

Does the Appetite to End the Conflict in Yemen Exist?

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Key Points

- The Houthis have evolved into a genuine state, and they are more interested in maintaining the status quo rather than engaging in negotiations to resolve the conflict.
- Even though the United Nations and the regional countries recognize Hadi as Yemen's rightful president, the six-year exile in Riyadh has weakened his legitimacy in the eyes of many in Yemen's grassroots movement.
- Yemen appears to be a disintegrated country which is unlikely to be reassembled as a single state after seven years of war.
- The appearance of several “islands” dominated by armed actors with loose chains of command and fluid loyalties complicated the math of achieving peace, which is no longer a two-part deal, between the Houthis and the IRGY.
- The US policy change regarding Yemen conflict did not reach the predicted results.
- The UN and the US do not have influence over all main parties involved in conflict, which is the major obstacle in reaching a peace agreement.

Introduction

On September 24th, 2014, the Houthis rebels, endorsed by former president Ali Abdullah Saleh and his loyalist forces, seized control of the historic Yemen capital Sana'a and overthrew the government of Abdo Rabbu Mansour Hadi, the president at the time. It is the milestone that triggered the transition from the deep crisis in which Yemen was struggling with ever since the Arab Spring to the civil war that has been crushing the country since then.

Seven years later, the parties involved in Yemen's conflict must choose between accepting a ceasefire and an imperfect political settlement or continuing a war that will result in more human suffering but no clear nationwide military victory for any group. A political compromise between the internationally recognized government and the Houthis — the de facto authority in Sana'a — might have ended the conflict and ushered in a period of political change. However, developments in the military balance, political and territorial fragmentation, and heavy-handed regional engagement have transformed the prerequisites for peacekeeping. A more inclusive UN-mediated multiparty solution is required, as well as interim governance mechanisms that prevent power recentralization in

Sana'a in favor of just one or two parties.¹ This paper will first identify the main actors involved in the conflict and then will examine their attitudes regarding a potential peace agreement.

The actors

Initially starting as a two-sided story, the conflict between Houthis and Government forces evolved, developed, and forked in an unpredictable way. Who are the main actors that are confronting and influencing the war in Yemen? Locally, the power is disputed between the Houthi rebels, the International Recognized Government of Yemen (IRGY), and the Southern Transitional Council (STC). Alongside them are expanding number of armed groups, all of which have different goals and trajectories emerging during the conflict. Regionally, the Kingdom of Saudi Arabia (KSA) and United Arab Emirates (UAE) are the most important players since both are the major contributors to the coalition empowered by the United Nations (UN) to restore peace. Undoubtedly, the Islamic Republic of Iran is involved in this conflict supporting the Houthis. In addition, the UN has the lead when it comes to international conflicts, backed up by the US.

The Houthis are more interested in maintaining the status quo rather than going to the negotiations table

After fighting six wars against the central government since 2004, the Houthis, also known as Ansar Allah, understood that to achieve their goals they need to continuously evolve and adapt to the internal and regional conditions and take advantage of any opportunity that is presented. The brief marriage of convenience with former president Ali Abdullah Saleh was the turning point that aided them not only to take over the capital Sana'a but also to absorb important military assets and national intelligence agencies. "Large portions of their arsenal come from absorbing — by negotiation or coercion — units of the Yemeni military, as well as from looting national army stockpiles, forging alliances with tribal militias, and making purchases on the black market."²

On the regional level, the Houthis have the support of the Islamic Republic of Iran. Largely portrayed as an Iranian proxy operating in Yemen, the Iranian relationship with the Houthi movement presents itself to be more like a partnership than a patron-proxy. Most likely, the Houthis began to receive Iranian help around 2009, even if that initial backing was insignificant, as Yemen was not a top priority for Iran at the time. During the Arab Spring, mass protests and elite infighting weakened an already vulnerable Yemeni regime, creating a vacuum which was perfectly exploited by Iran. It is impossible to precisely quantify how much of the Houthi movement's success is the result of Iranian support, but it has certainly played an important role in helping them becoming more powerful. Iran has provided direct and indirect support through the Iran Threat Network (ITN) via Lebanese Hezbollah in the form of financing, training, military expertise, political and media organizing and weapons. "In addition to providing the group with an increasing number of small arms, Iran has been delivering more advanced and lethal weapons as well. In many cases, Iran uses complex smuggling and procurement networks to provide more technologically advanced parts that the Houthis then combine with other locally acquired or produced ones. They assemble these parts into working weapons with technical assistance from Hizballah and Islamic

¹ "Rethinking Peace in Yemen", International Crisis Group, July 2, 2020, <https://www.crisisgroup.org/middle-east-north-africa/gulf-and-arabian-peninsula/yemen/216-rethinking-peace-yemen> (accessed August 20, 2021)

² Thomas Juneau, "How Iran helped Houthis expand their reach", War on the Rocks, August 23, 2021, <https://warontherocks.com/2021/08/how-iran-helped-houthis-expand-their-reach/> (accessed August 22, 2021)

³ ibid

Revolutionary Guard Corps (IRGC) advisers. This approach has allowed the Houthis to now field short and longrange drones and an increasingly diversified fleet of missiles capable of striking deep inside Saudi Arabia.”³

In the last report addressed to UN President of the Security Council, regarding the arms smuggling, the Panel of Experts on Yemen “documented several supply routes to the Houthis involving traditional vessels (dhow) in the Arabian Sea. Arms and equipment are trans-shipped in Omani and Somali waters to smaller boats, with the cargo being delivered to ports on the south coast of Yemen and smuggled overland to the Houthis or, in some cases, through the Bab-el-Mandab directly to Houthi-held areas.”⁴

Since the beginning of the conflict, the Houthi rebels have made significant headway in pursuing their political and military objectives. They are the dominant group in Yemen and have evolved from the “seized state” phase to present itself as a genuine state. Controlling the biggest part of the Yemeni population, the Houthis have institutionalized their own government and ministries, restructured the state institutions, inherited military intelligence agencies, developed cultural courses and indoctrination camps for children, collected taxes , and have influenced monetary policy.⁵ In 2019, the Houthis succeeded in collecting at least \$1.8 billion in state revenue to help fund its war effort.⁶ The Houthis have established a state, and they are not willing to bargain with anybody for a deal that will end up in sharing the power.

Yet, in regard to the Houthi rise to power, it is admitted that the group has reaped enormous benefits from the weakness of its enemies. “The Hadi government is incompetent, corrupt, and fragmented, and it has little legitimacy among the Yemeni population. The pro-government coalition is barely held together by Saudi support, and its members sometimes fight each other as much as they fight the Houthis. The Houthi movement is also less reliant on Iranian support than the Hadi government is on Saudi Arabia. If Iran cut off its support, the Houthis would remain dominant. If Riyadh cut off its support, the fragile coalition supporting Hadi would collapse.”⁷

The Houthi de facto government’s mechanism has encountered no serious opposition from the local population who live in their controlled territories. The Houthis rely on two things in order to control any uprising: they rely on violence, so people are afraid to resist them and also count on legitimacy given to them by Saudi intervention in Yemen. Additionally, most of the rebels came from the street and they are familiar with the ways that people can diminish government power, so they are using intelligence to oppress any kind of movement even before it started. On the other hand, the Houthis provide a relatively stable and predictable environment in ruled areas, which is a much better alternative than IRGY can offer.

The Iranian-Houthi diplomatic partnership has become official in 2020 when Iran appointed its ambassador in Sana’a. “The appointment in October of Hassan Erylou to the diplomatic post, unfilled for five years, made Iran the first country in the world to recognize the Shia Houthi movement as the legitimate government since they seized Sanaa... Ali Khamenei, Iran's supreme leader, granted an audience to a Houthi representative in August 2019, followed closely by the appointment of an ambassador from the NSG to the Islamic Republic.”⁸

⁴ UN Panel of Experts on Yemen, “Final report of the Panel of Experts on Yemen”, January 25, 2021, 3

⁵ “Can a New U.N. Envoy Produce Peace in Yemen?”, The Arab Gulf States Institute in Washington, July 15, 2021, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=XGgvJDLDGs> (accessed August 25, 2021)

⁶ UN Panel of Experts on Yemen, “Final report of the Panel of Experts on Yemen”, January 25, 2021, 35

⁷ Abdulghani Al-Iryani, “With Enemies Like These, Who Needs Friends?”, Sana'a Center For Strategic Studies, October 15, 2020, <https://sanaacenter.org/publications/analysis/11729> (accessed August 25,2021)

⁸ Economist Intelligence, “New Iranian ambassador meets Houthi prime minister”, November 12, 2020,

For now, the Houthis do not have any interest in getting involved in any peace negotiations. Furthermore, they recently launched a very aggressive campaign to conquer Marib, the governorate which will give them control of Yemen's oil and gas handling infrastructure. This will cement Ansar Allah's control of northwest Yemen, will ensure its future economic viability and will also offer them the upper ground in case of any future negotiations.

When it comes to bargaining, the Houthis have never engaged in any discussions which did not conclude in their favor. The 2018 UN facilitated Stockholm Agreement was a turning point in the Yemen conflict because it stopped the major operations of the coalition that would have taken the major port of Hodeidah from the Houthis. This would have had serious consequences on future development in the conflict, as it would have weakened the Houthis enough to force them to come to an agreement and accept some concessions. Instead, "The outcome of this cease-fire had given the Houthis uncontested power and control over Hodeidah city and the humanitarian supplies that arrived through its port, some of which have ended up in the hands of their fighters. Although the battle of Hodeidah was averted, the Stockholm Agreement was able to give the Houthis some breathing room as it enabled them to shift their strategy from defensive to offensive and redirect their efforts elsewhere."⁹

The discussions went entirely different when it came up to FSO Safer, the short fuse weapon of mass destruction which has been deteriorating for seven years in the Red Sea on the Yemeni coast. Ignoring the severe ecological, economic, and humanitarian impact which will result from an oil spill or explosion, Houthi rebels refused permission for the UN to conduct an onsite assessment. No doubt the Houthis and their partner Iran will use FSO Safer as a bargaining chip at the right time, seeking more advantages and concessions from the international community.

The Houthis are also benefiting from the change of administration in Washington, which lifted the terrorism designation of their movement, ended the support (offensive operations) for the Saudi-led coalition and concentrated their efforts at the diplomatic level. This soft response from a major power regarding the war in Yemen triggered criticism from IRGY. Muammar Al-Eryani, Yemen's information minister stated that the Houthis consider the international response to be a green light to push ahead with their military operations and as "encouragement for its aggression and military escalation, killings of Yemenis and violations of human rights."¹⁰

The Houthis continue to follow their own agenda in a mature and pragmatic way despite various peace efforts. They are the dominant group in Yemen and are more interested in maintaining the status quo rather than resolving the conflict. Unfortunately, neither the UN nor the US seem to understand that "The Houthis do not want to be part of a state; they want to be the state. They are not about to give up at the bargaining table what they believe they have won on the battlefield."¹¹

Extreme division and different agendas – the main issues within the anti-Houthi forces camp

http://country.eiu.com/article.aspx?articleid=1150379098&Country=Yemen&topic=Politics&subtopic=Fo_2 (accessed October 28, 2021)

⁹ Fatima Abo Alasrar, "For Yemen's Houthis, the status quo is the key to power", Middle East Institute, March 25, 2021, [For Yemen's Houthis, the status quo is the key to power | Middle East Institute \(mei.edu\)](https://www.mei.edu/article/for-yemens-houthis-the-status-quo-is-the-key-to-power) (accessed October 15, 2021)

¹⁰ Saeed Batati, "US: Hadi-led authority is Yemen's only legitimate government, but Houthis cannot be ignored", Arab News, June 26, 2021, <https://www.arabnews.com/node/1883521/middle-east> (accessed October 15, 2021)

¹¹ Gregory D. Johnsen, "The end of Yemen," Brookings, March 25, 2021, <https://www.brookings.edu/blog/order-from-chaos/2021/03/25/the-end-of-yemen/> (accessed October 17, 2021)

Opposing the Houthis, the IRGY is the only Yemeni authority recognized by the international community through UN Security Council Resolution 2216, along with Yemen president Abdo Rabbu Mansour Hadi. Hadi came to power because of the Arab Spring revolt that resulted in the resignation of former President Ali Abdullah Saleh; at the time, Hadi was the vice president. According to Article 116 of the Yemeni Constitution, if the president of the republic's seat falls empty or the president becomes permanently handicapped, the vice president takes over for a term of not more than 60 days, after which fresh presidential elections must be held. As part of a power transfer deal arranged by the Gulf Cooperation Council, Hadi was elected president in a one-candidate election in February 2012 for a two-year term. During the two-year transition phase, political groups held a national peace conference to settle on a new Yemen. When the two years concluded, the political instability deteriorated due to failed presidential election preparations. Once the Houthis took the capital, Sana'a, in September 2014, the country descended into chaos, and Hadi's power began to dwindle.¹²

Hadi was only supposed to be a transitional president until 2014 but his term was extended for 1 extra year. Before that happened, he was placed under house arrest, resigned under pressure, fled to Aden then to Saudi Arabia, renounced his resignation, and has since been the internationally recognized president that everyone agrees is at least rightfully in charge. Even though the UN and regional countries recognize Hadi as Yemen's rightful president, his six-year exile in Riyadh has weakened his legitimacy in the eyes of many in Yemen's grassroots movement.

Since the beginning of the conflict, the situation in South Yemen has evolved with the appearance of several "islands" dominated by armed actors with loose chain of command and fluid loyalties which complicated the math of achieving peace. Yemen looks like a disintegrated country which is unlikely to be reassembled as a single state after seven years of war, thousands of missiles and bombs, hundreds of thousands of dead, and the world's greatest humanitarian disaster. Instead of one or two Yemens, there are now several Yemens, small statelets, and control zones held by an ever-increasing number of armed organizations, all with their own aims and paths. This is the main reason for the constant failure in reaching a peace agreement – the total misunderstanding of the current state on the ground. "The international community's strategy for mediating an end to the complex war in Yemen is fundamentally misguided. It relies on the delusional belief that a single, strong unitary state could somehow be revived to rule a unified Yemen. Power in Yemen is divided between a dizzying array of actors. Some, like the Houthis and the exiled government of the president, Abdu Rabbu Mansour Hadi, are pretenders to state power. Others function as hybrid or nonstate actors, some armed and some civilian. Just as all are part of the conflict, all are likely to be part of a future peace. The sooner the international community and its mediators dispense with their Westphalian fantasies of a resuscitated Yemeni state, the sooner they can understand the reality of Yemen's conflict—and craft a way forward."¹³

What we are witnessing in Yemen is a profusion of armed groups that are trying to establish themselves as governance actors. The Houthis, the most powerful group, is in control of the northern areas. Hadi government forces control the governorate of Marib, northern Hadhramaut, Shabwah, al-Mahra, Abyan and part of the city of Taiz. STC, backed by the UAE, controls Aden and its surroundings and in the west, along the Red Sea coast, Tareq Saleh commands the dominant forces. UAE originally recruited, trained and paid most of the forces affiliated with the Southern Transitional Council, a situation that has evolved since 2015. The majority of these organizations not

¹² "Have Yemenis given up on Hadi during six-year exile?", Al-Monitor, June 2, 2021, <https://www.al-monitor.com/originals/2021/06/haveyemenis-given-hadi-during-six-year-exile> (accessed October 18, 2021)

¹³ Nadwa Al-Dawsari, "Fantasies of State Power Cannot Solve Yemen's War", Century International, July 13, 2021, [Fantasies of State Power Cannot Solve Yemen's War \(tcf.org\)](https://www.centuryinternational.org/fantasies-of-state-power-cannot-solve-yemen-s-war) (accessed October 20, 2021)

only function independently of the Yemeni government, but actually compete with it following personal and local agendas. Furthermore, many of them are influenced by regional sponsors whose objectives may differ with the international community goal of establishing a sovereign and viable national state in Yemen.¹⁴

The ongoing strategy, which is based on UN Security Council Resolution 2015, has long been a barrier to peace. Aside from the lack of reality in a resolution based on the Houthis' surrender, another important issue is that the war is no longer a one-sided conflict between the government and the Houthis. It's a struggle with several facets and any peace accord in Yemen would need the support of a wide spectrum of Yemeni parties if it is to succeed. As the events in Aden have demonstrated, a peace accord must incorporate pro-secession southern voices – not only the STC's – if a further north-south confrontation is to be avoided.

Another important fact is that the future of president Hadi on the Yemeni political stage will most likely end in conjunction with any peace agreement between the parties involved in conflict. Hadi will almost certainly step down as president in any post-conflict accord, as neither the Houthis nor the anti-Houthis alliance will tolerate his staying in power. This is a well-known fact in government, which posed a question regarding Hadi's good faith in his approach to negotiations. It happened before, in early 2016, when Hadi removed former vice president Khaled Bahah, a figure who was close to the UAE, and appointed Ali Muhsin al-Ahmar, a main supporter of Islah as a replacement, a move which was seen as an attempt to derail the peace talks in Kuwait.

The events in south Yemen might also potentially build a rift between Saudi Arabia and the United Arab Emirates, illustrating the two allies' increasingly divergent aims and methods in Yemen and elsewhere in the Middle East. Although Riyadh has stated that a partition of Yemen would not be tolerated, the STC, which is closely allied with the UAE, has stated that independence remains its ultimate, non-negotiable aim.

The success of the Houthis in the ongoing offensive in Marib could result in considerable consequences for all major internal actors involved in conflict, but surprisingly can also offer a solution to end the conflict. For IRGY this would represent the end since Marib and Shabwa are the most important provinces where they are still in control. STC, on the other hand, could see this as an opportunity to get rid of the IRGY presence, get out from the Riyadh Agreement and achieve the purpose for which it was created - the independence of the south from the north. With Houthis in control of the north and STC the only major player in the south, conditions could be created to justify direct talks between the two sides regarding a ceasefire agreement. "So deep is the enmity between the STC and Hadi that many Council officials see the Huthis as less threatening than the government. Some STC representatives believe their group would be best served by reaching an accommodation with the de facto authorities in Sanaa, if the Huthis can be convinced to limit their political and territorial ambitions to Yemen's north (an idea which some but not all Huthi leaders share)."¹⁵

At this moment there is no real motivation in anti-Houthi camp for serious deal making and coalition building. In order to move ahead with peace negotiations, the UN special envoy needs to work with as many parties it possibly can and not just armed actors: civil society, NGOs, women's groups and all pro-peace groups inside Yemen. He needs to articulate a vision less for peace but more for a political process that accounts for all these factors and doesn't rush to a quick solution which may suit the interests of international players but is likely to spark a new and bloodier round of conflict.

¹⁴ ibid

¹⁵ "Rethinking Peace in Yemen", International Crisis Group, July 2, 2020, <https://www.crisisgroup.org/middle-east-north-africa/gulf-and-arabian-peninsula/yemen/216-rethinking-peace-yemen> (accessed October 19, 2021)

The Coalition to restore legitimacy in Yemen

UN Security Council Resolution 2216, adopted in April 2015, authorizes military intervention against the Houthi rebels and the reinstatement of Abdo Rabbu Mansour Hadi as the recognized president of Yemen. Saudi Arabia assumed the leading role of the coalition including Egypt, Morocco, Jordan, Sudan, UAE, Kuwait, Qatar, and Bahrain. Planned as a six week-operation according to Saudi Arabia, Operation Decisive Storm launched in order to implement the UN resolution has not gone according to plan. Seven years later, the coalition “has not achieved any of its military objectives in Yemen. President Hadi remains in exile, his government is weak and in disarray, and the Houthis are stronger now than they were when the fighting began.”¹⁶

Saudi Arabia is looking for a way out

Caught in this clash for too long, without real prospects of any achievement in the short term, and with allegations of multiple war crimes¹⁷ which have damaged their image internationally and in the eyes of many Yemenis and abandoned by its main US ally, Saudi Arabia is looking for a way out. With UAE and Sudan withdrawing almost all their forces, it is becoming clearer that a political solution is the only plausible way to end this conflict.

Following this path, recent discussions started earlier this year in Baghdad between long time regional rivals Saudi Arabia and Iran with Iraqi mediation. The two Middle Eastern archrivals meeting offered the opportunity not only to ease tensions in region but also to reestablish diplomatic relations between them and maybe reach a solution to end the conflict in Yemen. “Multiple rounds of discussions have been held in Baghdad since the first direct talks between Riyadh and Tehran took place in early April. Saudi Arabia has sought talks with Iran as the kingdom tries to end its years-long war in Yemen against Iran-backed Houthi rebels, having lost an unflinching supporter in President Joe Biden’s predecessor, Donald Trump. Iran, meanwhile, appears to have calculated that a gradual detente with Saudi Arabia, a longtime U.S. ally, will work in its favor during renewed nuclear talks with Washington and world powers.”¹⁸ A gradual re-engagement with Saudi Arabia could also expand Iran's options for new trade routes as a promising path to neutralize and circumvent US sanctions.

Dominated by mistrust on both sides, the talks seem to be on a “good path”¹⁹ as Iran’s foreign minister said during his first visit to Lebanon since taking his post after Iran’s presidential elections. He also advocates in favor of continued dialogue between the two regional archrivals as part as Iran’s priority of improving relations with its neighbors.

¹⁶ Gregory D. Johnsen, “The end of Yemen,” Brookings, March 25, 2021, <https://www.brookings.edu/blog/order-fromchaos/2021/03/25/the-end-of-yemen/> (accessed October 21, 2021)

¹⁷ UN Group of Eminent International and Regional Experts on Yemen, “Yemen: A Pandemic of Impunity in a Tortured Land”, 9 September 2020, <https://www.ohchr.org/EN/HRBodies/HRC/Pages/NewsDetail.aspx?NewsID=26218&LangID=E> (accessed October 21, 2021)

¹⁸ Qassim Abdul-Zahra, “Iran, Saudi sides continue tension-easing talks in Baghdad”, The Associated Press, September 27, 2021, <https://apnews.com/article/middle-east-iran-saudi-arabia-iraq-tehran-9f6064e5e917df8cd8182839c23b8f27> (accessed October 22, 2021)

¹⁹ Bassem Mroue, “Iranian FM in Beirut says Iran-Saudi talks on a ‘good path’”, The Associated Press, October 7, 2021, <https://apnews.com/article/lebanon-beirut-iraq-baghdad-tehran-c49a15190cbbec949978e4c4b82c03fb> (accessed October 25, 2021)

²⁰ Nadwa Al-Dawsari, “Fantasies of State Power Cannot Solve Yemen’s War”, Century International, July 13, 2021, [Fantasies of State Power Cannot Solve Yemen’s War \(tcf.org\)](https://www.centuryinternational.org/fantasies-of-state-power-cannot-solve-yemens-war) (accessed October 23, 2021)

The United Arab Emirates – an influential player in the area

UAE also had a large impact on the Yemen conflict. As one of the major contributors to the coalition, the Emirati played a key role in pushing out the Houthis from the South in 2016. “Ever since, the Emirates has built a strong influence in the south and the west coast of Yemen, where it has created, trained, and commanded forces that operate entirely outside the Yemeni government chain of command. It is responsible for creating armed actors with incoherent ideologies and weak cohesion that clashed with the Yemeni government, and which have contributed to dividing the anti-Houthi camp—divisions that have given military advantages to the rebel group.”²⁰ After withdrawing its ground forces in 2019, UAE has continued to gain influence in Yemen. Besides backing up different small groups and internal actors like STC, it also developed an interest in some Yemeni islands of strategic importance in the area. According to some sources, UAE “retains a heavy military influence on Socotra Island, and is building an airbase on Perim Island in the strategic international strait of Bab al-Mandab in the Red Sea.”²¹ Moreover, as part of the latest developments in the diplomatic arena, the normalization of Israel - UAE relations with the Abraham Accord has the potential to feed the Houthi rhetoric claiming that only the Houthis are fighting Israel.²²

But in response to the political crisis in Yemen, the coalition no longer seems able to achieve the goal for which it was originally created. The required cohesion within the coalition is eroding as the two main powerhouses are following different agendas: while still supporting the IRGY, Saudi Arabia is looking for a way out of this expensive campaign. On the other hand, UAE seems to support a secessionist south in Yemen. “While the United Arab Emirates informed the Panel that it continues to support Yemeni counter-terrorism forces, the Panel also documented the continuing support of the United Arab Emirates for the Southern Transitional Council, some forces affiliated with the Southern Transitional Council and some west coast forces.”²³

The United States of America – the struggle between a new external policy and national interest

On the 20th of January, 2021, the 46th president of the United States took the oath on the West Front of the Capitol. Despite the importance of the moment, everyone was waiting for the radical changes in state policy that were to come. Two weeks later, in his first foreign policy speech as president, Biden announced his first decisions regarding the conflict in Yemen: an end to US support for Saudi-led offensive operations in Yemen, nomination of a US special envoy for Yemen, and freezing arms sales to Saudi Arabia.²⁴ By the end of February, President Biden also revoked one of the last foreign policy actions that Trump administration promoted - the designation of the Houthis as a Foreign Terrorist Organization (FTO). Effectively, these decisions seemed to lead to the idea that the United States has moved from supporting one party in the conflict to assuming the role of a peace broker.

This new path in US foreign policy was confirmed on March 3, 2021, when the Biden administration released the Interim National Security Strategic Guidance, the first official document which presented President Biden’s vision for how America will engage with the world. In the paragraph regarding the Middle East, it is stated: “...we do not believe that military force is the answer to the region’s challenges, and we will not give our partners in the Middle

²¹ Nadwa Al-Dawsari, “Fantasies of State Power Cannot Solve Yemen’s War”

²² Abdulghani Al-Iryani, “With Enemies Like These, Who Needs Friends?”, The Sana’a Center for Strategic Studies, October 15, 2020, <https://sanaacenter.org/publications/analysis/11729> (accessed October 24, 2021)

²³ UN Panel of Experts on Yemen, “Final report of the Panel of Experts on Yemen”, January 25, 2021, 15

²⁴ Julian Borger and Patrick Wintour, “Biden announces end to US support for Saudi-led offensive in Yemen,” The Guardian, February 4, 2021, <https://www.theguardian.com/world/2021/feb/04/us-end-support-saudi-led-operations-yemen-humanitarian-crisis> (accessed October 26, 2021)

East a blank check to pursue policies at odds with American interests and values. That's why we have withdrawn U.S. support for offensive military operations in Yemen and backed UN efforts to end the war."²⁵

Ending US military assistance for Saudi Arabia's war in Yemen (for offensive operations) is not a new topic on the US political scene. In 2019, Congress passed a resolution to cut off support for the Saudi campaign. "Today, the US House of Representatives took a clear stand against war and famine and for Congress's war powers by voting to end our complicity in the war in Yemen." Senator Bernie Sanders and Democratic Congressman Ro Khanna issued in a joint statement.²⁶ But President Trump used his veto, and the move was blocked. Two years from that attempt, the Biden Administration assumes this measure as part of the new orientation of US diplomacy in the Middle East. However, in order to sweeten the tone a little, the US committed to provide support to Saudi Arabia in combating drone and ballistic missile attacks used by the Houthi rebels.

All these measures taken by the Biden Administration were aimed toward applying more pressure on the main local actors involved in the Yemen conflict (Saudi Arabia, UAE and Houthis) in the hope of reaching a lasting peace agreement. Eight months later, the results seem to be far different than what was expected. Not only has no peace agreement been reached, but the violence climbed with the Houthis engaged in a ferocious offensive to capture Marib Province. Although the US does not have a military presence in Yemen, the current situation seems to replicate the Afghanistan allied-withdrawal situation. Following the same pattern, the Houthis in control of the entirety of Yemen is a very plausible scenario. This will put the US, for a second time in such a short period, in a very delicate situation to deal with an entity which they labeled as a terrorist organization. That is why an assessment of external policy regarding Yemen seems to be the most logical way forward for the Biden administration.

On the other hand, it seems like President Biden is facing his first real foreign policy test - how to deal with Saudi Arabia. The suspension of US military sales for the offensive purposes might have a moral dimension but in the end America's interest and America's power are the dominant considerations. According to statistics presented by the International Peace Research Institute in Stockholm, Saudi Arabia is the largest importer of weapons in the United States, with sales to Riyadh accounting for 24% of US arms exports. This should be the reason why

"President Joe Biden's approach to Saudi Arabia represents a "recalibration" and not a break in historically close ties," as a State Department spokesman said.²⁷ Regarding this situation, Frederick Kempe, president of the Atlantic Council think-tank, said: "The reality is you'd rather have a flawed, and perhaps even deeply flawed ally, than an adversary in this era of new power and big power competition where Saudi Arabia might depend more on China, more on Russia for its arms deliveries, for its economic strength."²⁸ President Obama understood this aspect,

²⁵ Interim National Security Strategic Guidance, (Washington, The White House, 2021), 11

²⁶ Julian Borger and Patrick Wintour, "Yemen war: Congress votes to end US military assistance to Saudi Arabia," *The Guardian*, April 4, 2019, <https://www.theguardian.com/world/2019/apr/04/yemen-saudi-arabia-war-us-military-assistance-vote-congress-trump-veto-latest> (accessed October 26, 2021)

²⁷ Nick Wadhams, "U.S. Calls Tougher Saudi Stance a Recalibration, Not a Rupture," *Bloomberg*, March 1, 2021, <https://www.bloomberg.com/news/articles/2021-03-01/u-s-calls-tougher-saudi-stance-a-recalibration-not-a-rupture> (accessed October 14, 2021)

²⁸ Abigail Ng, "Biden needs Saudi support, and that could make it tough to pressure Riyadh on human rights: Atlantic Council CEO," *CNBC*, March 2, 2021, <https://www.cnbc.com/2021/03/02/biden-needs-saudi-support-that-makes-it-tough-to-push-for-human-rights.html> (accessed October 14, 2021)

President Trump also understood that when he made Saudi Arabia his first foreign trip, and President Biden understands this, too. It is about an exchange, not an alliance and it is about maintenance of American power.²⁹

No way ahead on peace negotiations led by the United Nations

The UN has been involved in the conflict in Yemen from the very beginning. Troubled by the Houthi offensive in the south of the country, the UN Security Council issued Resolution 2216 in May 2015 which recognized Abdo Rabbu Mansour Hadi as president of Yemen and authorized a coalition led by Saudi Arabia to intervene and restore order in the country. Since then, UN has appointed three different special envoys to mediate peace, none of whom have been particularly successful in completing their task.

On his final briefing to the United Nations Security Council on 15 June 2021, Martin Griffiths, the second Special Envoy for Yemen, made a statement that can summarize the convoluted situation in Yemen: “Over the course of the conflict, armed and political actors have multiplied and fragmented. Foreign interference has grown not diminished. What was possible in terms of conflict resolution years ago is not possible today. And what is possible today may not be possible in the future.”³⁰ He also expressed the disappointment regarding the accomplishments during his mandate: “what has been most frustrating during my time has been the absence of comprehensive peace talks. ... the last time the parties sat down to discuss these issues was there in Kuwait in 2016 five years ago. And this is of course deeply shocking”³¹.

But what went wrong with the UN approach? One can specify two causes which drove to this outcome. First, the UN does not have the same influence on the main parties present in conflict. While the UN has on many occasions successfully set pressure on the Saudi led coalition and IRGY to deescalate, they failed every time when they tried to impose the same kind of pressure on the Houthis. The situation in Yemen portrays, in the horrid way, the constant dilemma which grinds the United Nations: it has the power to adopt resolutions, but not always the power to implement them - sometimes creating catastrophic situations. The implementation of a UN resolution can be done in two ways: direct enforcement, when the content of the decision is implemented by another actor, or indirect enforcement, when coercive measures are taken against the actor who does not comply to impose the measures. Unfortunately, the UN has no control on the Houthis and without any leverage it is almost impossible to gain success on the diplomatic ground. As an example, the efforts made by the UN Special Envoy to halt the siege on Marib have arrived at a deadlock, indicating the declining influence of the international community in Yemen’s conflict.

The second cause was also acknowledged by the former UN envoy in his last speech, and it concerns a highly fragmented Yemen, with the appearance of numerous new actors who are controlling large parts of the country. Those non-state actors are controlling, at this moment, around two-thirds of the entire country (by geographic area), in southern and western Yemen. The STC, STC- affiliated forces, local factions, and the western forces are in control of more strategic areas and more land than the Houthis and the IRGY and they are antagonistic to both. All these actors are not present in the peace talks and there has not been any serious attempt to understand the

²⁹ “US remains top arms exporter and grows market share,” BBC, March 15, 2021, <https://www.bbc.com/news/business-56397601> (accessed October 14, 2021)

³⁰ “Briefing to United Nations Security Council by the Special Envoy for Yemen – Martin Griffiths”, United Nations Office for the Coordination of Humanitarian Affairs, June 15, 2021, [Briefing to United Nations Security Council by the Special Envoy for Yemen – Martin Griffiths, 15 June 2021 - Yemen | ReliefWeb](#) (accessed October 23, 2021)

³¹ *ibid*

dynamics within these actors, their interests, and their desire to contribute to peace negotiations. This shows how the UN seemed to be completely disconnected from the reality that has evolved in past years.³²

The lack of influence on the Houthis can be proved with another sonorous diplomatic failure that the UN faced in the last years of the Yemen conflict – the case of FSO Safer. For some time, UN attempted to assemble a team of experts to assess the situation of the tanker anchored just 4.8 nautical miles off the Yemen coast. In November of 2020 the UN reached an agreement with the Houthi forces to assess the condition of the vessel. One year later the mission had failed to launch. "As a result, we still do not know the exact condition of the vessel, nor what the best solution would be to deal with 1.1 million barrels of oil in an ageing tanker located in an environmentally sensitive area of the Red Sea"³³ Inger Andersen, Executive Director of the UN Environment Program (UNEP) said.

In August, UN Secretary-General Antonio Guterres named Swedish diplomat Hans Grundberg as his new Yemen envoy. However, this change does not seem to bring a new approach or a change in the attitude of the parties involved in the conflict. "There is no use in having any dialogue before airports and ports are opened as a humanitarian necessity and priority," the Houthi negotiator Mohammed Abdulsalam, who is based in Oman, tweeted in response to Grundberg's appointment³⁴. Trying to develop more his statement, he said that UN envoy "has nothing in his hands"³⁵. There is no doubt that the new envoy faces an incredible challenge and that it does not have all the instruments necessary to achieve an immediate result. How will he interpret the reality on the ground and the way that he will use his leverage will determine the success of his diplomacy.

Conclusion

A strong internal fragmentation constitutes the main obstacle for reaching a peace agreement in Yemen. Acknowledging this reality is essential for creating alternative ways that might enable effective interventions to end the war and establish long-term strategies to address regional security. Attaining peace and building a state is no longer a two-part deal between the Houthis and the IRGY. Honestly, such an approach will only cause more disintegration and more violence within the armed groups inside the country. Saudi Arabia and UAE must engage with their Yemeni partners, with UN assistance, to rearrange the anti-Houthi coalition deck in a way that reduces the immediate risk of additional violence.

When it comes to reaching a peace deal, the anti-Houthi forces have different interests, and they are following different agendas. Any peace agreement will mean the end for President Hadi and his government since neither the Houthis nor the STC will accept him staying in power. That is the reason why his will and efforts to put an end to this conflict are arguable. On the other hand, for the STC, the ultimate objective is an independent south Yemen, and they are ready to be part of any negotiation with anyone as far as the outcome of that will materialize in realizing that ambition.

³² "Can a New U.N. Envoy Produce Peace in Yemen?", [The Arab Gulf States Institute in Washington](https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=XGgvJDILDGs), July 15, 2021, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=XGgvJDILDGs> (accessed October 27, 2021)

³³ Radina Gigova and Kara Fox, "Decaying oil tanker off Yemen could disrupt clean water supply for 9 million people", CNN, October 12, 2021, [Yemen: Decaying oil tanker could disrupt clean water supply for 9 million people - CNN](https://www.cnn.com/2021/10/12/middleeast/yemen-oil-tanker/index.html) (accessed October 21, 2021)

³⁴ Ghaida Ghantous, "Top Houthi negotiator says no point in meeting new U.N. envoy now", Reuters, August 8, 2021, [Top Houthi negotiator says no point in meeting new U.N. envoy now | Reuters](https://www.reuters.com/article/whatsapp/yemen-houthi-negotiator-says-no-point-in-meeting-new-un-envoy-now-idKCN1M100001) (accessed October 21, 2021)

³⁵ *ibid*

The Houthis' commitment to any peace talks remains a major issue, since no leverage can be used by the international community to bring them to negotiations. The sudden change in US foreign policy did not reach the desired results. The decision to revoke the Houthis' terrorist label so quickly and unconditionally appears hasty. Therefore, the rebels viewed the US position as a carte blanche to increase malign activities and strengthen their position in future negotiations. A more pragmatic approach with regional and global partners to establish a tailored pressure against the Houthis could lead to a substantial behavioral change. On this line, FSO Safer would provide the Houthis an easy bargaining chip to show good will and generate that positive reaction which will unblock peace discussions.

Recommendations for the US/ USCENTCOM

- Engage with Saudi Arabia and UAE in discussions regarding fragmentation in Yemen and ways to incorporate non-state actors into future peace negotiations.
- Support interventions and programs that encourage the peaceful local actors currently excluded from peace negotiations, rather than actors which promote violence.
- Develop and support programs that can help fighters reintegrate into society as part of exploring options for demobilization.
- Support the Saudi led coalition and Yemeni forces efforts to counter weapon-smuggling and provide targeted training and intelligence aimed at cutting the sea and land lines of supply.
- Re-evaluate the unconditional removal of the Houthis from the FTO list and consider modifications to create leverage against them.
- Advertise and support the development of an international immediate crisis reaction force with experts and equipment to address FSO Safer threat.