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Yemen Policy From the Inside Out

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The conflict continues because none of the local parties is strong enough to win, weak enough to lose, or incentivized toward peace, but the Biden administration can do something about the latter problem.

The United States' strategic interests in Yemen have often revolved around threats, such as al-Qaeda or the Iranian-backed Houthis, and around protecting economically essential assets adjacent to Yemen, such as Red Sea shipping lanes or Saudi oil facilities. These issues are priorities indeed, but the Biden administration may find the solutions to them lie in focusing on their common thread: Yemen's stability. For its Yemen policy, the Biden administration should not simply trade the Trump administration's Iran lens for a Saudi lens but instead employ a Yemen lens.

In addition to a strategic re-think, the United States should consider getting tactical in Yemen. To increase the odds of a global settlement to the war, the United States could work to build international support for a robust humanitarian response to Yemen's [increasingly desperate situation](#). It could also turn its attention to "following the money" to understand how certain actors in Yemen are benefiting from the war and use any leverage it may have to disincentivize such activity, thus removing barriers to peace. It could work more actively with its partners to counter smuggling, especially of advanced weapons, to the Houthis instead of narrowly focusing on defending Saudi Arabia once missiles are airborne. This may also help alleviate differences in opinion between the Pentagon and Congress, the latter of which has been hesitant about the continued support to Saudi Arabia.

The crisis in Yemen is not one that the Biden administration can solve alone, nor one that will end merely as a result of a change in American policy toward Saudi Arabia. The conflict continues because, despite their regional patronage, no Yemeni party is strong enough to win, weak enough to lose, or, frankly, incentivized toward peace. As a result, the international community has been unable to table a plan that can meet the demands of either the Hadi government or the Houthis. The Biden administration should pursue a Yemen-lensed policy that focuses tactically on creating incentives—where disincentives now exist—for the Yemeni parties to come to the peace table.

Elana DeLozier is the Rubin Family Fellow at The Washington Institute. This item was originally published as part of the Middle East Institute article series “[Up for Debate: U.S. Yemen Policy](#).” ❖



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