

Biden Needs a Plan B for Yemen If Houthis Win

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Articles & Testimony

Ending the war under the current circumstances will generate new problems unless further steps are taken to interdict weapons smuggling and bolster security in Saudi Arabia and the Red Sea.

Poor Tim Lenderking. In February, the veteran U.S. diplomat—one of the State Department’s best and brightest Middle East hands—drew the short straw and was appointed the Biden administration’s special envoy to Yemen. Since then, not only has he been charged with the unenviable task of brokering an end to the seven-year war between the Iranian-backed Houthi rebels and the Saudi-backed government of Yemeni President Abed Rabbo Mansour Hadi, but he has also been responsible for containing the worst humanitarian crisis on the face of the earth. Regrettably, on both accounts, it’s not going well.

Lenderking isn’t to blame. Successful diplomacy depends on effective leverage, which Washington lacks. To be sure, the United States can pressure Saudi Arabia, but these days Riyadh doesn’t need any persuasion to want to end the war. In fact, in recent years, the Saudis have engaged in what are, by all accounts, **good-faith talks**

(<https://www.state.gov/briefing-on-yemen-with-timothy-lenderking-u-s-special-envoy-for-yemen-and-sarah-charles-usaid-assistant-administrator-for-humanitarian-assistance/>) on the future of Yemen, including

with **arch-foe Iran** (<https://www.ft.com/content/852e94b8-ca97-4917-9cc4-e2faef4a69c8>). The problem is the Houthis, who have proved consistently recalcitrant and are now playing for time as they make slow but steady progress on the battlefield. Indeed, the Houthis have little incentive to come to the table when the Hadi government and its local allies’ forces are splintered, insufficiently armed, and frequently **fighting one other**

(<https://www.washingtonpost.com/world/middle-east/yemeni-separatists-suspend-talks-with-govt-clashes->

[resume/2020/08/26/f84b4c3e-e780-11ea-bf44-0d31c85838a5_story.html](https://www.eia.gov/todayinenergy/detail.php?id=41073))—a series of conditions the Saudis have been unable to rectify.

The Houthi inclination toward a military rather than a negotiated solution is paying off. Two years into their military campaign in Marib—a strategic governorate named for its capital city—the rebels are on the verge of conquering both. The oil-rich region is among the last key areas in the north contested by the Hadi government and a gateway to Shabwa, another Hadi-held governorate with important energy resources and infrastructure. It would be a Pyrrhic victory—the Houthis have reportedly lost thousands of soldiers, many of them children, in the effort—but it would represent a turning point.

If they defeat the Saudi-backed Yemeni national army in one of its last major strongholds in the north and take control of the energy center of Yemen, the Houthis would essentially have won the war. For Riyadh, Washington, and the Yemeni people, this represents a worst-case scenario. Even if the war were to end, the humanitarian situation would remain critical, with two-thirds of Yemen's 30 million citizens continuing to face famine and depending on the United Nations World Food Program for daily sustenance. Meanwhile, Iranian proxies will control another Arab country, and Saudi Arabia will remain vulnerable to missile and drone attacks from its southern neighbor.

Yemen is yet another problem from hell for the Biden administration. As with Afghanistan, the U.S. government will likely soon be faced with the challenge of another failed state led by a militant Islamist organization with millenarian delusions—even if the Houthis are nominally Shiite.

The potential consequences are considerable. Not only might the Houthis persist in militarily targeting the United States' Gulf allies, but if the shaky Saudi coalition loses the Yemeni port city of Hodeida and the rest of the Red Sea coast, the Houthis could also more easily disrupt the more than **6 million barrels of oil and petroleum products per day** (<https://www.eia.gov/todayinenergy/detail.php?id=41073>) transiting through one of the world's key chokepoints, the Bab el-Mandeb Strait. In addition, the Houthis refuse to allow the repair or disposal of Yemen's aging, single-hulled oil tanker anchored as floating oil storage 5 miles off the coast, which is an environmental disaster waiting to happen. Should the 45-year-old vessel sink, a million barrels of oil could leak into the Red Sea, restricting port access, impacting desalinization plants and freshwater supplies to as many as 10 million people, and interrupting fishing, further exacerbating the humanitarian crisis.

There's no good solution to Yemen. Like the Trump and Obama administrations before it, the current White House has tried and failed to cajole the parties toward a negotiated solution. The key now is to shape the disposition of what will almost inevitably be the first Iranian-dominated state in the Arabian Peninsula in several centuries.

For better or worse, chances are zero that the Biden administration will attempt to forestall a total Houthi victory, either by working with the Saudis to better arm and organize the Hadi government and its local allies or by ordering the U.S. military to intervene directly. After the likely end of the war, it will therefore be incumbent on the United States to contain Iranian mischief in a Houthi-controlled Yemen, keep Red Sea shipping safe, and blunt the Houthis' **territorial ambitions** (<https://www.economist.com/middle-east-and-africa/2020/02/06/the-houthi-model-of-government>) in Saudi Arabia.

Notwithstanding U.S. President Joe Biden's obvious antipathy toward Saudi Crown Prince Mohammed bin Salman, the first order of business will be to bolster the kingdom's defensive capabilities. Over the past two years, Saudi Arabia has markedly improved its ability to counter the Houthi missile and drone threat. But to continue doing so, Riyadh will require a U.S. commitment to replenish its defensive arsenal, including Patriot anti-missile batteries and anti-aircraft missiles used to target incoming drones.

Another step is for Biden to put the Houthis back on the list of foreign terrorist organizations, a designation he revoked upon taking office. While the Houthis' status is a topic of debate, I believe then-Secretary of State Mike

Pompeo was correct when he officially labeled them terrorists—the group intentionally bombs hospitals, recruits and deploys child soldiers, and on Dec. 30, 2020, attempted to kill all the members of the internationally recognized Yemeni government. But while the terrorist designation may have met the criteria, it's unclear that it ultimately would have impacted the group's behavior or limited its finances.

Beyond bilateral defensive assistance to the Saudis, the Biden administration should quickly—starting now, in anticipation of the end of the war—establish a multilateral Red Sea security mechanism to interdict illicit weapons shipments, stop human and other trafficking, and prevent the harassment of shipping, including by laying mines, at the southern end of the Red Sea. If pitched as a broad international effort to combat all security issues related to global shipping in and around the Gulf of Aden—in other words, not framing it as a Yemen-specific mission aimed only at the Houthis and Iran—the initiative could gain traction. To this end, the administration should explore whether the duties of the existing counterpiracy mission known as Combined Task Force 151 could be expanded.

Perhaps most importantly, to prevent Iran from fully completing its project of recreating a Hezbollah-like entity on Saudi Arabia's southern front once the Houthis gain control, the Biden administration will need to reinvigorate the 2015 U.N. arms embargo on Yemen. This will require continued and additional maritime interdiction efforts as well as enforcement of the embargo on air traffic to prevent smuggling of advanced Iranian military equipment.

Notwithstanding the Biden administration's efforts to build back a better nuclear agreement with Iran, putting teeth into the U.N. arms embargo may also require Washington to sanction or otherwise penalize Tehran for continuing to supply its proxy with destabilizing weapons.

Should the Biden administration fail, the risk is not just that more and increasingly advanced weaponry with Iranian components will be pointed from Yemen toward Riyadh. Concerned about Houthi and Iranian intentions, the Israelis twice this year deployed Patriot and Iron Dome missile defense batteries against potential missiles and drones **emanating from Yemen (<https://www.timesofisrael.com/idf-deploys-air-defenses-to-south-amid-threats-of-attack-from-yemen/>)**.

It's still possible that the Hadi government will unite with Yemeni factions opposing the Houthis to launch a counteroffensive, the Saudis will begin aggressively arming the Yemenis in Marib to give them a chance at winning, or fortunes will otherwise dramatically reverse. But the probable outcome is that Washington's adversaries are going to win this war—and sooner rather than later. Given the bleak trajectory, it's time for the Biden administration to craft a plan B to contend with a Yemen controlled by Iranian proxies.

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