemic, it is not unlikely to happen again.

Conclusion: So far, China has not shown genuine interest in Yemen. However, it seems possible we will observe an uptick in Chinese activity in the southern tip of the Arabian Peninsula. Nevertheless, China made significant investment in infrastructure, extensive interest-free loans for the IRGY, a substantial increase of humanitarian aid, and not least delivery of millions of doses of COVID-19 vaccine, all areas where Yemen suffers the most. China may see the opportunity to get a foot in the door of the strategic gate where the Red Sea and Gulf of Aden meet.

Europe

Following Saudi Arabia's new peace approach, the EU should signal its full support to end the war in Yemen. Additionally, the UN and the US envoy both reiterated their support for the legitimate government and its stance towards peace. All in all, one can see an increased diplomatic effort to create circumstances for Yemen's unity, security, and stability. This would be a perfect moment for the EU to announce its unrestricted support of all peace initiatives and join efforts to reach a comprehensive political solution to eventually end the crisis. The EU could advocate a new international approach that includes forming a new international contact group, comprised of the

³³ John Calabrese, "Bab el-Mandeb Strait: Regional and great power rivalries on the shores of the Red Sea," *Middle East Institute*, January 29, 2020, <https://www.mei.edu/publications/bab-el-mandeb-strait-regional-and-great-power-rivalries-shores-red-sea> (accessed March 23, 2021).

³⁴ Jeff Seldin, "Top US Commander Warns 'Front Line' With China Now South of Border," *Voice of America*, March 16, 2021, [Top US Commander Warns 'Front Line' With China Now South of Border | Voice of America - English \(voanews.com\)](https://www.voanews.com/news/top-us-commander-warns-front-line-with-china-now-south-of-border-20210316) (accessed March 28, 2021).

five permanent members of UN Security Council, members of the Gulf Cooperation Council, and the EU.³⁵ Several approaches to this kind of initiative, and different compositions of such groups, are conceivable.³⁶ Some see a special role for the GCC, and others in the EU or world powers. But no matter what and who, all paths have one thing in common. Saudi Arabia, acting alone as the sole major actor, cannot fix the problem. The EU on the other hand, has the potential and reputation to step in, leave a sustainable footprint, and become the international forerunner.

First, the entire EU should follow France's and Germany's³⁷ example of stopping weapon sales into the region. After many years of arms deals, there is a vast number of weapons amongst militaries, rebels, and citizens. Though persistently following the BREXIT throughout the last year, the UK showed on different occasions when the Yemen situation was discussed, high visibility and emphasized its political weight in the region. It seems that especially now, after exiting the EU, the UK intends to play a more visible strategic political role on the Arabian Peninsula. Last but not least, the recent statements made by UK Prime Minister Johnson have not ruled out, but even emphasized possible involvement in a future UN-mandated stabilization operation in Yemen.³⁸

The EU itself should give Yemen greater importance, start discussions on how to enhance humanitarian help, and remind its own members (and also the non-EU international community) to live up to their financial promises. However, this means first setting a good example. Although all EU members are also struggling with the omnipresent pandemic, there is still enough room for joint support to the Middle East's poorest country. Appropriate action would be to advocate and take a leading role in a UN-led Yemen international contact group. The current Saudi-proposed ceasefire could serve as the perfect starting point for an inclusive peace process embracing all three major Yemeni factions. In this process, the EU could act as an intermediary and launch immediate diplomacy with the IRGY as well as other involved parties. All stakeholders must understand that only a return to a true political process can lead to success.

Conclusion: The EU can play a significant role in the mediation and diplomatic approach to bring this dire situation back to an inclusive political level. Rational and resolute EU actions can reignite stalled negotiations and put halted humanitarian effort in balance again.

Conclusion

Just a few days after taking office, the Biden administration froze arms sales to the Saudi-led coalition and stopped intelligence and logistical support for it. A high-level envoy has been appointed to push for peace talks. Saudi Arabia announced a new peace initiative.³⁹ However, real progress on the ground cannot be ascertained.

³⁵ Peter Salisbury, "The International Approach to the Yemen War: Time for a Change?," *Crisis Group Middle East North Africa*, October 23, 2020, [The International Approach to the Yemen War: Time for a Change? | Crisis Group](#) (accessed March 28, 2021).

³⁶ Michael von Normann, "Thanks to the Riyadh and Stockholm Agreement, Will Yemen one Day Reach Peace?" USCENTCOM CSAG Strategy Paper 2020-04, March 3, 2020.

³⁷ Derek Bisaccio, "Germany Extends Arms Embargo on Saudi Arabia," March 24, 2020, *Defense & Security Monitor*, <https://dsm.forecastinternational.com/wordpress/2020/03/24/germany-extends-arms-embargo-on-saudi-arabia/> (accessed March 30, 2021).

³⁸ Ashley Cowburn, "Boris Johnson doesn't rule out deploying troops in Yemen but 'conditions would have to be very different'," *Independent*, March 24, 2021, [Boris Johnson doesn't rule out deploying troops in Yemen but 'conditions would have to be very different' | The Independent](#) (accessed March 31, 2021).

³⁹ Shuaib Almosawa, Ben Hubbard, "Famine Stalks Yemen, as war drags on and foreign aid wanes," *The New York Times*, March 31, 2021, [Famine Stalks Yemen, as War Drags On and Foreign Aid Wanes - The New York Times \(nytimes.com\)](#) (accessed April 1, 2021).

Additionally, the international community's attention to Yemen's humanitarian situation faded. Evidence of this is the recent UN pledging conference on March 1, 2021. Conference goals were to raise \$3.85 B to help Yemen avoid famine. Participating nations committed less than half that much (\$1.7 B). This will result in scaled back support to a nation in need.

Over the past years, Yemen's situation has been terrible. Unfortunately, COVID-19 has made things even worse. Yemen itself is not able to tackle the challenges connected to this pandemic while so many other ongoing issues require attention such as war, weapons trafficking, a humanitarian catastrophe that effects all areas of social life, and the well-being of a whole people.

These factors may create an opportunity to foreign powers to (re-)engage in Yemen (though) for varying reasons. While the whole world is impacted by COVID-19 and its severe economic and societal consequences, some regional or global players may see an opportunity to act.

Saudi Arabia is trapped. It must either accept the unacceptable, the Houthi demand all foreign forces depart the country, or increase Saudi military posture. Ground forces are required to effectively throw back the enemy. Additionally, Saudi Arabia can try to influence the UAE to reinsert force enablers, e.g. artillery units, which were removed in 2019. This action should be accompanied by more targeting intelligence, especially against important Houthi individuals that cannot be so easily replaced. This would make the Houthis feel that the future of the conflict will not proceed on their terms. So far, the Houthis clearly feel that they have nothing to lose by rejecting all proposals towards conflict solution. The US should lead by example to change this impression by winning over international partners, and forming a coalition that is ready to pair words with tangible action. The Houthis must understand that the days of rhetorical condemnation are over.⁴⁰ In this regard, the UK could be a possible first addressee, as Prime Minister Johnson lately did not rule out deploying troops in Yemen as part of a multi-national stabilization force.⁴¹

Ambassadors from the US and Europe should press the UN Security Council to put more emphasis in enforcing its resolutions. "If the UN...cannot muster the ability to enforce its own resolutions,"⁴² then one solution is a genuine US-led international effort to apply pressure on Iran and the Houthis by detecting and interdicting weapons shipments. The GCC, above all Oman, should increase their own activities in stopping overland trafficking into Yemen. Successful blocking of Houthi's access to weapons and technology from its Iranian patron could be the ultimate incentive to get the rebels to the negotiation table in good faith.⁴³

Devastated infrastructure and a broken health care system, that lacks millions of COVID-19 vaccination doses, reveal potential access points for Chinese investment. Although no genuine interest of Beijing is noticeable in this part of the Arabian Peninsula yet, China can provide everything that Yemen needs. But especially after signing a

⁴⁰ Michael Knights, Alex Almeida, "Saving the Yemen Peace Process by Blunting the Houthi Push for Marib," *The Washington Institute for Near East Policy*, March 17, 2021, [Saving the Yemen Peace Process by Blunting the Houthi Push for Marib | The Washington Institute](#) (accessed March 29, 2021).

⁴¹ Ashley Cowburn, "Boris Johnson doesn't rule out deploying troops in Yemen but 'conditions would have to be very different'," *Independent*, March 24, 2021, [Boris Johnson doesn't rule out deploying troops in Yemen but 'conditions would have to be very different' | The Independent](#) (accessed March 31, 2021).

⁴² Bradley Bowman, Katherine Zimmerman, "Biden Can't Bring Peace to Yemen While Iran Keeps Sending Weapons," *Foreign Policy*, March 4, 2021, [Biden Can't Bring Peace to Yemen While Iran Keeps Sending Weapons \(foreignpolicy.com\)](#) (accessed March 23, 2021).

⁴³ Bradley Bowman, Katherine Zimmerman, "Biden Can't Bring Peace to Yemen While Iran Keeps Sending Weapons," *Foreign Policy*, March 4, 2021, [Biden Can't Bring Peace to Yemen While Iran Keeps Sending Weapons \(foreignpolicy.com\)](#) (accessed March 23, 2021).

25-year comprehensive strategic partnership with Iran, China is apparently not interested in being too entangled into this conflict.

Russia evaluates the military path as counterproductive, and prefers the political approach. Therefore, Moscow's backing in the UN Security Council is not likely. However, her potential to influence and mediate on all levels should be employed. In fact, Russia's all-directional influence should precede any military option. Recent reports on Teheran's interest in making a similar deal with Moscow, as with Beijing, could be an additional incentive for Russia to influence Yemen towards peace.

If COVID-19 can be leveraged for a major change in Yemen, then first and foremost great economic world powers have the ability to do so. The US can play a special role in this context. Together with international partners and a revitalized GCC, a peaceful solution ensuring Yemen's survival is within reach. It is of utmost importance that the US and all other donors fulfill their financial pledges to provide necessary short-term funding. Economic ties between China and Iran, and perhaps in the near future between Russia and Iran, can be exploited in a common push for peace. Europe must support US efforts since the EU relies on safe and steady transport of goods via the Red Sea, Gulf of Aden, and Arabian Sea. Now is the time to step up and actively back tangible activities.

Recommendations for the US / USCENTCOM

- Ensure belligerent parties understand that political compromise brings less danger than the uncontrolled spread of COVID-19.
- Engage diplomatically with Saudi Arabia in order to emphasize an inclusive approach towards peace in Yemen, and actively include all parties involved in all peace efforts.
- Create leverage to bring the Houthis back to the negotiating table.