

Time to Hold the Houthis Accountable in Yemen

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KEY TAKEAWAYS

The Biden Administration's "diplomacy first" approach to negotiations in Yemen has failed; the Iranian-backed Houthis are bent on achieving a military victory.

The Biden Administration remains complacent about the threat to American troops and civilians in Saudi Arabia and the UAE from Houthi drone and missile attacks.

The U.S. should help the Saudis and Emiratis protect against Houthi attacks, reduce Iranian arms smuggling to Yemen, and impose stronger sanctions on the Houthis.

During the past year, the United States has made every effort to support a negotiated solution for the Yemen conflict. The Biden Administration, for example, lifted the Trump Administration's designation of the Houthi Ansar Allah (Supporters of God) movement as a terrorist organization and pressured Saudi Arabia and the United Arab Emirates (UAE) to wind down the war.

However, the Houthis have escalated their military attacks in Yemen, as well as drone and ballistic missile attacks against military and civilian targets in Saudi Arabia and the UAE, and have boycotted the recent summit on Yemen, scheduled to end on April 7, that the Gulf Arab States convened in Riyadh. The Saudi-led coalition and Houthis have agreed to a two-month U.N.-brokered cease-fire for

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Ramadan, but there is no guarantee that this cease-fire will pave the way for a permanent cessation of hostilities or sustainable peace.

For years, peace negotiations have failed because the Houthis are determined to achieve a military victory. Washington must get tougher with the Houthis to disabuse them of the notion that they can impose their will through violence and press them to reach a negotiated settlement. The U.S. should help the Saudis and Emiratis to protect themselves from Iran-supplied Houthi drones and missiles, step up efforts to reduce Iranian arms smuggling to Yemen, and impose stronger sanctions on the Houthis.

Biden Administration's One-Sided Détente with Houthis Backfired

The Houthis exploited the political chaos of the 2011 Arab uprisings to overthrow the Yemeni government and dominate most of Yemen, with increasingly important help from an Iranian regime bolstered by sanctions relief received in the Obama administration's nuclear deal. The 2015 intervention of a Saudi-led coalition escalated the fighting and transformed the civil war into a complex proxy conflict.

The Biden Administration entered office with the goal of ending the war in Yemen and easing the suffering of Yemeni civilians in one of the world's worst humanitarian crises. The problem is that Yemen's multi-sided clash is not a conflict that is easy to fix. The seven-year-old war has pitted the Houthi rebels, which are supported by Iran, against the internationally recognized Yemeni government, which is backed by a Saudi-led military coalition that relies heavily on UAE support.

The Biden Administration has supported U.N.-led peace negotiations, but those talks have stalled. For Iran and the Houthis, there is little incentive to end the protracted conflict while the Houthis maintain their military dominance. Iran sees the Houthis as a useful tool for extending its influence to the Red Sea and for outflanking and pressuring Saudi Arabia and the UAE, and the Houthis remain determined to defeat their adversaries in battle.

In January, the Houthis launched a series of drone, cruise missile, and ballistic missile attacks on UAE targets, including civilian airports. A January 17 Houthi drone and missile strike killed three foreign workers. The Houthis also claimed to have targeted Al Dhafra Air Base in Abu Dhabi, which hosts roughly 2,000 American airmen. Some of the ballistic missiles were intercepted by an Emirati Terminal High Altitude Area Defense (THAAD) battery, marking the first known use in combat of this U.S.-produced missile defense system.

Ongoing Houthi attacks against Saudi Arabia and the UAE threaten the lives of U.S. citizens and American military forces in the region. Approximately 40,000 to 50,000 Americans live in Dubai, and 10,000 others live in Abu Dhabi. Another 30,000 U.S. citizens are spread out across Saudi Arabia.

Sooner or later, American troops or civilians will be killed in a Houthi strike using Iranian weapons. But the Biden Administration remains remarkably complacent about this threat. In early February 2021, the Administration announced that it would prioritize Yemen by appointing a special envoy to Yemen tasked with facilitating a cease-fire by pressing Riyadh to lift a coalition blockade on Houthi-held areas that had been imposed to halt the smuggling of Iranian drones, missiles, and other arms to the Houthis.

The Administration also ended U.S. support for coalition offensive operations while supporting defensive operations to protect against Houthi drone and missile attacks. However, it immediately froze pending arms sales to Riyadh for review.

In June 2021, the Administration announced the withdrawal of a U.S. THAAD air defense system from Saudi Arabia as well as fighter planes and eight Patriot antimissile batteries from Iraq, Jordan, Kuwait, Saudi Arabia, and the UAE. These military drawdowns, devised to enable a realignment of military forces to focus more on China and Russia, unfortunately left the former host countries more exposed to Iranian and Houthi attacks.

Finally, the Biden Administration revoked the Trump Administration's 11th-hour designation of the Houthis as a Foreign Terrorist Organization (FTO) and as Specially Designated Global Terrorists (SDGT),¹ citing the possible negative impact of those designations on international efforts to provide food and humanitarian aid to Yemen.

The Houthis paid back Biden's favor by escalating their hostile acts against the U.S. On November 10, 2021, the Houthis invaded the U.S. embassy in Sana'a, which had been closed in 2015, looted the compound, and took at least two dozen Yemeni caretakers as hostages. Only a handful were later released, and the Houthis have refused to free the rest despite mounting local and international pressure and condemnations. In February 2022, the Houthis kidnapped two more Yemeni caretakers.²

The White House's one-dimensional focus on pressuring Saudi and UAE security partners to restrict their air campaign and negotiate a peace agreement has emboldened the Houthis. They interpreted the Administration's efforts to downgrade U.S. ties to Saudi Arabia as an open invitation to push for a military victory.

The Biden Administration's efforts to distance itself from Saudi Arabia because of the 2018 killing of Saudi dissident Jamal Khashoggi, its premature drawdown of U.S. military forces deterring Iran in the region, and its failure to respond adequately to rising threats from Iran and the Houthis have frayed the fabric of U.S. bilateral relations with the two Gulf oil kingdoms. Both Riyadh and Abu Dhabi have hedged their bets by building stronger ties to Moscow and Beijing. The leaders of both countries have downplayed Russia's aggression in Ukraine, balked at increasing oil exports despite an American request to mitigate the surge in global oil prices, and reportedly refused to accept a phone call from President Biden. The Saudi government is also edging closer to accepting the yuan as payment for oil shipments to China instead of U.S. dollars—a move long requested by Beijing.

Needed: A More Realistic U.S. Approach to Yemen

Throughout the war, U.S. policy has focused on supporting U.N. peace negotiations, providing humanitarian aid to the Yemeni people, preventing al-Qaeda in the Arabian Peninsula from making a comeback in Yemen, and helping Saudi Arabia and the UAE to mitigate the Houthi threat. U.S. Special Envoy for Yemen Tim Lenderking has attempted to broker a cease-fire and restart negotiations on multiple occasions, but the Houthis have refused to come to the table, although they did accept a cease-fire during Ramadan on April 2.

In response, the Administration has sanctioned multiple Houthi leaders under Executive Order 13611³ related to acts that threaten the peace, security, or stability of Yemen, but it has refused to reinstate the Houthis as a Foreign Terrorist Organization and Specially Designated Global Terrorist entity. The Administration also has not publicly clarified either what it means by its decision to withdraw support for Saudi offensive operations in Yemen or what its defensive support entails. Arms sales negotiated under the Trump Administration and frozen by the Biden Administration eventually were approved for Saudi Arabia in November 2021, but the Administration's ham-handed treatment of longtime Arab partners and soft-headed Iran policy have severely undermined President Biden's "diplomacy first" approach to Yemen.

Appeasement rarely works as a diplomatic strategy, especially in the Middle East.

What the U.S. Should Do

The Biden Administration’s “diplomacy first” approach has failed because it pays inadequate attention to the balance of forces fighting inside Yemen and the security threats posed by Houthi attacks outside of Yemen. Ending the war and easing Yemen’s humanitarian catastrophe are worthy goals, but a one-sided focus on pressuring the Arab coalition while giving Iran’s allies the benefit of the doubt has emboldened the Houthis to step up their military efforts and cross-border attacks. U.S. goals are not likely to be realized as long as the Biden Administration turns a blind eye to Houthi aggression and continues its “virtue signaling” on Saudi Arabia.

The Biden Administration must minimize the threats posed by the Houthis to their neighbors and to U.S. citizens living in the region while also alleviating the misery of Yemeni civilians. To these ends, the Administration should:

- **Help the Saudis and Emiratis strengthen their defenses against Houthi drones and missiles.** The U.S. should publicly commit to selling Saudi Arabia and the UAE whatever missile defense systems they need to defeat Houthi and Iranian attacks. It should also expand their access to early warning intelligence gathered by U.S.-operated systems and commit more resources to the detection and interception of Iranian weapons smuggled into Yemen. Washington also should encourage Israel–UAE defense cooperation and the possible transfer of Israeli missile defense systems to enhance the defense of the UAE, a partner with Israel in the Abraham accords, and (in the future) possibly Saudi Arabia.
- **Designate the Houthis as a Specially Designated Global Terrorist entity.** Missile attacks against civilian targets constitute terrorism. However, the FTO list is not the only terrorist designation. The U.S. can also designate the Houthis as an SDGT entity in addition to the terrorist designations of individual Houthi leaders. Unlike the FTO designation, the SDGT entity designation allows for more flexibility because it is easier to enforce and prosecute.⁴ The U.S. should escalate its response to the Houthi threat by designating the entity as an SDGT while identifying and designating high-level Houthi leaders as specially designated global terrorists. The Department of State and Department of the Treasury should work with humanitarian

organizations operating in Yemen to draft a package of licenses and exemptions with clear guidelines to address the concerns of international banks, shipping companies, and suppliers that are nervous about possibly violating U.S. laws.

- **Provide humanitarian aid without strengthening the Houthi stranglehold on Yemen.** The conflict has created a catastrophic food crisis. Eighty-eight percent of Yemen's food supply comes from external commercial and humanitarian imports shipped through three ports: Hudaydah and Saleef under Houthi control, and Aden under government control. Two-thirds of Yemen's people require food and livelihood support. The Houthis have siphoned off aid to help fund their war. Washington should adopt vetting policies put forward by the Trump Administration to demand more accountability from non-governmental organizations that are providing aid and should channel more aid through ports outside of Houthi control.
- **Push for a long-term cease-fire as a prelude to an inclusive peace agreement.** The two-month cease-fire over Ramadan provides an opportunity to negotiate a long-term cease-fire and restart peace talks with the Houthis. The U.S. should continue to support the U.N.-brokered Stockholm peace process, but it must pay greater attention to the correlation of military forces inside Yemen if it hopes to extract a long-term cease-fire from the Houthis. Washington should encourage greater coordination between Riyadh and Abu Dhabi not only in the military sphere, but also in the diplomatic sphere. It should also work with both governments to encourage greater cooperation between the Yemeni government and the Southern Transitional Council, a regional coalition backed by the UAE. Without a long-term cease-fire, the cross-border spillover from the fighting may well block any progress on a negotiated solution.

The Bottom Line

The Biden Administration should adopt a more balanced and effective strategy for ending the war in Yemen through negotiations. That goal can be reached only after Houthi efforts to score a military victory have been defeated, but the Houthis and their Iranian backers have interpreted the Administration's policies, however well-intentioned, not as a sign of U.S. goodwill but as a sign of weakness. This has encouraged the Houthis to

seek a military victory and has intensified the threat they pose to Saudi Arabia and the UAE as well as to American citizens living in those countries and Yemen.

After more than a year of mistakenly giving the Houthis the benefit of the doubt—only to reap disastrous consequences—it is time for the Biden Administration to hold them accountable for their terrorist missile and drone attacks.

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Endnotes

1. FTO sanctions are given authority by the Immigration and Nationality Act of 1965, and SDGT designations are given authority by Executive Order 13224. See H.R. 2580, Immigration and Nationality Act of 1965, Public Law No. 89-236, 89th Cong., October 3, 1965, Section 219, <https://www.congress.gov/89/statute/STATUTE-79/STATUTE-79-Pg911.pdf> (accessed April 5, 2022), and Executive Order 13224, “Blocking Property and Prohibiting Transactions with Persons Who Commit, Threaten to Commit, or Support Terrorism,” September 23, 2001, in *Federal Register*, Vol. 66, No. 186 (September 25, 2001), pp. 49079–49083, <https://www.govinfo.gov/content/pkg/FR-2001-09-25/pdf/01-24205.pdf> (accessed April 5, 2022).
2. Saeed Al-Batati, “Houthis Abduct Two More Yemeni Employees of US Embassy in Sanaa,” *Arab News*, updated February 24, 2022, <https://www.arabnews.com/node/2031336/middle-east> (accessed April 4, 2022).
3. Executive Order 13611, “Blocking Property of Persons Threatening the Peace, Security, or Stability of Yemen,” May 16, 2012, in *Federal Register*, Vol. 77, No. 97 (May 18, 2012), pp. 29533–29535, <https://www.govinfo.gov/content/pkg/FR-2012-05-18/pdf/2012-12225.pdf> (accessed April 5, 2022).
4. It may be difficult to prove that someone is materially supporting or working on behalf of an FTO under the law; it is easier to prove that someone is violating the terms of an executive order. Additionally, licenses and exemptions for humanitarian activities can be prepared for SDGT designations but not for FTO designations.