

Pursuing a Stable Peace in Yemen that Preserves U.S. Interests

by [Nadwa Al-Dawsari \(/experts/nadwa-al-dawsari\)](/experts/nadwa-al-dawsari), [Steven Fagin \(/experts/steven-fagin\)](/experts/steven-fagin)

May 31, 2024

ABOUT THE AUTHORS



[Nadwa Al-Dawsari \(/experts/nadwa-al-dawsari\)](/experts/nadwa-al-dawsari)

Nadwa Al-Dawsari is a researcher and conflict practitioner with over twenty years of field experience working alongside tribes, civil society figures, local authorities, security actors, and armed groups in Yemen.



[Steven Fagin \(/experts/steven-fagin\)](/experts/steven-fagin)

Steven Fagin is the U.S. Ambassador to Yemen.

 Brief Analysis

The U.S. ambassador to Yemen joins an expert conflict practitioner to discuss Washington's policy options for resolving the civil war.

On May 28, The Washington Institute held a virtual Policy Forum with Nadwa Al-Dawsari and Ambassador Steven Fagin. Dawsari is a nonresident scholar with the Middle East Institute and a fellow at the Centre on Armed Groups, with over twenty years of field experience in Yemen. Fagin is the U.S. ambassador to Yemen and former director of the State Department's Office of Iranian Affairs. The following is a rapporteur's summary of their remarks.

Nadwa Al-Dawsari

Yemenis need an end to violence and a functioning government to restore normalcy in their lives. They need open roads, access to air travel, reliable salaries, and the ability to return home without fear of persecution. Ideally, this could be achieved through dialogue, where the Houthis and other Yemeni parties all come together to agree on a power-sharing formula. Yet real-world complexities have thwarted such scenarios.

History gives ample reason for skepticism about dialogue with the Houthis, who have exploited negotiations since 2014 to stall the process and strengthen their position. They have used commodity price hikes, political divisions, and international agreements to their advantage, repeatedly demonstrating their strategic acumen and commitment to their long-term goals. For example, the 2018 Stockholm Agreement was brokered by the UN and heavily supported by the international community, but it only served to embolden the Houthis, who subsequently regrouped, seized three crucial provinces, and began to threaten Marib, the government's last stronghold in the north.

The group is driven by an ideology that extends beyond Yemen. They view their mission as part of a broader jihadist movement, aiming to turn the country into a recruitment camp for a global jihadist army. This ideology, supported by Iran, has transformed the Houthis into a formidable force, able to strategically outmaneuver their opponents and exploit every opportunity to advance their agenda.

Policymakers must therefore prepare for the worst-case scenario. Sadly, the most probable outcome of the current UN-backed "roadmap" peace plan is escalating violence. The Houthis would likely exploit a breakthrough in the process to grow stronger and dominate additional parts of Yemen.

Accordingly, training, equipping, and supporting the Yemeni government's forces is crucial to prevent the Houthis from expanding their control. Interested parties must also address the government's internal disagreements and foster cooperation among different political forces.

Economic support is vital as well. Services and infrastructure must be improved to stabilize the country, particularly in areas such as Aden, where power cuts and poor living conditions are fueling unrest. Investing in Yemen's future is essential to prevent further deterioration.

Looking ahead, expanded regional cooperation could help the situation substantially. Saudi Arabia and the United Arab Emirates should work together to strengthen Yemeni forces and ensure they are prepared for potential Houthi escalation. This preparation is not about maintaining the status quo, but about preventing the loss of more territory.

The Houthis' missile and drone arsenal and other military capabilities make them superior to other forces in Yemen. If they succeed in taking over the country, the violence will not end. The Houthis see themselves as a regional and global actor—their ambitions extend beyond Yemen's borders, posing a threat to the broader region.

Steven Fagin

The ideal end state for Yemen is a peaceful nation progressing toward sustainable economic development, without posing threats to the region or the international community. Significant progress has been made toward this long-term goal despite numerous challenges. U.S., Saudi, and UN diplomacy have maintained a truce, broken the cycle of military offensives and coalition airstrikes inside Yemen, and put a stop to nearly all Houthi missile and drone attacks against the Gulf states for the past two years. These achievements must be preserved.

Yemen has suffered greatly, with 400,000 deaths attributed to the conflict. The United States does not support any parties returning to war, recognizing that there is no military solution. The international community understands that the Houthis will remain a political factor, making it essential to pursue a comprehensive political settlement toward sustainable development and peace. This settlement will likely involve a transitional political arrangement leading to an electoral process to validate a final agreement.

Recent attacks on shipping highlight the urgent need to facilitate a peace process. The Yemeni government cannot sign a deal that leaves the Houthis with unrestrained access to weapons. The focus should be on strengthening state institutions, political parties, and civil society to create conditions conducive to peace. For example, the Presidential Leadership Council, established in April 2022, is a more politically inclusive body than previous entities. To avoid further internal conflict, the security forces must be unified under the PLC's command.

The United States, regional allies, and the wider international community are working to narrow differences and promote a collective effort toward peace. Over the past few years, their initiatives have aimed to move from a provisional ceasefire to a permanent, comprehensive ceasefire. Maintaining freedom of navigation in the Red Sea is crucial—without international protection, fewer ships would traverse this route, and the region would face more drone and missile attacks and a heightened risk of environmental disasters.

Efforts to interdict the supply of weapons to the Houthis continue, with successful operations reported to the UN. This work is vital to upholding UN Security Council resolutions.

Even so, the path ahead is challenging. Simplistic solutions are not viable for Yemen's complex problems; realistic and cautious approaches are needed. Embracing and working with the country's politically diverse factions is crucial to ensure a prosperous future and integrate the broader Yemeni society into the peace process. The goal remains a comprehensive resolution that addresses the country's complexities and leads to lasting peace and development.

As noted previously, one of the most important steps is moving from the current truce to a permanent, comprehensive ceasefire. Although time-consuming and difficult, this step is necessary for long-term stability. In particular, protecting international shipping and ensuring freedom of navigation are paramount.

Economic restoration is essential as well. Yemen's economy has suffered tremendously, with no oil or natural gas currently being exported. Restoring these exports and promoting private-sector growth could significantly improve the lives of Yemenis even in the absence of a comprehensive settlement. Achieving this requires sufficient political will from all sides to create the necessary conditions.

The United States and its international partners remain committed to working with Yemen and other regional countries to interdict the flow of weapons to the Houthis, in accordance with UN Security Council resolutions. This ongoing effort is crucial for maintaining regional security and supporting the peace process.

Ultimately, achieving peace requires a comprehensive and inclusive approach that addresses the conflict's political, economic, and security dimensions. The international community must continue supporting Yemen in this complex process, recognizing that while the path ahead is challenging, the goal of a peaceful and prosperous Yemen is worth pursuing.

This summary was prepared by Abdullah Hayek. The Policy Forum series is made possible through the generosity of the Florence and Robert Kaufman Family. ❖

RECOMMENDED



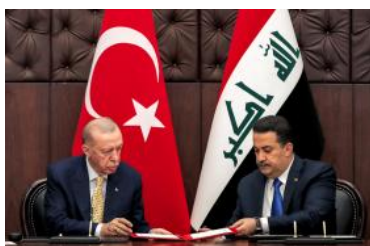
BRIEF ANALYSIS

[Beyond the Ballot Box: U.S. Priorities in North Africa's 2024 Elections](#)

May 30, 2024

◆
Sabina Henneberg,
Amine Ghoulidi

(/policy-analysis/beyond-ballot-box-us-priorities-north-africas-2024-elections)



BRIEF ANALYSIS

[The Iraq-Turkey Reset](#)

May 29, 2024

◆
Soner Cagaptay,
Selin Uysal,
Bilal Wahab

(/policy-analysis/iraq-turkey-reset)



IN-DEPTH REPORTS

North Africa in an Era of Great Power Competition:

Challenges and Opportunities for the United States

May 29, 2024



Anna Borshchevskaya,
Louis Dugit-Gros,
Ben Fishman,
Sabina Henneberg,
Grant Rumley

[\(/policy-analysis/north-africa-era-great-power-competition-challenges-and-opportunities-united-states\)](#)

TOPICS

[Military & Security \(/policy-analysis/military-security\)](#)

REGIONS & COUNTRIES

[Gulf States \(/policy-analysis/gulf-states\)](#)