

No Quick-fix to End the Yemen War

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US President Joe Biden wants to “End the Yemen War” by cutting support to the Saudi-led coalition and focusing on diplomacy to end the six-year conflict in one of the world’s poorest countries, which has brought 30 million Yemenis close to famine.

The US has a history of looking for a quick fix, without considering the complex reality on the ground. Yemen’s conflict is multifaceted, includes many actors, and can’t be solved in a rushed political agreement.

Biden may be considered for the Noble Peace Prize if his administration could bring peace to Yemen; however, halting arms sales to the Saudis, or making a deal between the Hadi government and the Houthis won’t end Yemen’s war, or stop the world’s worst humanitarian crisis.

Biden has announced a big policy shift on Yemen by ending US support for the Arab Coalition’s operations in Yemen, calling out Saudi Arabia for human rights issues, halting arms sales to Riyadh and Abu Dhabi, and holding the Saudi-led coalition accountable for their role in mismanaging the war.

Biden has appointed Timothy Lenderking, former deputy assistant secretary for Arabian Gulf affairs, as the special envoy to Yemen, and called the Saudi foreign minister twice over the past week.

Lenderking met with the internationally recognized Yemeni President Abdu Rabbu Mansour Hadi in Riyadh on February 11 and also met with Saudi Foreign Minister Faisal bin Farhan, while discussing a comprehensive solution to ending Yemen’s war.

Saudi Arabia’s military spending has been exceeding even that of global powers, although direct Saudi-led coalition attacks against the Houthis have decreased in recent years while shifting the Saudi strategy to defending the border with Yemen.

Riyadh is aiming to strengthen its influence among all Yemeni factions and is now more actively pursuing negotiations with the Houthis.

Farhan went to Moscow a few weeks ago, and the Kingdom enjoys a good relationship with China, which provides the oil-rich monarchy a contingency plan.

Saudi Arabia can’t afford to get out of Yemen entirely, as the security cost would be too

high. Riyadh might invest in mercenaries while it continues to reduce its direct military interventions.

Trump

President Trump imposed upon the Houthi movement the specially designated global terrorist (SDGT) and foreign terrorist organization (FTO) designations on his last full day in office, in a final attempt to cut off funding, weapons, and other support for Iran's proxy fight in Yemen. Trump was often criticized for his close relationship with Saudi Crown Prince Mohammed bin Salman, and Abu Dhabi Crown Prince Sheikh Mohammed bin Zayed Al Nahyan, while he used his close ties to push through peace deals between Arab states and Israel.

Sanctions

The United Nations describes Yemen as the world's worst humanitarian crisis, with 80 percent of its people in need. The Trump-ordered terrorist designation threatened to deepen the humanitarian crisis by denying food, fuel, and other basic commodities to civilians. Importers would have faced criminal penalties should the goods fall into Houthi hands, which could push Yemen into a major famine.

The US and EU sanctions on Syria, for example, have caused hospitals to be without chemotherapy drugs, ventilators, and other essential medicines and medical equipment. Gasoline, heating oil, and electricity supplies have all been in dire short supply because of the sanctions on Syria. It is the innocent, unarmed civilians who suffer from Western sanctions.

"This decision is a recognition of the dire humanitarian situation in Yemen," Blinken said in a statement.

"We will continue to closely monitor the activities of Ansar Allah and its leaders and are actively identifying additional targets for designation," Blinken said, referring to the name of the Houthi movement.

Houthi

The Houthis currently have the upper hand militarily, and a political settlement risks tipping the military balance in favor of the Houthis, who have not held to cease-fires in the past.

Biden's speed to call out Arab Gulf monarchies, without first condemning actions taken by the Houthis was perceived by the group as a sign of American weakness, and a Houthi victory.

The move created widespread anger among Yemenis, who saw it as the Biden administration giving the Houthis a green light and a new sense of confidence.

The US administration's decision to revoke the terrorist designation of the Houthis has emboldened the group, and they escalated their offensive to capture Marib the following day after the designation was rescinded when a Houthi drone was launched toward Khamis Mushait in the kingdom's Asir province.

On February 12, the Houthis claimed a drone attack that targeted a civilian airplane in Saudi Arabia's Abha airport.

How the war started

In 2011, the Gulf Cooperation Council (GCC) Initiative resulted in a power-sharing deal between former President Saleh and his opponents and called for a political transition process.

Lost between the two sides were the long-standing grievances of ordinary Yemenis, who still feel their voices are not heard.

The deal granted former President Saleh immunity, which effectively allowed him to remain in control of most of the armed forces. He then allied with the Houthis and overthrew the government in September 2014, and from there the country was dragged into a civil war.

The war in Yemen is between the Iranian-aligned Houthi movement, and the internationally recognized government of Yemen, which has been supported since 2015 by a Saudi-led military coalition.

The Stockholm Agreement was brokered by the UN envoy in December 2018 between the Hadi government and the Houthis but failed to deliver peace or stability.

The UN

A series of UN special envoys for Yemen has tried to broker a political settlement between the two sides since 2014.

The Biden administration should work with the Office of the Special Representative of the Secretary-General to Yemen Martin Griffiths to ease access to humanitarian aid and opening airports, seaports, and key roads to cities for the sake of the suffering civilians.

Down the road

Yemen is a conflict that's more than just politics and will require getting firm commitments from the Houthis while working with the Saudis as well.

Most Yemenis are currently not represented in the peace talks. Western policy experts, diplomats, and peace activists are not enough to end the war when most Yemenis have animosity toward both the Houthis and Hadi's government. The voiceless civilians must be made part of the solution for the war to come to an end, and have lasting stability.

The Biden administration must look farther down the road than just a quick fix, or risk an uptake in violence and a long-lasting conflict with no end in sight.

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