

# From Warring Partner to Peace Broker – Impact of the New Administration’s Policy towards the War in Yemen

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## Key Points

- The Houthis continuously show their principal interest is escalating the Yemen conflict. International allies must prevent the Houthis from establishing the upper hand to ensure successful future negotiations.
- Regardless of the new Administration’s approach, Riyadh will likely continue its operations against the Houthis and find alternative partners from whom to purchase munitions.
- To make real progress, the US and international community’s efforts must include Teheran while avoiding generation a Hezbollah-like proxy in Yemen.
- Washington’s pivot drives Saudi Arabia to increase cooperation with other Gulf States, and potentially with other countries such as China, Russia, and Israel.
- European partners should increase security cooperation, particularly to counter small UAVs.
- All parties must now focus on guaranteeing safe conditions for the people in and around Marib, and preventing it from generating an increase of refugees in the region.
- Recent diplomatic normalization between Israel and Middle East countries is promising. The US and allies should take advantage of that momentum and broaden the Abraham Accords to bring Israel and Saudi Arabia closer than ever.
- This “forgotten war” is also closely linked to CENTCOM priorities of “detering Iran;” “countering the UAS threat;” and “weaponization of internally displaced persons (IDPs) and refugees.”

## Introduction

In his first foreign policy speech on February 4, 2021, President Biden announced the US would end its support for the Saudi-led coalition’s offensive operations in Yemen.<sup>1</sup> The new policy laid out by the President also included the suspension of pending sales of aerial bombs to KSA.<sup>2</sup> In support of this policy shift, the US appointed a special

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<sup>1</sup> Strobel, Warren P., “Biden launches fresh effort to end civil war in Yemen, halting ‘offensive’ aid to Saudis, naming envoy,” *The Wall Street Journal*, February 4, 2021, <https://www.wsj.com/articles/biden-to-name-special-envoy-to-yemenlaunching-fresh-effort-to-end-the-fighting-11612450815> (accessed February 16, 2021).

<sup>2</sup> Kheel, Rebecca, “Biden administration pauses UAE, Saudi arms sales amid broader review,” *The Hill*, January 27, 2021, <https://thehill.com/policy/defense/536172-biden-administration-pauses-uae-saudi-arms-sales-amid-review> (accessed February 13, 2021).

envoy to advance a political solution to the conflict<sup>3</sup> and the State Department announced it would remove the Houthis from the Foreign Terrorist Organization (FTO) list in February of this year. Although this policy change removes US support to the coalition and lifts pressure off the Houthis, President Biden stated that the US will continue to assist Saudi Arabia's defense. Regardless of the new Administration's approach, Riyadh will likely continue its operations against the Houthis and find alternative partners from whom to purchase munitions.

The international community and NGOs welcomed this US foreign policy pivot as good news,<sup>4</sup> but some may be uncertain whether this re-orientation was well-conceived. Since this US policy announcement, the Houthis have launched near-daily drone attacks against Saudi Arabia and increased fighting around the Marib region.<sup>5</sup> This paper explores this policy change's impact on the war in Yemen in terms of opportunities and time.

### Assessment

For years Iran has supported the Houthis covertly. Iran is undoubtedly smuggling missiles into Yemen. Iran's Islamic Revolutionary Guard Corps (IRGC), and proxies like Hezbollah, train the Houthis on advanced tactics, techniques and procedures.<sup>6</sup> According to some analysts, the Houthis have become the sole Middle Eastern rebel group that is able to effectively employ fixed wing drones and ballistic missiles.<sup>7</sup> The range and size of Iranian supplied drones launched by Houthi rebels vary from Qasef drones to the recently observed Shahed-136.<sup>8</sup> Although most missile and drone attacks have been intercepted, KSA still faces an increasing imminent threat of Houthi cross-border attacks. It is likely only a matter of time before the Saudi military fails to successfully intercept a drone attack and civilian deaths follow. Therefore, the KSA must immediately act to defend its citizens and country. The imminent threat requires the Saudis do not wait to develop new defenses, but employ available solutions. As KSA apparently lacks the ability to deter Iranian activities and as the US shifts its policies, the Houthis are incentivized to increase their attacks. Thus, the only behavioral change of the Houthis will be an increased threat to the region. To date, the Houthis have predominantly targeted Yemen's northern neighbor. However, should no one stop the Houthis, they may soon extend this threat to Iran's other arch foe, Israel.

Developing sufficient carrots and sticks to encourage the Houthis to act peacefully and pursue negotiations will not be easy. The Houthis currently hold a position of strength. The Yemeni government appears impotent, the coalition divided, and the international community disinterested in this forgotten war. The US decision to revoke the Houthi's terrorist label so quickly and unconditionally appears hasty. Without pressure, the US relinquished

<sup>3</sup> Jack Detsch and Robbie Gramer, "Biden Taps Career Diplomat as Envoy to Yemen," *Foreign Policy*, February 4, 2021, <https://foreignpolicy.com/2021/02/04/biden-taps-career-diplomat-as-envoy-to-yemen/> (accessed February 15, 2021).

<sup>4</sup> Magdy, Sami, "Despite Biden's push, a difficult road to peace in Yemen," *AP*, February 11, 2021, <https://apnews.com/article/joe-biden-world-news-yemen-united-nations-17b22cd1da343418af445635b2ff0eb8> (accessed February 15, 2021).

<sup>5</sup> AFP, "Houthi drone attack on Saudi airport leaves civilian plane ablaze," *i24news*, February 10, 2021, <https://www.i24news.tv/en/news/international/middle-east/1612959954-houthi-drone-attack-on-saudi-airport-leavescivilian-plane-ablaze-state-media> (accessed February 14, 2021).

<sup>6</sup> Jonathan Saul and Parisa Hafezi and Michael Georgy, "Iran steps up support for Houthis in Yemen's war," *Reuters*, March 21, 2017, <https://www.reuters.com/article/us-yemen-iran-houthis/exclusive-iran-steps-up-support-for-houthis-in-yemenswar-sources-idUSKBN16S22R> (accessed February 15, 2021).

<sup>7</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>8</sup> Frantzman, Seth J., "Houthi step up attacks after removal from 'terror' list," *Jerusalem Post*, February 15, 2021, [Houthi step up attacks after removal from 'terror' list - The Jerusalem Post \(jpost.com\)](https://www.jpost.com/Israel-news/Article-Houthi-step-up-attacks-after-removal-from-terror-list-611111) (accessed February 16, 2021).

clear leverage and the only apparent carrot. As a precursor, the US should have demanded increased stability to enable critical services to Yemenis in Houthi held territory. While this change in US policy was not completely unexpected, could fuel fears in some Gulf countries that the US will become too conciliatory with Iran. The immediate impact on the ground in Yemen seems rather limited, but the pressure on Riyadh to pursue other solutions is likely to increase.

### New Opportunities

Regardless of support for or against changes to US policy, it is the reality for the next four years, so, stakeholders must look for new opportunities. Washington's pivot drives the KSA to increase cooperation with other Gulf States, and with other countries such as China, Russia, or Israel. The KSA may follow the UAE and normalize relations with Israel, who could actually provide a substantial solution to the Houthi problem. 'Iron Dome,' the Israeli mobile all-weather air defense system, is designed to intercept and destroy missiles, rockets, mortars, artillery shells, as well as aircraft and UAVs.<sup>9</sup> Israeli Defense Forces have proven Iron Dome's capability countering attacks launched from Gaza.<sup>10</sup> Following the 2020 Abraham Accords, Israel approved potential Iron Dome deployments on US Gulf bases.<sup>11</sup> Though unconfirmed, in 2018, Israel reportedly denied a KSA agreement to purchase Iron Dome.<sup>11</sup> However, the US could use the current situation to mediate new Israel-Saudi negotiations.<sup>12</sup> KSA and Israel may draw closer and agree to normalize relations to counter a common enemy. The US could still bolster this development by continuing to assist the KSA's defense against Houthi attacks, while halting military aid for offensive Yemen operations.<sup>14</sup>

Threats by smaller UAVs, like weaponized commercially available drones, must also be countered. However, these small UAV attacks are currently rare and apparently not the rebels' primary *modus operandi*. Various European arms companies have already developed methods to combat such aircraft.<sup>13</sup> These European partners could provide more support to the KSA via security cooperation, to detect and disrupt small UAVs. Such measures would clearly constitute defending the Kingdom's territory and people. While electronically jamming small UAVs is one "soft" approach, well-developed "harder" capabilities exist to repel these attacks such as high-energy lasers, water

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<sup>9</sup> Rafael Advanced Defense Systems Ltd., IRON DOME Family, <https://www.rafael.co.il/worlds/air-missile-defense/shortrange-air-missile-defense/> (accessed February 16, 2021).

<sup>10</sup> MEE Staff, "Ten rockets fired into southern Israel, most intercepted by Iron Dome," *Middle East Eye*, November 1, 2019, <https://www.middleeasteye.net/news/rockets-fired-southern-israel-intercepted-iron-dome> (accessed February 14, 2021).

<sup>11</sup> Frantzman, Seth J., "Will the US deploy Iron Dome to protect bases in the Gulf?," *The Jerusalem Post*, January 24, 2021, <https://www.jpost.com/middle-east/will-us-deploy-iron-dome-to-protect-bases-in-the-gulf-656516> (accessed February 13, 2021).

<sup>11</sup> "US will protect the Gulf by Iron Dome missile system," *TRTWorld*, January 25, 2021, <https://www.trtworld.com/magazine/us-will-protect-the-gulf-by-iron-dome-missile-system-43563> (accessed February 15, 2021).

<sup>12</sup> "Israel allows US to deploy Iron Dome missile defence system in the Gulf: Report," *Middle East Eye*, January 24, 2021, <https://www.middleeasteye.net/news/israel-gulf-us-iron-dome-missile-defence-system> (accessed February 16, 2021).

<sup>14</sup> Brennan, David, "Joe Biden should expand Trump's Abraham Accords, not Iran deal, Reza Pahlavi says," *Newsweek*, February 16, 2021, <https://www.newsweek.com/joe-biden-expand-donald-trump-abraham-accords-not-iran-deal-rezapahlavi-says-1569512> (accessed February 17, 2021).

<sup>13</sup> Pistoia, Daniela, "Detecting and Neutralizing Mini Drones," *The Journal of the Joint Air Power Competence Center*, Edition 25, Winter 2017/2018, p. 81-86, <https://www.japcc.org/detecting-and-neutralizing-mini-drones/> (accessed February 16, 2021).

cannons, “suicidal drones,” or even targeted glue spray.<sup>14</sup> European democracies should soundly support such military sales which should quickly improve the security situation and counter Houthis’ UAV activities.

### **Time is of the essence**

All parties must now focus on guarantying safe conditions for the people in and around Marib, and preventing it from precipitating an additional exodus of refugees. The ongoing Houthi offensive on the gas-rich region of Marib risks displacing up to two million people already traumatized by six years of war. Further, as rebels show increased daring and capability, the allies must convince the Houthis to cease hostilities, particularly during this “renewed diplomatic momentum.”<sup>15</sup> Moreover, the Houthis must view the Biden administration’s policy changes as a final chance to pursue negotiations from a strong position. Unfortunately, the Houthis may see no such incentive.

Therefore, the new US administration must immediately find common diplomatic ground with regional and global partners and allies to counter the Iranian accomplice, establish tailored pressure against them, and leverage the lifting of proscription for substantial rebel cooperation. In this respect, the crippled ship, FSO SAFER, would provide the Houthis an easy bargaining chip to show good will and generate tremendous positive regional environmental impact.<sup>16</sup>

The international public has welcomed the US policy change revoking the Houthis’ FTO label and halting support to Saudi-led offensive Yemen operations. The Houthis, however, have exploited this new accommodation and advanced into the Marib region.<sup>17</sup> The rebels apparently viewed the US position as a *carte blanche* to increase malign activities and strengthen their position in future negotiations. The question remains whether the US policy change is merely presentational or a substantial direction change. Though the former may be politically opportune, a direction change is more desirable. The latter requires tangible action, as ending offensive support is insufficient.

Today’s conflict in Yemen is not just between KSA and rogue actors inside Yemen. The problem is much larger and therefore, requires a comprehensive approach to succeed. Riyadh must sincerely seek a deal and scale back its initial objectives while insisting on certain security assurances. The primary challenge in getting the Houthis to the table is their perception of having the upper hand.<sup>18</sup> If fighting spills into populated areas or refugee sites, people will further flee towards locations east and south of Marib City where fewer resources and aid are available. That scenario creates more breeding ground for VEOs to influence, or even weaponize, IDPs. Thus, it is vital Riyadh

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<sup>14</sup> Monroy, Matthias, “Fight against small drones: Police use military technology,” *digit.site36.net*, February 13, 2019, <https://digit.site36.net/2019/02/13/fight-against-small-drones-police-use-military-technology/> (accessed February 18, 2021).

<sup>15</sup> Gavlak, Dale, “Yemen’s Houthis on Offensive in Bid to Gain Diplomatic Leverage,” *Voice of America*, February 16, 2021, <https://www.voanews.com/middle-east/yemens-houthis-offensive-bid-gain-diplomatic-leverage> (accessed February 17, 2021).

<sup>16</sup> Harden, Dave, Managing Director Georgetown Strategy Group, on Twitter, February 6, 2021, in response to President Biden’s first foreign policy speech, February 4, 2021.

<sup>17</sup> Gavlak, Dale, “Yemen’s Houthis on Offensive in Bid to Gain Diplomatic Leverage,” *Voice of America*, February 16, 2021, <https://www.voanews.com/middle-east/yemens-houthis-offensive-bid-gain-diplomatic-leverage> (accessed February 17, 2021).

<sup>18</sup> *Ibid.*

prevent the Houthis from controlling Marib. Finally, warring parties must de-escalate and show mutual respect and reciprocity. Only a neutral mediator can achieve that result.

### **Conclusion**

The world expects deeds rather than words from the US. In Yemen, the US currently has the opportunity to connect regional security with CENTCOM's top priority: "deterring Iran." This "forgotten war" is also closely linked with two other CENTCOM priorities: countering the UAS threat; and weaponization of internally displaced persons (IDPs) and refugees. Washington should strive for dialogue with Teheran and try to identify measures to address distinct US concerns about attacks emanating from Yemen against Saudi Arabia. Increased military escalation must be avoided. The US should work towards a new agreement with Iran, the "P5," and Gulf Cooperation Council countries. This task is clearly not easy, but any achievement would be improvement.

### **Recommendations for the US / USCENTCOM**

- Re-evaluate the unconditional removal of the Houthis from the FTO list and consider modifications to create leverage against the rebel movement.
- Message MIL/MIL with Israel and Saudi Arabia the concept to expand the Abraham Accords far deeper into the region.
- Increase security cooperation by US and European partners with Yemen and its neighbors including joint exercises focused on "defense against fixed wing drones" and "counter small UAV attacks."
- The 'JCPOA follow-on settlement' scope should be enlarged to embrace Iran's nuclear program and other power-projection measures, including ballistic missiles and malign proxy activities.