

Diplomacy, deconfliction and reconstruction: opportunities for a joint US-Saudi effort in Yemen



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While American interests in Yemen have for years focused sharply on counterterrorism, the rise of the Houthi movement has expanded these interests to protecting the territorial integrity of Saudi Arabia and securing adjacent maritime lanes essential for the flow of oil. The Biden Administration's decision to re-engage diplomatically in efforts to resolve the Yemeni conflict represents an opportunity for Saudi Arabia and the broader GCC to work together towards a peaceful resolution, through a sustained engagement with all involved parties, including Iran, if recently resumed nuclear talks progress sufficiently to add regional-security issue to the agenda. While the United States can lead the engagement with Iran, Saudi Arabia and the broader GCC should be ready to play a major role in state-building and economic reconstruction once conditions enable it, including in the northern part of Yemen where marginalization of communities has been a contributing factor to the current crisis. This will also entail a recognition by GCC states of the limitations and constraints of current UN resolutions and the necessity to incorporate a demilitarized Houthi movement into a government of national unity.

Introduction

The Biden Administration's robust diplomatic engagement on Yemen is best understood as central to a broader effort to reassure the international community that the United States is prepared to return to its traditional leadership role on the global stage. The President himself has asserted that he will focus on "reclaiming our credibility and moral authority," adding that "we must start with diplomacy rooted in America's most cherished democratic values," language designed to draw a sharp distinction with the transactional approach to foreign policy favored by the previous administration. The appointment of career diplomat Tim Lenderking as the State Department's special envoy to the Yemen conflict is further evidence that Washington intends to employ a broad range of diplomatic tools in support of the United Nations-led efforts to achieve a ceasefire and bring the principal parties to the conflict into direct talks. American moral leadership is also being reinforced by the expected confirmation of Samantha Power as the administrator of the U.S. Agency for International Development (USAID). Ms. Power was a strong proponent of the "responsibility to protect" doctrine when she served as the U.S. Permanent Representative to the United Nations in the Obama administration, and USAID can be expected to ramp up its efforts in Yemen in support of U.S. diplomatic initiatives.

International diplomatic engagement will need to be followed by localized deconfliction efforts, and in parallel, reconstruction and economic development. According to the latest World Bank assessment, reconstruction needs are expected to be around \$ 25 billion over the next five years, the bulk of it for housing followed by power and health infrastructure¹. In addition to the capital requirements for infrastructure, funds will be needed to run the country until the economy can sustain itself: public sector salaries, social security benefits, and the import of basic commodities will all require outside support.

US national security interests in Yemen

The Biden administration's re-engagement in Yemen flows from more than just a desire to return to a "values-based" foreign policy. It also reflects a very practical assessment of the extent to which fundamental U.S. national security interests are at stake in the country. These include ensuring the stability of neighboring Gulf Arab countries; maintaining the security of maritime lanes that are essential to global commerce; and preventing terrorist organizations from securing safe haven in Yemen.

The stability of Gulf Arab countries is an important American goal, particularly in the face of continued hostility from Iran. The outsized ability of Saudi Arabia to stabilize global oil markets, and long-standing trade relationships with GCC countries argue strongly for constructive ties, especially at a time when these countries are growing their commercial and security relations with China. President Biden has committed to continuing to support Saudi Arabia "defend its sovereignty and territorial integrity and its people"² from the threat posed by the Houthi rebels. Continued close ties with the United Arab Emirates is also a priority for the Biden Administration. Abu Dhabi has broad support in Washington for its moves to normalize relations with Israel via the Abraham Accords, as demonstrated by the recent approval of a \$23 Billion weapons sale to the UAE.

Maritime security is another key US concern in the region, and Yemen figures prominently in this regard, given that key international shipping lanes pass immediately to its south and west, via the Bab el Mandeb strait, and the Red Sea. The Bab el Mandeb is a particularly worrisome chokepoint: 18 miles across at its narrowest point, some six million barrels of oil pass through the strait every day³, creating enormous potential for the disruption of global energy supplies. The Houthi rebels in Yemen already have conducted attacks against maritime traffic in this region, targeting a UAE vessel and a U.S. guided-missile destroyer in 2016⁴.

¹World Bank, "Yemen Dynamic Needs Assessment: Phase 3", 2020 Update, <http://documents1.worldbank.org/curated/en/490981607970828629/pdf/Yemen-Dynamic-Needs-Assessment-Phase-3-2020-Update.pdf>

²Reuters, "Biden ends U.S. support for Saudi Arabia in Yemen, says war 'has to end'", February 4 2021, <https://www.reuters.com/article/usa-biden-yemen-int-idUSKBN2A4268>

³US Energy Information Administration, "The Bab el-Mandeb Strait is a strategic route for oil and natural gas shipments", August 27 2019, <https://www.eia.gov/todayinenergy/detail.php?id=41073>

⁴Almeida A., Vaughan J., Knights M., "Houthi Antishipping Attacks in the Bab al-Mandab Strait", October 6 2016, <https://www.washingtoninstitute.org/policy-analysis/houthi-antishipping-attacks-bab-al-mandab-strait>

In 2018, they targeted two Saudi oil tankers, leading Saudi Arabia to temporarily halt oil shipments through the Bab El Mandeb⁵. Attacks on tankers in the port of Jeddah in 2020 were also attributed to the Houthis⁶.

Although weakened⁷, the continued presence in Yemen of Al Qaeda in the Arabian Peninsula (AQAP) is another national-security concern for the United States, particularly given that AQAP has tried on multiple occasions to conduct attacks against American targets, including an attack against the American Embassy in September 2008 while I was serving as ambassador that left 18 people dead. Subsequently, AQAP engineered two unsuccessful attacks against targets in the United States. The first was on Christmas Day 2009, when a young Nigerian tried unsuccessfully to detonate explosives hidden in his clothing on board an airplane as it began its descent over Detroit, Michigan⁸. The second occurred less than a year later, when toner cartridges filled with explosives were discovered in two airplanes headed for the United States⁹. Since the war began in Yemen, the Yemeni government's counter-terrorism programs have largely stalled. In 2015, UAE special forces deployed to areas of Yemen known to serve as safe havens for AQAP fighters, and they continue counter-terrorism operations to this day. A small number of U.S. special forces are also on the ground in Yemen, and the United States has conducted aerial attacks against AQAP fighters using armed drones and aircraft.

US position on the conflict and its resolution

The principal interest of the United States in Yemen is to ensure that it does not serve as a platform for destabilizing activities in the region or beyond. In this regard, as part of any peace negotiations, the Houthis will be expected to agree to cease hostile activity in the sea lanes around Yemen, and end missile and drone attacks and cross-border incursions against Saudi territory, in exchange for an end to Saudi airstrikes in Yemen. As government formation in Yemen gets underway, the United States – and the international community more broadly – will press for effective measures to neutralize the threat posed by AQAP; Washington will support these operations, as it has in the past.

The United States has no interest in trying to dictate the outcome of an internal Yemeni political process. In line with this approach, the U.S. will take no position on the future role of Yemeni President AbdRaboo Mansour Hadi, leaving that to the determination of the Yemeni electorate. UN Security Council Resolution 2216 which (ill-advisedly) enshrined Hadi as the legitimate authority in Yemen, is widely seen as an obstacle to a negotiated settlement to the conflict, and the United States will support an initiative in the Security Council to pass a new resolution that reflects the distinctly different situation on the ground that has evolved since 2015. Support from Saudi Arabia and the UAE for a new UNSCR will be important for the legitimacy of this effort.

⁵Reuters, Saudi Arabia halts oil exports in Red Sea lane after Houthi attacks, July 25 2018, <https://www.reuters.com/article/us-yemen-security-idUSKBN1KFOXN>

⁶Bloomberg, "Blast at Saudi Port Hits Oil Tanker as Red Sea Attacks Mount", December 14 2020, <https://www.bloomberg.com/news/articles/2020-12-14/fuel-tanker-hit-by-explosion-off-saudi-arabia-near-jeddah>

⁷Mendelsohn B., Clarke C., "Al-Qaeda Is Being Hollowed to Its Core", War On the Rocks, February 24 2021, <https://warontherocks.com/2021/02/al-qaeda-is-being-hollowed-to-its-core/>

⁸Counter Extremism Project, "Umar Farouk Abdulmutallab", <https://www.counterextremism.com/extremists/umar-farouk-abdulmutallab>

⁹BBC, "Printer cartridge bomb plot planning revealed", November 22 2010, <https://www.bbc.com/news/world-middle-east-11812874>



U.S. thinking is largely aligned with that of the UN Special Envoy in terms of a national-unity government emerging that reflects the realities on the ground in Yemen. Thus, in addition to representatives of the Hadi government, the Houthi rebels, who exercise authority over virtually the entire northern highlands, are likely to receive key ministerial portfolios and, in accordance with the Riyadh Agreement of November 2019, the Aden-based Southern Transitional Council would also be represented in the government. A failure to integrate the Houthi movement in a new national unity government could lead to its continued existence as a heavily armed national militia with its own command-and-control structure, similar to Hezbollah in Lebanon, which would be unacceptable to Yemen's neighbors, Saudi Arabia in particular.

The opportunity of joint diplomacy

From the beginning, Gulf Arab states – and critics of the JCPOA in the United States – complained that nuclear negotiations with Iran were too narrowly defined and failed to address the threat posed by Iran's ballistic missiles and its interference in their internal affairs. It seems likely that the US will seek to eventually expand the agenda of this new round of negotiations to include these issues, in addition to those related to Iran's nuclear weapons. In this regard, any concrete steps taken by Saudi Arabia and other GCC states to end their involvement in the conflict in Yemen will make it easier for the U.S. to insist that Iran do the same.

Reinvigorated US diplomacy in Yemen and a clear commitment to Saudi territorial integrity are strongly supportive of Saudi efforts to end its military involvement in the war and should present an opportunity for close coordination between Washington and Riyadh. The resumption of talks with Iran on a return to the JCPOA provides an opportunity to raise other issues of regional concern, including Iran's ballistic missiles and its support for Shi'a militia and armed surrogates seeking to destabilize Arab states, including Yemen. Without derailing the nuclear negotiations, the United States should make it clear to Iran that there can be no normalization of relations if it continues to threaten the stability and security of neighboring states.

The Way Forward

The GCC with Saudi Arabia in the lead should make it clear to the Houthi leadership that a de-escalation can be rewarded with economic aid. As efforts towards peace gain momentum, the focus will shift to the long – and costly – process of reconstruction. In particular, Saudi Arabia and the UAE, because of their direct involvement in the war, will be expected to shoulder a substantial portion of the financial burden. The U.S. will also seek to enlist other Gulf Arab states in this effort. In the event a nationwide cease fire is negotiated, the rapid deployment of economic and humanitarian assistance on the ground in Yemen will be essential to prevent armed hostilities from re-igniting anew, extinguishing hopes for an end to the violence. Donor countries – in particular GCC states – should hold out the promise of long-term development aid to neglected regions such as the Saada governorate as an incentive, just as the U.S. is doing with Iran for economic relief. Additional funds could be made available to support projects linked to water, health and education infrastructure once the Houthis demonstrate a willingness to engage in a political process and cease their military campaign. While Saudi Arabia has been the largest donor to Yemen since the beginning of the war, its assistance has been largely constrained to areas not under Houthi control, for obvious reasons. A substantial portion of the reconstruction effort going forward will have to be focused in the north of the country, where 70% of the population lives and where civilian infrastructure has been most damaged. This should also theoretically stem grievances that have contributed to the Houthis' rise to power, which has been ascribed to the lack of economic development in the governorate of Saada, in addition to resentment over the post-1960 disempowerment of the Sada (Sayyids), who claim descent from the Prophet Mohammed and who had historically ruled the region^{10,11}. Reconstruction of the northern highlands will require stringent monitoring mechanisms and have to be under a UN framework. GCC states should also start exploring additional aid mechanisms, beyond funds: integrating Yemen's electricity grid with that of the GCC or admitting Yemeni workers could go a long way in supporting economic development in Yemen while benefiting GCC economies. Similarly, creating an economic free zone along Yemen's northern border might help restore once-thriving cross-border trade and economic activity between Saada and southern Saudi Arabia.

Regarding Iran, Gulf Arab states should also expect the U.S. to encourage them to imagine ways in which they can accommodate greater integration of the Islamic republic into the region, a position not unlike that which underpinned the Obama administration's nuclear deal with Iran. While some Gulf states already have fairly strong commercial ties with the regime in Tehran, there is still considerable anxiety among others regarding Iran's revolutionary zeal and whether its theocratic leadership and Revolutionary Guard Corps can ever accept peaceful coexistence with their Arab neighbors. This anxiety is not always readily understood in Washington, and discussions between the U.S. and Gulf Arab states on this issue will need to be candid and clear in order to avoid misapprehensions on either side.

¹⁰Brandt M., "Tribes and Politics in Yemen: A History of the Houthi Conflict", Oxford University Press 2017

¹¹Featuring a mountainous terrain with little agricultural land and limited natural resources, the governorate's aquifers have been depleted following decades of uncontrolled well-digging and the cultivation of water-intensive crops. As a result, the drillings of wells now exceed 800 meters of depth. Source: Al Asbahi Q., "Water Resources Information in Yemen", International Work Session on Water Statistics, https://unstats.un.org/unsd/ENVIRONMENT/envpdf/pap_wasess3a3yemen.pdf

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