



The Arab Gulf States
Institute in Washington
Building bridges of understanding



Seven Yemens: How Yemen Fractured and Collapsed, and What Comes Next

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October 8, 2021

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#4

2021

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About the Author

Gregory D. Johnsen has been a Peace Corps volunteer in Jordan, a Fulbright Fellow in Yemen, and a Fulbright-Hays Fellow in Egypt. In 2013-14 he was selected as BuzzFeed's inaugural Michael Hastings National Security Reporting Fellow where he won a Dirksen Award from the National Press Foundation and, in collaboration with Radiolab, a Peabody Award. He has a PhD from Princeton University and master's degrees from Princeton and the University of Arizona. Johnsen is the author of *The Last Refuge: Yemen, Al-Qaeda, and America's War in Arabia* (W.W. Norton), which has been translated into multiple languages. From 2016-18 he served on the Yemen Panel of Experts for the United Nations Security Council. In 2019, he served as the lead writer for the United States Institute of Peace's Syria Study Group. His writing on Yemen and terrorism has appeared in, among others, The New York Times, The Atlantic, and Foreign Policy. Currently, he is a nonresident fellow at the Center for Middle East Policy at the Brookings Institution. He is also the editor of the Yemen Review and a non-resident fellow at the Sana'a Center for Strategic Studies.

Executive Summary

After seven years of war, a unified Yemeni state no longer exists. President Abd Rabbu Mansour Hadi is in exile. His capital of Sanaa is held by the Houthis, and his temporary capital of Aden is under the control of the secessionist-minded Southern Transitional Council. Yemen's economy is broken and in the midst of a devastating currency crisis, which has left much of the country dependent on outside aid to survive. Dueling central banks in Sanaa and Aden have led to divergent exchange rates with the Yemeni rial trading, most recently, at 600 rials to \$1 in Sanaa and 1,100 rials to \$1 in Aden. Prior to the fighting the exchange rate across the country was 250 rials to \$1.

What is often described as the war in Yemen is actually three separate but overlapping wars: a U.S.-led war against terrorism, a regional war pitting Saudi Arabia against what it sees as an Iranian proxy, and a local civil war. These three wars have fragmented Yemen into seven pieces, which are held by different armed groups. None of these armed groups are strong enough to force all the other actors in the country to submit to their will, but nearly all of them have enough military strength to act as a spoiler to any deal they believe does not adequately address their goals. And, the longer the fighting lasts, the more armed groups emerge, even as Yemen's economic resources continue to shrink. More armed groups competing over a smaller economic pie is not a recipe for a lasting or durable peace.

Yemen will not be reconstituted as a single state, nor is it likely to revert to the pre-1990 North-South division. Instead, the reality is likely to be much messier with various warlords and armed groups holding sway in different parts of the country. The United States and other international actors will have to navigate a broken Yemen to deal with issues such as counterterrorism, freedom of navigation through the Red Sea corridor, and a growing humanitarian crisis that is unlikely to remain contained within Yemen.

Introduction

Decades ago – before the Gulf War, War on Terror, and succession of post-Arab Spring civil wars – someone asked Abdullah Baraduni, Yemen's poet laureate, to assess the future of his country. Baraduni, who was blind and badly disfigured from a bout of smallpox as a child, famously replied: "Yemen's future is written across my face."

It was not an encouraging picture. But Baraduni, who doubled as a political analyst and commentator, knew exactly what he was saying. At the time of his perhaps apocryphal comments – a literature festival in Baghdad in the 1980s – Yemen had not yet unified, but seeds of its collapse had already been sown.

More than 30 years later, Baraduni's grim prediction has come true. Yemen is no longer a single state. Instead of one Yemen, there are now multiple Yemens and little hope of ever reconstituting the various pieces into any sort of a unified whole. Yemen's fragmentation will have severe repercussions for U.S. foreign policy, regional stability, and, ultimately, international security.

This paper examines how Yemen broke apart, the current realities on the ground, and the challenges a fractured state will pose for the United States, the region, and the world.

The War Before the War: 2009-14

In November 2009, a 5-year conflict in Yemen spilled over the border into Saudi Arabia, drawing the Saudi military into the fighting for the first time and attracting Iranian attention. At the time, the Houthis, a Zaydi-Shia insurgent group, were in the midst of their sixth round of fighting against the Yemeni central government and then-President Ali Abdullah Saleh.

For years, Saleh had been telling the international community that the Houthis were an Iranian front, but few believed him. In September 2009, Stephen Seche, then the U.S. ambassador to Yemen, wrote in a cable that “Iranian influence in Yemen has thus far been limited to informal religious ties between Yemeni and Iranian scholars and negligible Iranian investment in the energy and development sectors.”¹ Saudi Arabia was similarly skeptical. Another U.S. diplomatic cable, from December 2009 quoted, second hand, a member of Saudi Arabia’s Special Council for Yemeni Affairs as saying: “We know Saleh is lying about Iran, but there’s nothing we can do about it now.”²

Iranian perceptions of who the Houthis were changed in November 2009 when the group crossed the border into Saudi Arabia and came into direct conflict with the Saudi military. For the first time, Iran saw the Houthis not merely as a domestic insurgent group with local ambitions but as a potential ally with the ability to open a new front against Saudi Arabia. The Saudi military performed poorly against the Houthis. The Houthis quickly overran a Saudi border post, killing one guard and taking another captive.³ Over the next several weeks, the Houthis won a series of small skirmishes with Saudi soldiers, often uploading videos to YouTube of Houthi fighters driving out of Saudi camps with looted equipment. It was concerning for Saudi Arabia, which spent over \$40 billion on its military in 2009, that a group of poorly equipped tribal fighters from Yemen could so easily defeat its soldiers.

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The sixth Houthi war ended a few months later, in February 2010. Before another round of fighting could begin in Yemen, a fruit vendor in Tunisia lit himself on fire, setting off popular protests that eventually led to the resignation of Tunisian President Zine el-Abidine Ben Ali and then – as the “Arab Spring” protests spread across the Middle East – Egyptian President Hosni Mubarak.

¹ U.S. Embassy Sanaa, “Iran in Yemen: Tehran’s Shadow Looms Large, But Footprint is Small,” Wikileaks Cable: 09SANAA1662_a, dated September 12, 2009.

² See: U.S. Embassy Sanaa, “Yemeni Tribal Leader: For Saleh, Saudi Involvement in Sa’dah Comes Not a Moment Too Soon,” Wikileaks Cable: 09SANAA2279_a, dated December 28, 2009.

³ Robert F. Worth, “Yemen Rebels Routed, Saudi Says,” *The New York Times*, November 9, 2009.

In Yemen, the Houthis quickly made common cause with the protesters against Saleh, their old enemy, setting up tents in Sanaa's Tahrir Square and calling for the president to step down. In November 2011, following a failed assassination attempt that left him badly injured, Saleh agreed to resign the presidency, which he'd held for 33 years, in exchange for immunity. A few months later, in February 2012, a referendum installed Saleh's longtime vice president, Abd Rabbu Mansour Hadi, as Yemen's interim president for what was supposed to be a 2-year transitional period.

Unlike in other countries that experienced Arab Spring protests, such as Tunisia where Ben Ali went into exile, Egypt where Mubarak went to prison, or Libya where Muamar al-Qaddafi was killed, Saleh simply went home. Almost immediately, as should have been predictable, Saleh began working against his former vice president. Sanaa between 2012 and 2014 was a four-way contest for power among Hadi, Saleh, General Ali Mohsen al-Ahmar, and the al-Ahmar tribal family. But while those four were battling for Sanaa, the Houthis were given a free hand in the northern governorate of Saada.

By the summer of 2014, the Houthis had managed to push out Salafi fighters from a school in Dammaj and had taken de facto control over Saada. Then they went looking for revenge. In late June and early July, Houthi fighters moved south out of Saada into the neighboring governorate of Amran, targeting tribes and Islamists who had fought against them years earlier in the Houthi wars. On July 9, the Houthis overran the 310th Brigade Camp, which was led by an ally of Ali Mohsen, who had spent years fighting the Houthis. Two days later, the United Nations Security Council called on the Houthis to withdraw from all military installations that the group had occupied.⁴ Not surprisingly, the Houthis refused. From Amran they moved south toward Sanaa.

By September, the Houthis were on the outskirts of the capital. Iran warned them not to enter Sanaa,⁵ but the Houthis ignored this advice and instead cut a deal with their old foe, Saleh. The former president instructed soldiers still loyal to him to stand aside and allow the Houthis to enter the city. As in Amran, the Houthis' first order of business was revenge. This time they focused on Ali Mohsen, the general who directed the war in Saada, and the al-Ahmar family, which had provided many of the tribal forces that fought the Houthis.

The Houthis ransacked Ali Mohsen's house, posting videos of fighters jumping on the general's bed. Ali Mohsen escaped, sought refuge at the Saudi Embassy, and was later smuggled out of the country. The most politically prominent member of the al-Ahmar family, Hamid al-Ahmar, who some had suggested might replace Saleh as president, also fled the country. At least initially, Saleh's deal with the Houthis allowed both sides to get what they wanted. The Houthis got revenge on the two figures they blamed most for the six wars in Saada. Saleh got revenge on the general who deserted him in the midst of the Arab Spring while neutralizing Hadi and the al-Ahmar tribal family, his rivals in Sanaa.

⁴ "Security Council Press Statement on the Fighting in Yemen," *United Nations Security Council*, July 11, 2014.

⁵ Ali Watkins, Ryan Grim, and Akbar Shahid Ahmed, "Iran Warned Houthis Against Yemen Takeover," *HuffPost*, April 20, 2015.

The Houthis moved quickly to consolidate control in Sanaa. On September 22, the day after they entered Sanaa, the Houthis forced Yemen's prime minister, Mohammed Salem Basindwa, to resign.⁶ Within weeks they had abducted one of Hadi's top aides and placed the president under house arrest, pressuring him to resign.

In late February 2015, Hadi escaped Houthi custody and made his way first to Aden and then to Saudi Arabia, where he renounced his resignation and called on Yemen's neighbors to intervene militarily.⁷

Operation Decisive Storm and the War That Broke Yemen: 2015-16

Hadi's letter in March 2015 to Gulf leaders came at a particularly low point in Saudi-U.S. relations.⁸ Saudi Arabia had never trusted the administration of then-President Barack Obama. During the Arab Spring protests, Saudi officials thought Obama was too quick to abandon long-standing U.S. allies like Mubarak in Egypt. The Saudis were also wary of the Obama administration's attempt to reach a nuclear deal with Iran, which would be finalized in July 2015, shortly after Hadi's letter, as the Joint Comprehensive Plan of Action. In private, Saudi leaders were already hearing the message Obama would make public a year later: Saudi Arabia and Iran needed to "share the neighborhood."⁹ All of this gave the Saudis and other Gulf leaders a "real deep sense of betrayal," Dafna Rand, an assistant secretary of state in the Obama administration, later said.¹⁰

Inside the kingdom things were changing as well. In January 2015, King Abdullah bin Abdulaziz died and was succeeded by his half-brother Salman. The new 80-year-old king immediately appointed his 29-year-old son, Mohammed bin Salman, as Saudi Arabia's minister of defense. Mohammed bin Salman, whom The New York Times editorial board has described as "young and brash," was determined to chart a new course in Saudi politics.¹¹ He saw the Houthi takeover of Sanaa as an opportunity to do two things at once. First, he wanted to prevent the rise of a Hezbollah-like group, which would be dependent on Iran, on Saudi Arabia's southern border. Second, like the Houthis themselves, Mohammed bin Salman was looking for revenge. In his case, he wanted to erase the memory of the Saudi military's poor performance against the Houthis in 2009 and 2010.

⁶ Hakim Almasmari, "Yemeni Leaders, Rebels Sign Ceasefire Calling for New Government," *CNN*, September 22, 2014.

⁷ Shuaib Almosawa and Rod Nordland, "Yemen's Former Leader, Held by Rebels, Leaves Capital," *The New York Times*, February 21, 2015.

⁸ See the full text of Hadi's letter: "Identical Letters Dated 26 March 2015 From the Permanent Representative of Qatar to the United Nations Addressed to the Secretary-General and the President of the Security Council," U.N. Security Council, March 27, 2015.

⁹ Jeffrey Goldberg, "The Obama Doctrine," *The Atlantic*, April 15, 2016.

¹⁰ Dafna Rand, comments at "U.S. Policy and the War in Yemen," (public event, Brookings Institution, October 25, 2018).

¹¹ The Editorial Board, "The Young and Brash Saudi Crown Prince," *The New York Times*, June 23, 2017.

By late March 2015, Saudi officials informed the United States that the kingdom was going to war in Yemen and wanted U.S. support. Mohammed bin Salman and his military advisors estimated that it would take about “six weeks” – which would prove wildly off the mark – to drive the Houthis from Sanaa and restore Hadi to power.¹²

The Obama administration, which desperately wanted out of both Iraq and Afghanistan, was wary of getting involved in another open-ended conflict in the Middle East, but it also wanted to avoid further alienating a key regional partner. “We knew we might be getting in a car with a drunk driver,” one former senior U.S. official later said.¹³ But, as Robert Malley and Stephen Pomper wrote, the United States “climbed in anyway.”¹⁴

Ultimately, the United States tried to split the difference, agreeing to support the Saudi-led coalition, while refusing to take an active role in military operations. That was the compromise, what former officials like Rand would later call the United States’ “original mistake” in Yemen.¹⁵

The Obama administration thought it could somehow shape a war that it wasn’t leading.

The Obama administration, which desperately wanted out of both Iraq and Afghanistan, was wary of getting involved in another open-ended conflict in the Middle East, but it also wanted to avoid further alienating a key regional partner.

Saudi Arabia attempted to capitalize on U.S. support by taking the unusual step of announcing the beginning of its intervention in Yemen not from Riyadh

but from Washington, DC. On March 25, 2015, the Saudi ambassador to the United States at the time, Adel al-Jubeir, called a press conference to announce that Saudi Arabia had “launched military operations in Yemen.”¹⁶ Later that evening, the United States announced the formation of a “Joint Planning Cell with Saudi Arabia to coordinate US military and intelligence support” for Operation Decisive Storm.¹⁷

Initially at least, the war went according to plan for Saudi Arabia. Along with its primary military ally, the United Arab Emirates, Saudi Arabia quickly pushed the Houthis out of the southern port city of Aden and established air supremacy over Yemen. But as the weeks turned into months, Saudi Arabia realized that airpower alone would not be sufficient to uproot the Houthis. The Saudi air force quickly ran through its list of targets, bombing military bases and destroying arms depots. Saudi Arabia was bombing the Houthis as if they were a traditional

¹² Dafna Rand, comments at “U.S. Policy and the War in Yemen,” (public event, Brookings Institution, October 25, 2018).

¹³ Robert Malley and Stephen Pomper, “Accomplice to Carnage: How America Enables War in Yemen,” *Foreign Affairs*, March/April 2021.

¹⁴ Ibid.

¹⁵ Dafna Rand, comments at “U.S. Policy and the War in Yemen,” (public event, Brookings Institution, October 25, 2018).

¹⁶ Adel al-Jubeir, “Video: Saudi Ambassador in U.S. Speaks on Military Campaign in Yemen,” Al Arabiya Video, 12:19, March 25, 2015.

¹⁷ Bernadette Meehan, “Statement by NSC Spokesperson Bernadette Meehan on the Situation in Yemen,” *The White House Office of the Press Secretary*, March 25, 2015.

military tied to known bases and supply chains. But the Houthis weren't a military. They were an insurgent group allied with the remnants of a military that was still loyal to the former president, Saleh.

Saudi Arabia also imposed a partial economic blockade on Houthi-controlled territory, closing the airport in Sanaa, limiting goods into the seaport in Hodeidah, and restricting cross-border traffic. The idea, in essence, was to make life miserable enough in Houthi areas that the population would rise up and fight the Houthis on the ground. But once again the Saudis miscalculated. Few in the Yemeni highlands were willing to fight the Houthis when Saudi jets were carrying out bombing raids that, increasingly, killed Yemeni civilians.

From the beginning of the military conflict, Saudi Arabia believed it had three basic options. First, it could do nothing and allow the Houthis to cement their control over northern Yemen, which in Saudi calculations meant Iranian control over Sanaa. Second, it could insert ground troops into Yemen for what would likely be a long and bloody war with no guarantee of success. Or, third, it could conduct airstrikes and hope the Houthis would collapse. Not surprisingly, the Saudis have consistently selected the third option: bombing and hoping that something will change on the ground.

Early in 2016, during the final year of the Obama administration, then-Secretary of State John Kerry spent months conducting shuttle diplomacy, traveling back and forth to various Middle Eastern capitals, preparing the ground for peace talks to be held in Kuwait. At the time – and even today – the Kuwait peace talks represented perhaps the best chance to end the war in Yemen. But on the eve of the talks, Hadi, who was worried that he might be replaced during the talks, named Ali Mohsen as his vice president. Hadi's move was meant as a warning to the West: Remove me and you get him. For many in the West, particularly the United States, this was unacceptable given Ali Mohsen's historic ties to jihadist groups. But Hadi's appointment of Ali Mohsen also undermined the peace talks before they could begin. The Houthis considered him their primary enemy due to his conduct during the wars in Saada from 2004-10, and following his appointment they were much less eager to compromise. The talks in Kuwait limped along for six months but never produced anything resembling an agreement.

Few in the Yemeni highlands were willing to fight the Houthis when Saudi jets were carrying out bombing raids that, increasingly, killed Yemeni civilians.

In September 2016, Hadi made a second move that would have long-term consequences for Yemen. Against strong international advice, Hadi uprooted the Central Bank of Yemen, moving its headquarters from Houthi-controlled Sanaa to Hadi government-held Aden, effectively splitting the bank in two: a Houthi-controlled bank in Sanaa and a government-controlled one in Aden. Hadi was concerned that the Houthis were manipulating the bank and its accounts and using its funds to support the group's war efforts. Unfortunately, Hadi's decision meant that neither bank was fully functional. Like the Saudis' economic blockade, Hadi hoped that he could squeeze the Houthis into submission, and, like the Saudis, he was wrong.

Hadi's decision effectively split Yemen's economy in two and, over time, has led to the creation of competing currencies. To offset its lack of funds, Hadi's government has resorted to printing new currency, which the Houthis have banned in territory they control.¹⁸ As of July, the Yemeni rial was trading at over 1,100 rials to \$1 in Aden, while in Sanaa the rate was around 600 rials to \$1. Even if there was political will among the various parties to reach a compromise on power sharing it would be difficult to accomplish it given Yemen's divided economy.

As the war dragged on throughout late 2016, Saudi and Emirati pilots grew increasingly desperate to alter the battlefield and, according to at least one report, "were either using the bombs negligently or deliberately aiming them at civilians."¹⁹ One of the most egregious airstrikes came on October 8, 2016, when Saudi pilots targeted a funeral hall in Sanaa, apparently on intelligence that Saleh was in the building. Saleh was not present, but hundreds of civilians were, and the two strikes killed at least 142 people and wounded more than 500.²⁰

At the time of the bombing in Sanaa, U.S. officials were already worried that policymakers, including Kerry, could be charged with war crimes for "approving bomb sales to the Saudis and their partners" when they knew how many civilians were dying as a result of errant airstrikes.²¹ The United States insisted that its "security cooperation with Saudi Arabia is not a blank check." A written statement in the immediate aftermath of the attack on the funeral hall from Ned Price, the National Security Council spokesman, said, in part: "We have and will continue to express our serious concerns about the conflict in Yemen and how it has been waged."²² But this was a problem of the United States' own making. It was complicit in a war it did not control.

U.S. training programs for Saudi coalition pilots designed to limit civilian casualties weren't working, and the Saudis seemed immune to both public and private warnings. In December 2016, during its last full month in office, the Obama administration sent a message to the Saudis by blocking an arms package of \$350 million in guided munitions kits. Anonymous administration officials told *The New York Times* that: "upgrading the bombs would not help targeting if the Saudi-led coalition in Yemen did not choose its targets properly."²³ But the Obama administration's block was too little, too late to alter the course of the war in Yemen. Just over a month later, the new administration of President Donald J. Trump took over and quickly lifted the block.

¹⁸ "Yemen's Rival Powers Battle Over Banknotes," *Reuters*, January 17, 2020.

¹⁹ Michael LaForgia and Edward Wong, "War Crime Risk Grows for U.S. Over Saudi Strikes in Yemen," *The New York Times*, September 14, 2020.

²⁰ Ahmed Al Omran and Asa Fitch, "Saudi Arabia to Investigate Yemen Funeral Bombing," *The Wall Street Journal*, October 10, 2016.

²¹ Michael LaForgia and Edward Wong, "War Crime Risk Grows for U.S. Over Saudi Strikes in Yemen," *The New York Times*, September 14, 2020.

²² Ned Price, "Statement by NSC Spokesperson Ned Price on Yemen," *The White House Office of the Press Secretary*, October 8, 2016.

²³ Helene Cooper, "U.S. Blocks Arms Sale to Saudi Arabia Amid Concerns Over Yemen War," *The New York Times*, December 13, 2016.

Fragmentation and Fracturing: 2017

On April 27, 2017, Hadi made another error. Much like a year earlier, when he named Ali Mohsen his vice president, Hadi was concerned with maintaining his hold on power. But this time, instead of hiring someone, he fired someone: Aidarous al-Zubaidi, the governor of Aden. Two weeks later, Zubaidi announced the formation of the Southern Transitional Council, which openly advocated for an independent Southern state. Hadi now found himself facing two domestic enemies: the Houthis in the north, and the STC in the south. Making things even more complicated, the Saudi-led coalition was fraying as well.

Although Saudi Arabia and the UAE were technically on the same side, the two had very different goals in Yemen. Saudi Arabia was primarily concerned with combatting the Houthis and preventing Iran from gaining a foothold on the peninsula, while the UAE was more concerned with its regional presence, particularly along the southern coast and Red Sea corridor. As part of that strategy, the UAE had been training, equipping, and financing local Yemeni militias. The UAE had created a number of proxy or allied units in Yemen, such as the Security Belt Forces, Shabwani Elite Forces, Hadrami Elite Forces, and Giants Brigades. Some of these armed groups, notably the Security Belt Forces, which were stationed in and around Aden, backed the STC against Hadi, as did the UAE.

Saudi Arabia was primarily concerned with combatting the Houthis and preventing Iran from gaining a foothold on the peninsula, while the UAE was more concerned with its regional presence, particularly along the southern coast and Red Sea corridor.

A similar fragmentation was happening in the north. In the summer of 2016, nearly two years after the Houthis took Sanaa with Saleh's help, the two sides formalized their alliance with the creation of the Supreme Political Council, which was designed to rule northern Yemen. The council was composed of 10 individuals, five appointed by the Houthis and five by Saleh. But within months, the rickety Houthi-Saleh alliance began to collapse.

In 2014, the Houthis and Saleh – the former enemies – needed one another. The Houthis needed Saleh to enter Sanaa, and Saleh needed the Houthis to neutralize domestic rivals like Hadi and Ali Mohsen. By 2017, that was no longer the case. The Houthis had grown significantly stronger, while Saleh had been severely weakened. This was primarily the result of U.N. sanctions, which listed Saleh and his eldest son, Ahmed, as well as three top Houthi figures, including the group's leader Abdul Malik al-Houthi. While the sanctions – a travel ban and an asset freeze – were applied equitably, they had a disproportionate impact on Saleh. Yemen's former president had international assets to freeze; the Houthis did not. As Saleh's cash dried up, so did his network in Yemen. For more than three decades as president, Saleh had maintained his position of power by playing rivals against one another – what he called “dancing on the heads of snakes”²⁴ – and using state accounts to back a robust network of supporters. Without money or the presidency none of this remained possible. U.N. sanctions decisively altered the delicate balance between Saleh and the Houthis, ultimately leading to Saleh's death and the collapse of the alliance.

²⁴ Robert F. Worth, “The Man Who Danced on the Heads of Snakes,” *The New York Times*, December 7, 2017.

One of the first public signs of the growing tensions between the two sides came in August 2017, when one of Saleh's associates was killed in a clash at a Houthi checkpoint in Sanaa. Instead of hitting back immediately, Saleh elected to wait. But by the time he decided to act, calling for his supporters to overthrow the Houthis in December 2017, it was too late. The Houthis had effective control over much of the military in and around Sanaa, and, crucially, they had installed Houthi loyalists at the top of Yemen's intelligence agencies, which allowed them to intercept Saleh's communications.

The street fighting in December lasted four days, and at the end of it, Saleh was dead, and the Houthis held Sanaa. One of Saleh's nephews, Tariq Saleh, did escape the fighting and later joined the anti-Houthi coalition eventually establishing the National Resistance Forces with UAE assistance. However, both Tariq's brother, Mohammed, and eldest son, Afaash, were taken prisoner by the Houthis. In the aftermath of Saleh's death, the Houthis worked to cement their control over much of northern Yemen. They quickly co-opted or destroyed what was left of Saleh's network, including his political party, the General People's Congress. In 2019, the Houthis dissolved the Saleh-era intelligence agencies and formed their own. They also revamped the education curriculum and began instituting Shia holidays. Seven years after their assault on Sanaa, the Houthis now see themselves as the state in northern Yemen.

Indeed, the longer the war has gone on, the more support Iran has provided to the Houthis.

The Houthis' unilateral control over the northern highlands did two things. First, it strengthened their relationship with Iran. Second, it made them less willing to compromise at the negotiating table, as they no longer had to take into consideration Saleh's views. After Saleh's death, the Houthis were able to present a unified front without the worry that Saleh might betray them or attempt to cut a separate deal.

As mentioned, Iran first became interested in utilizing the Houthis against Saudi in late 2009. But it wasn't until after the Arab Spring protests in 2011 that there is evidence of Iran providing direct material support to the Houthis.²⁵ After the Houthis took Sanaa – against Iran's advice – in September 2014, Iranian support increased. Indeed, the longer the war has gone on, the more support Iran has provided to the Houthis. In many ways, Saudi Arabia's stated rationale for intervening in Yemen – to prevent the creation of a Hezbollah-like group on its southern border – has become a self-fulfilling prophecy: Greater Saudi involvement in Yemen has resulted in increased Iranian involvement.

At the end of 2017, a U.N. Panel of Experts concluded that Iran was in violation of U.N. Security Council Resolution 2216, which lays out an arms embargo for Yemen.²⁶ The panel concluded that Iran had smuggled ballistic missile components as well as drone technology to the Houthis. The extended-range ballistic missiles, in particular, allowed the Houthis to strike deeper into Saudi Arabia and target Riyadh. The Houthis' first launch of an extended-range ballistic missile took place two years into the war, in May 2017, suggesting a gradual ramp-up

²⁵ Eric Schmitt and Robert F. Worth, "With Arms for Yemen Rebels, Iran Seeks Wider Mideast Role," *The New York Times*, March 15, 2012.

²⁶ Note: The author was a member of this panel; "Final Report of the Panel of Experts on Yemen," *U.N. Security Council*, January 26, 2018.

of Iranian support. Prior to that, the Houthis had been limited to using modified Scud missiles, which had been part of the Yemeni military's existing stockpiles and had a maximum range of nearly 200 miles. Later evidence suggests that Iran has also dispatched small numbers of military advisors to Yemen.²⁷

In August 2019, the Houthis appointed their first ambassador to Iran. In October 2020, Iran reciprocated and sent Ambassador Hassan Irloo to Sanaa, who was subsequently sanctioned by the United States.²⁸

Collapse: 2018-21

On April 19, 2018, the UAE targeted and killed Saleh al-Sammad, the Houthi head of the Supreme Political Council, who was traveling in Hodeidah.²⁹ In late May and early June, Emirati and Saudi forces launched an offensive on the Red Sea port city. The operation, Golden Victory, called on Emirati and affiliated forces to advance up the Red Sea coast on Hodeidah from the south, while Saudi forces pressed down on the city from the north. The Saudi-led coalition believed that if it could expel the Houthis from Hodeidah – the one port city the group controlled – it could isolate the Houthis and force them to compromise at the negotiating table.

Initially at least, the offensive went according to plan. Emirati troops and local allies, backed by strong air support, pushed up from the south, quickly taking much of the barren coastland and forcing the Houthis to retreat inside the city. The northern, Saudi-led push made slower progress but still managed to take territory. By mid-summer, however, the battle lines had hardened. The Houthis were largely dug in behind lines of land mines inside the city with Emirati, Saudi, and local Yemeni forces surrounding them. Eventually, pressured by nongovernmental and humanitarian organizations that warned of potentially high civilian casualties from urban fighting and a humanitarian disaster if food shipments through Hodeidah were disrupted, the United States, which had given the offensive a “yellow light,”³⁰ pressed the Saudis and Emiratis to halt the fighting.³¹

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Martin Griffiths, then the U.N. special envoy for Yemen, worked behind the scenes to take advantage of the pause in fighting, eventually getting both the Houthis and Hadi government officials to Stockholm in December for negotiations over Hodeidah. The discussions produced a trio of deals – one on Hodeidah, one on Taiz, and one on prisoners – that collectively became

²⁷ See, for example, Michael Knights, “The Houthi War Machine: From Guerrilla War to State Capture,” *CTC Sentinel* 11, no. 8 (September 2018); Joshua Koontz, “Iran’s Growing Casualty Count in Yemen,” *War on the Rocks*, June 1, 2017.

²⁸ U.S. Department of the Treasury, “Treasury Sanctions Iran’s Envoy in Yemen and University Facilitating Recruitment for Qods Force,” Press Release, December 8, 2020.

²⁹ Rawan Shaif and Jack Watling, “How the UAE’s Chinese-Made Drone is Changing the War in Yemen,” *Foreign Policy*, April 27, 2018.

³⁰ Daniel Byman, “The U.S. ‘Yellow Light’ in Yemen,” *The Brookings Institution*, August 3, 2018.

³¹ Mohammed Ghobari and Aziz El Yaakoubi, “Saudi-Led Coalition Halts Hodeidah Assault as West Presses for Yemen Ceasefire: Sources,” *Reuters*, November 15, 2018.

known as the Stockholm Agreement. Although the U.N. touted the Stockholm Agreement as helping to “avert a catastrophic military escalation,” it had serious and obvious flaws at the time that have only become more apparent in the years since it was signed.³²

In his desire to reach some sort of an agreement, Griffiths rushed through a hasty deal full of ambiguous language, which the Houthis later exploited. For instance, the agreement on Hodeidah states that both sides must withdraw their military forces from the city, while turning control of Hodeidah over to “local security forces.”³³ However, the text never defined the composition of those local security forces. So, one group of Houthis turned control of Hodeidah over to another group of Houthis. Similarly, only the Houthis and Hadi’s government signed the agreement on Taiz, but they were far from the only groups fighting there. Not surprisingly, a two-sided agreement in a multisided conflict was never enacted.

These were the obvious and predictable results of a rushed process in Sweden, but perhaps the most damaging result of the Stockholm Agreement was one that was not immediately foreseeable. Once the military pressure was lifted in Hodeidah, the Houthis were able to redeploy many of their forces to eastern fronts. In July 2019, the UAE withdrew many of its troops from Yemen as well as its Patriot missile batteries in Marib. In January 2020, the Houthis launched an offensive on Marib and al-Jawf, which is still ongoing. The Houthis must have come to realize that to create a viable state they would need both a port, such as Hodeidah, as well as an economic base, such as the oil fields in Marib.

At the same time, the anti-Houthi coalition was collapsing far from the frontlines. In August 2019, shortly after the UAE drew down in Yemen, what was initially described as a Houthi attack on a military base in Aden sparked a conflict between the STC and Hadi-affiliated military units in Aden. Although the Houthis claimed the strike, “stating that they used a combination of an uncrewed aerial vehicle and a missile.”³⁴ The U.N. Panel of Experts later noted that it had not been able to find “indication of either

weapon” at the site.³⁵ The STC, which had been looking for an excuse to take military control of Aden, accepted the Houthis’ account and publicly blamed the Islamist Islah Party for passing what it called intelligence to the Houthis.

The Houthis must have come to realize that to create a viable state they would need both a port, such as Hodeidah, as well as an economic base, such as the oil fields in Marib.

Under the guise of responding to the attack, the STC quickly took control of Hadi’s temporary capital and pushed east toward Hadramout in an attempt to establish a Southern state. That offensive broke down in Shabwa, and the STC was pushed back into western Abyan, where only the intervention of UAE warplanes, which bombed Hadi’s military, prevented them from being routed.

³² “Statement by the Secretary-General on the Second Anniversary of the Stockholm Agreement – on Yemen,” U.N. Secretary-General, December 14, 2020.

³³ “Agreement on the City of Hodeidah and Ports of Hodeidah, Salif, and Ras Isa,” Office of the Special Envoy of the Secretary-General for Yemen, December 2018.

³⁴ “Final Report of the Panel of Experts on Yemen,” U.N. Security Council, April 28, 2020, pg. 14.

³⁵ Ibid.

Saudi Arabia, concerned that its anti-Houthi alliance was breaking down, pressured both Hadi and the STC to accept the Riyadh Agreement, which called for power sharing, military withdrawals, and a unity government. Although both Hadi and the STC reluctantly bowed to Saudi pressure, each has slow played implementation. STC leadership has frequently referred to the Riyadh Agreement as an “interim step,” signaling that the group has no intention of giving up on its pursuit of an independent state in the South. Hadi did eventually form a unity government in 2020, but as with many of the conditions of the Riyadh Agreement, little has changed on the ground. Outside of some token redeployments in western Abyan, the STC has left its troops in place, refusing to place them under the command and control of Hadi’s minister of defense, and continues to hold Aden. That, in short, is the current standoff.

In an effort to put pressure on the Houthis, as well as perhaps hobble the incoming Biden administration, the Trump administration designated the Houthis a foreign terrorist organization on January 19, 2021, its last full day in office. The designation criminalized interaction with the Houthis, who held most of northern Yemen, effectively cutting off humanitarian aid to the roughly 16 million people who were living under Houthi control.

In much the same way as the Trump administration had reversed earlier Obama administration decisions on Yemen, the Biden administration quickly reversed the designation and named its own special envoy, Timothy Lenderking, as the United States’ point person on Yemen. But the decision to lift the designation coincided with – some have said encouraged³⁶ – a renewed Houthi offensive in Marib. The Biden administration, which is staffed by several former Obama officials, came into office determined to end the war in Yemen. However, while the United States has significant leverage over Saudi Arabia and the UAE, it does not have significant leverage to compel the Houthis to sit down and negotiate in good faith. The Houthis are not about to give up at the bargaining table what they believe they have won on the battlefield. The Houthis hold Sanaa and none of the various actors, either in the Saudi-led coalition or the domestic anti-Houthi alliance, are capable of dislodging them.

³⁶ Andrew England and Katrina Manson, “Rebels Step Up Attacks as Biden Pushes for Peace in Yemen,” *Financial Times*, March 9, 2021.



The Seven Yemens

Seven years after the Houthi takeover of Sanaa, Yemen is broken and unlikely to be reconstituted as a single state. The Houthis hold much of the northern highlands and Hodeidah and are moving eastward, battling for territory in Marib and al-Jawf. In the North, more than at any other point in the last several years, the Houthis are the state.

Hadi's government is largely in exile. Hadi is still president, but increasingly it is a title without a country. He has never won an election, his domestic base of support is weak, and the international community continues to recognize him – with increasing levels of exasperation – largely due to a lack of other viable alternatives. Hadi lost his power base – the capital of Sanaa – to the Houthis in 2014 and his temporary capital of Aden to the STC in 2018. It is increasingly unlikely that he will be able to permanently return to either.

The STC, which has administrative control over large parts of southern Yemen, has proved incapable of taking control of the country's oil- and gas-producing regions of Shabwa, Marib, and Hadramout – what one analyst has called Yemen's "triangle of power."³⁷ All three governorates have achieved a significant degree of autonomy in recent years and now each individual governorate directly receives roughly 20% of its export revenue rather than it going to Yemen's U.N. recognized government. Much like the Houthis, who need Marib to survive as an independent state, the STC will need at least Shabwa and Hadramout for an economically viable independent state in the South. The STC's inability to take control of those two governorates has undermined its attempts to create a "government in waiting"³⁸ in the South.

Adding to the complexity on the domestic front and fixing to prolong the conflict are a multitude of disparate forces and armed groups. These include Tariq Saleh's National Resistance Forces on the Red Sea coast as well as a handful of other UAE-backed forces, tribal militias, criminal gangs – some of which have been incorporated into military units – and terrorist or extremist groups.

Making the situation even more complicated is that what is often talked about as the "war in Yemen" is actually three separate but overlapping conflicts.³⁹ First is the U.S.-led war against terrorism, which began in 2001 and shows no signs of ending.⁴⁰ Second, is the regional contest between Saudi Arabia and Iran, which is being fought out in Yemen. This is the war that began with the Saudi intervention on March 25, 2015, and which gets most of the media attention. Ironically, this proxy conflict may be the easiest of Yemen's three wars to solve, or at least the most susceptible to international diplomatic efforts. Much more intractable is the third war – the local civil war that began long before the first Saudi bombing raid in 2015 and will last well after Saudi Arabia has withdrawn from Yemen. This is the war that pits the Houthis, the STC, the Hadi government, Tariq Saleh and his National Resistance Forces, and all the other local armed groups in Yemen against one another in a violent free-for-all to acquire and hold as much territory as possible.

There are now, broadly speaking, seven different Yemens: the Houthi-controlled northern highlands, Hodeidah and the Red Sea coast, Taiz, Marib and al-Jawf, Aden and the South, Hadramout, and Mahra and Socotra. These geographical blocs have distinct histories, different political and sectarian inclinations, and, in some cases, different languages. As the war has fractured the country, what was once a single state is now in seven pieces.

The Houthi-Controlled Highlands

The Houthis are firmly entrenched in Yemen's northern highlands, which include Sanaa and represent roughly one-third of the land of the current Yemeni state, with approximately 60% of the country's population. The highlands are home to the country's Zaydi tribes, which provide

³⁷ Ammar Al Aulaji, "The Yemeni Government's Triangle of Power," *The Sana'a Center for Strategic Studies*, September 9, 2020.

³⁸ "Yemen Update #5," *International Crisis Group*, February 21, 2019.

³⁹ Gregory D. Johnsen, "Yemen's Three Wars," *Lawfare*, September 23, 2018.

⁴⁰ President Joseph R. Biden Jr., "Letter to the Speaker of the House and President Pro Tempore of the Senate Regarding the War Powers Report," *The White House*, June 8, 2021.

the Houthis with most of their supporters and fighters. Since taking Sanaa in September 2014, the Houthis have attempted to restructure and redirect the Yemeni state. Basically, this has meant leaving the existing state bureaucracy in place but replacing the heads of government institutions and ministries with Houthi loyalists. As an added layer of control, the group has also placed “supervisors” who report to the Houthi inner circle in many government offices.

The Houthis have also sought to restore the traditional Zaydi elite – *sayyids* or descendants of the Prophet Muhammad – at the top of Yemen’s social pyramid. Zaydi sayyids largely ruled northern Yemen from 893 until the revolution in 1962. One of the Houthis’ original grievances was that successive republican governments routinely discriminated against Zaydi sayyids, as a way of balancing the scales after more than a millennium of sayyid domination. As part of this effort to restore what the Houthis see as the proper order in the North, the group has also sought to exert more control over Yemen’s northern tribes. This has reignited an old competition between the sayyids and tribal sheikhs for dominance. Prior to the revolution in 1962, the sayyids had the upper hand, as Yemen’s imams dominated the political scene. In the post-revolutionary republic, tribal sheikhs, such as the late Abdullah al-Ahmar of the Hashid confederation, became more powerful. The Houthis have appointed sayyids to “tribe-related positions of authority” and have made them the “primary officials for tribal affairs” with an “authority greater than that of the tribes’ traditional leadership” in an attempt to reverse this trend.⁴¹

It is unlikely that the Houthis can be militarily defeated in the northern highlands, and, given their gains on the battlefield, they are unwilling to compromise at the negotiating table.

The longer the war lasts the more the Houthis are able to consolidate control over the northern highlands and pursue their key goals: ensuring internal security, advancing the group’s domestic state-building project, and achieving recognition as a nation-state on the international stage. In recent years, they have restructured and reorganized Yemen’s intelligence agencies, rewritten school curriculums, and dispatched ambassadors to Syria and Iran. They have also significantly cracked down on internal dissent, abducting dissidents and activists, limiting the role of women in public, and arresting artists. It is unlikely that the Houthis can be militarily defeated in the northern highlands, and, given their gains on the battlefield, they are unwilling to compromise at the negotiating table.

Hodeidah and the Red Sea Coast

The Houthis also control Hodeidah, the nearby ports, and much of the inland countryside. Hodeidah is essential to the Houthi’s ambition to create an independent state. It is the group’s only outlet to the sea, the main entry point for food and fuel, and an important source of revenue. But unlike the northern highlands, the Houthis do not consider Hodeidah part of their historic base of support. Part of this is sectarian. Yemen’s northern highlands are largely Zaydi, while Hodeidah and the coastlands are predominantly Sunni. This has led the Houthis to act more as an occupying force than a domestic government in Hodeidah. For example, the

⁴¹ Adel Dashela, “Coercing Compliance: The Houthis and the Tribes of Northern Yemen,” *The Washington Institute for Near East Policy*, November 6, 2020.

Houthis privatized electricity in the port city, where temperatures often reach triple digits in the humid summer months. Residents in Hodeidah have complained that this is an unofficial tax on the city's Sunni residents.

South of the city, much of the coast is held by Tariq Saleh's UAE-backed National Resistance Forces. Tariq Saleh was allied with the Houthis for the first three years of the war but broke with them in December 2017. The Houthis still hold Tariq Saleh's eldest son, Afaash, and his brother, Mohammad, as a check on his battlefield ambitions.

Marib and al-Jawf

Much like Hodeidah and its ports, Marib and its oil and gas fields, which are controlled by Islah for the anti-Houthi coalition, are essential for the Houthis to establish a sustainable independent state. The Houthis control much of Yemen's population centers but none of its oil and gas fields. That economic reality has driven many of the Houthis' battlefield decisions over the past two years. Despite significant casualties since 2020, the Houthis continue to press the offensive in Marib. If the Houthis are victorious in Marib, as appears increasingly likely, it will destroy any lingering hopes that the Yemeni state can be reunified and ensure that the Houthis will have an economic base upon which to build an independent state.

Marib's population, like Hodeidah's, is largely Sunni. But unlike Hodeidah, Marib is also tribal. The Houthis have attempted to take advantage of this by negotiating nonaggression pacts with individual tribes but so far with little success. Another result of the fighting in Marib is that local tribesmen, many of whom were deployed to other fronts, have returned home to defend the governorate against the Houthis, leaving those other fronts vulnerable.

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Nonetheless, some analysts believe this tribal resistance will not withstand the Houthi military pressure.⁴² How the Houthis plan to govern this area, with its inbuilt tribal and sectarian differences, remains to be seen.

For the first few years of the war in Yemen, Marib was one of the country's few success stories. The city of Marib experienced a construction boom including new malls and an airport; Emirati soldiers and Patriot missile batteries protected the city; and the governor, Sultan al-Arada, negotiated a degree of autonomy for Marib with Hadi's government, receiving 20% of revenue from the governorate's oil and gas exports. But in recent years an influx of Yemenis displaced from Houthi-controlled territory, the partial collapse of the electrical grid, the withdrawal of the UAE, and an antiquated infrastructure have combined to arrest the governorate's initial successes.

⁴² "Battle for the 'Future of Yemen' as Rebels Close on Key City," *AFP*, September 28, 2021.

Taiz

For several years Taiz was the "Stars Wars" cantina of the Yemen war in that every group was present: al-Qaeda fighters, fighters allied with the Islamic State in Iraq and the Levant, Houthis, Hadi government-aligned soldiers, criminal gangs, and a variety of Salafi militias. That dynamic has changed in recent years as battlelines have hardened. The Houthis now control much of the countryside north of the city of Taiz, where the governorate's industrial base is located. Military units affiliated with the Islamist Islah Party control most of the city of Taiz as well as parts of the southern countryside.

Islah has since worked to solidify its control over the city of Taiz, largely by incorporating various criminal and militia groups into its military command structure.

In 2019, Islah won an internal contest within the anti-Houthi alliance, pushing the more neutral 35th Armored Division and the Salafi militia of Abu al-Abbas – who received support from the UAE even though he has been sanctioned by the United States, Saudi Arabia, and the UAE⁴³ – out of Taiz and into rural areas south of the city. Islah has since worked to solidify its control over the city of Taiz, largely by incorporating various criminal and militia groups into its military command structure. Despite its control over the city, Islah is landlocked and surrounded by enemies. The Houthis are north of the city, Tariq Saleh and his UAE-backed National Resistance Forces are to the west, and another rival, the STC, is south of Taiz in Lahj with the ability to block the supply road up from Aden.

Aden and the South

Southern Yemen is split between two members of the anti-Houthi coalition. The STC, which advocates for an independent South Yemen, holds the capital of Aden, much of Lahj, and parts of al-Dhale and Abyan. Hadi's government controls parts of Bayda, eastern Abyan, and the oil- and gas-producing governorates of Shabwa and Hadramout. At the moment, neither side is strong enough to impose its vision for the future upon the other. And much like the Houthis in Marib, the STC cannot build a state without Shabwa and Hadramout.

Hadramout

Hadramout produces roughly 50%-65% of all of Yemen's oil exports, but like the rest of the South, it is divided. The UAE-backed Hadrami Elite Forces hold coastal Hadramout, while Islah-affiliated military units hold the interior of Wadi Hadramout. Generally, security is better in coastal Hadramout, while electricity is better in Wadi Hadramout.

The military is the strongest actor in Wadi Hadramout. Many of the Islah officers in the First Military Zone are members of northern tribes, which are currently living under Houthi control. The soldiers in the First Military Zone have largely not participated in the fighting since 2015.

⁴³ Sudarsan Raghavan, "The US Put a Yemeni Warlord on a Terrorist List. One of Its Closest Allies is Still Funding Him," *The Washington Post*, December 29, 2018.

Much of coastal Hadramout was held by al-Qaeda fighters from early 2015 until Emirati troops and the UAE-backed Hadrami Elite Forces pushed them out of Mukalla in April 2016. After Hadi fired the governor of Hadramout, Ahmad bin Brik, in 2017 (and he subsequently joined the STC) Hadi appointed Faraj al-Bahsani, the head of the Hadrami Elite Forces, as the new governor. However, Bahsani has remained closer to the UAE than to Hadi.

Mahra and Socotra

In Yemen's far east, Mahra and Socotra are also split. In Mahra, Saudi Arabia has slowly been building up its military presence, which has elicited a response from Oman. Like the island archipelago of Socotra, Mahra has its own linguistic and cultural identity. Mahri speakers exist in both eastern Yemen and western Oman, and Oman has long viewed Mahra as within its sphere of influence and resents Saudi actions in the governorate. This maneuvering by Yemen's neighbors in Mahra has weakened and undermined local government. Mahris are largely opposed to the STC's vision of an independent Southern state.

The situation is somewhat similar in Socotra. The UAE has long coveted the island as a naval base, but after Hadi's government complained, UAE troops on the island were replaced by Saudi troops. In June 2020, the STC took over Socotra in what Hadi's government labeled a coup.⁴⁴ Saudi Arabia pressured the STC to halt the military offensive but did not use its troops to prevent the STC from taking control. The STC still holds the island.

Challenges for U.S. Policy

The Yemen that existed from 1990-2014 that was unified and had a central government no longer exists. Nor is that Yemen likely to be reconstituted anytime soon. Like Humpty Dumpty after his great fall, Yemen has shattered and not the United States, the U.N., or the Gulf Cooperation Council will be able to put the country back together again.

A broken and divided Yemen that is at war with itself and a threat to its neighbors presents a number of policy challenges for the United States. Like most countries, the United States is set up to deal with other nation-states. That's how the international system works. The State Department works with the Ministry of Foreign Affairs, the Defense Department deals with the Ministry of Defense, and so on. That will not be possible in Yemen. To be certain, the international community – for largely bureaucratic reasons – will likely label one group as Yemen's official government and give that group Yemen's seat at the U.N., but that group is unlikely to control much territory on the ground. The United States, obviously, won't recognize all the groups that hold territory in Yemen, but to safeguard its national security interests, it will have to deal with many of them.

⁴⁴ "Yemen Southern Separatists Take Control of Socotra Island," *AFP*, June 22, 2020.

The United States has three primary national security concerns in Yemen: terrorism, freedom of navigation in the Red Sea corridor and Gulf of Aden, and the humanitarian crisis. The United States will have to deal with each of these challenges without the benefit of an effective partner on the ground. Despite years of effort, equipment, funding, and advice there will be no national Yemeni military for the U.S. military to work “by, with, and through.”⁴⁵

For some this won’t matter. There will likely be arguments that an “over-the-horizon”⁴⁶ presence from drone bases in the Horn of Africa and Arabian Peninsula will be sufficient to deal with any emerging terrorist threat in Yemen. After all, Al-Qaeda in the Arabian Peninsula is at its weakest point since it was founded in 2009. Over the past six years, the group has been decimated by drone strikes, infiltrated by spies, and riven with infighting. The ISIL affiliate in Yemen is, if anything, in even worse shape.

But al-Qaeda in Yemen has rebounded before – notably with a prison break in 2006 – and is capable of doing so again. The group has, at its core, two wings: an international terrorist wing and a domestic insurgency wing.⁴⁷ It is the international terrorist wing, comprised largely of non-Yemeni recruits, that has withered in recent years. The group’s domestic wing, although weakened, is still largely intact. This is the wing that could revitalize AQAP and once again make it a terrorist threat to the West. Indeed, as others have

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argued, should Saudi Arabia withdraw from Yemen and the fighting within the country revert to a civil war, AQAP would be the likely benefactor.⁴⁸ It is these types of protracted, messy, and multisided civil wars that tend to attract international jihadists. At the height of its strength, from 2009-12, Yemen was the destination of choice for many would-be jihadis. This changed with the rise of ISIL in Iraq and Syria in 2014 and 2015, and AQAP was unable to replace the leaders it lost on the battlefield. Should Yemen once again become a preferred stop on the jihadi circuit, the United States will be forced to deal with a resurgent terrorist threat but this time it will have to do so without a local partner on the ground.

The past two years of the coronavirus pandemic have demonstrated the fragility of the global supply chain. For the United States, any threat to shipping through the Red Sea corridor is a threat to national security. Safeguarding shipping lanes around Yemen, however, is a complex challenge, particularly in the absence of a functioning state and an accountable central government. The Houthis, who control part of the Red Sea coast, have utilized drone boats in the past as well as floating sea mines, which could deteriorate, break free, and drift into

⁴⁵ Joseph L. Votel and Eero R. Keravuori, “The By-With-Through Operational Approach,” *Joint Force Quarterly* 89, no. 2 (Quarter 2018): 48-55.

⁴⁶ Joseph R. Biden Jr., “Remarks by President Biden on the End of the War in Afghanistan,” *The White House*, August 31, 2021.

⁴⁷ Gregory D. Johnsen, “The Two Faces of al-Qaeda in the Arabian Peninsula,” *War on the Rocks*, October 11, 2018.

⁴⁸ Elisabeth Kendall, “Twenty Years After 9/11: The Jihadi Threat in the Arabian Peninsula,” *CTC Sentinel*, September 2021.

international waters. Indeed, the only time the United States has come into direct conflict with the Houthis was in 2016 when the Houthis fired rockets at U.S. warships. The United States responded by firing cruise missiles at Houthi-controlled radar stations.⁴⁹

The United States has little leverage with the Houthis, as recent efforts, such as a U.S.-backed Saudi offer of a cease-fire,⁵⁰ to entice them to the negotiating table have demonstrated. Targeted sanctions have had little impact on the Houthis and, indeed, likely strengthened their hand in Yemen by weakening Saleh. Broad sanctions, such as designating the Houthis a foreign terrorist organization, hurt the wrong people and likely contributed to worsening the already dire humanitarian crisis.

Future U.S. administrations, then, are likely to be left with few nonmilitary options to ensure freedom of navigation through the Red Sea. The use of military measures, although useful in response to situations in which international shipping is threatened by specific actions, is unlikely to represent a long-term solution, particularly when some scenarios – such as an escaped sea mine – do not call for a military response.

Perhaps the most challenging aspect of a collapsed and broken state in what was once known as Yemen will be the dire humanitarian situation and refugee outflows. Yemen's problems will not remain in Yemen. The U.N. already describes Yemen as the "world's worst humanitarian crisis," and it is likely to get worse. Once

Saudi Arabia starts to head for the exits in Yemen, the anti-Houthi coalition, which is only held together by Saudi money and pressure, will collapse. This could lead to a vacuum as various armed

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groups attempt to seize and hold as much territory as they can control. The result would be a patchwork of warlords and armed groups who hold sway in different parts of the country. No one group would likely be strong enough to hold all of Yemen or to force the other armed groups to submit to its will.

Such a scenario could create more displacement as people flee one region for another. Should the situation persist long enough, it is likely that many of these people will seek refuge in Saudi Arabia and Oman. Already, more than 20 million of Yemen's estimated 27 million people depend on outside aid to survive. The Houthis have routinely politicized humanitarian aid, using it to reward their allies and punish their enemies. This is likely to continue in the absence of the state, which could force the United States to choose between two unsatisfactory options: Either withdraw aid altogether and let the humanitarian crisis worsen, and potentially spill over into neighboring countries, or continue to supply aid the United States knows will be used by various warlords to strengthen their grip on power, with the Houthis leading the way, ultimately making reconstruction and political unity even more difficult.

⁴⁹ Matthew Rosenberg and Mark Mazzetti, "U.S. Ships Off Yemen Fire Missiles at Houthi Rebel Sites," *The New York Times*, October 12, 2016.

⁵⁰ Rick Gladstone and Shuaib Almosawa, "Saudi Arabia Offers Cease-Fire in Yemen and Lifting of Blockade," *The New York Times*, March 22, 2021.

The United States has little leverage and few options in Yemen. U.S. departments and agencies are not designed to deal with a fragmented state in which political power is in the hands of warlords. But increasingly, whether in Yemen, Libya, or Syria, the United States is going to be forced to confront the reality of a post-central state Middle East.

