

A Way Forward in Yemen

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KEY TAKEAWAYS

The U.S. has an interest in shoring up Yemeni cooperation to combat threats posed by Al-Qaeda in the Arabian Peninsula, the Houthis, and Iran.

The U.S. can play a supporting role in facilitating negotiations—but ultimately the prospects for peace will be up to the Yemenis and their Arab allies.

The U.S. should encourage negotiations that give as many Yemeni factions as possible a stake in a stable peace.

Introduction

Yemen, a failed state destabilized by multiple civil wars, has become the world's foremost humanitarian disaster, an arena for a proxy conflict between Iran and Saudi Arabia and a hotbed for clashing Sunni and Shiite Islamist extremists. The United States, which has been attacked by the Yemen-based al-Qaeda in the Arabian Peninsula (AQAP), also faces potential threats from the Iran-backed Houthi movement, which overthrew Yemen's weak central government in 2014.

Yemen's brutal civil war has reached a stalemate. The unwieldy anti-Houthi coalition, which in recent years clawed back considerable territory seized by the Houthis, is disintegrating. Southern secessionists have ejected Yemeni government forces from some parts of the south, and the United Arab Emirates

This paper, in its entirety, can be found at <http://report.heritage.org/ib4999>

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(UAE)—a key contributor to the Arab coalition that intervened to fight the Houthis—has pulled back many of its forces.

The United States should support negotiations that give as many Yemeni factions as possible a stake in a stable peace; minimize Iranian influence, threats to international shipping off Yemen’s coasts, and terrorist threats; support the security needs of regional allies; address legitimate historical grievances of both the Houthis and southern separatists in an inclusive manner; and lay out a framework for post-war reconciliation that includes security sector reform (SSR) alongside a disarmament, demobilization, and reintegration (DDR) program for ex-fighters.

A Fragmented “Chaos State”

The latest chapter in Yemen’s internecine conflict stemmed from “Arab Spring” protests that triggered the fall of President Ali Abdullah Saleh’s authoritarian regime, which ushered in a transitional government and a National Dialogue Conference in 2013. Unsatisfied with the terms of the National Dialogue, the Houthis (officially known as *Ansar Allah*—“Helpers of God”), an Islamist movement drawn from the Zaidi Shiite sect based in northern Yemen, seized control of the capital city of Sana’a and invaded southern Yemen. President Abdrabbuh Mansour Hadi called on the support of Saudi Arabia, which organized an Arab military coalition that intervened in March 2015 to push back the Houthi offensive and prop up Yemen’s beleaguered government.

The UAE, which deployed some of the Arab coalition’s most effective military forces, has withdrawn many of its troops, leaving behind approximately 90,000 Yemeni militia fighters that it trained to fight AQAP, as well as the Houthis, ostensibly on behalf of the government. On August 7, some of these security forces revolted and seized Aden, the seat of Hadi’s government. These forces declared loyalty to the Southern Transitional Council (STC), a political movement that has chafed at what it considers to be southern disenfranchisement in Hadi’s government, which is dominated by northerners. The STC has accepted a Saudi invitation to participate in talks with the Hadi government, but it is unclear if it will accept anything less than southern independence.

The splintering of the anti-Houthi coalition threatens to undermine the U.S.-led counterterrorism campaign against AQAP and the much smaller Islamic State terrorist group in Yemen. Expanded fighting between the Hadi government and the STC would distract both camps and reduce the military pressure each could apply against those terrorist groups, as well as against

the Houthis. The growing tensions in southern Yemen also complicate U.N. efforts to broker a ceasefire and settlement of the Houthi war. Martin Griffiths, the U.N. Special Envoy to Yemen, has struggled to balance the interests of the Yemeni government, the Houthis, and the STC. The failure of the 2018 Stockholm agreement, combined with southern exclusion from peace talks, have triggered renewed fighting and worsened the humanitarian situation.

U.S. Policy: Give Peace a Chance

Yemen's civil war has been exploited by AQAP, other Sunni extremist groups, the Houthis, and Iran to expand their power and leverage. The longer the fighting goes on, the worse the humanitarian disaster will become, the more Islamist extremists will be able to harness sectarian tensions to advance their own agendas and the more dependent the Houthis will become on Iran. Washington has supported the Yemeni government, but the permanent defection of STC supporters would further erode President Hadi's already weak popular support and reinforce Yemeni perceptions that he is too dependent on Saudi backing.

The United States has an interest in shoring up Yemeni cooperation to combat threats posed by AQAP and Iran. It should seek to defuse tensions between Hadi's government and the STC and support negotiations to avert an expanded civil war in the south that would benefit AQAP and Iran. The UAE pullback from fighting the Houthis has put an end to any Saudi hopes of scoring a military victory over the Houthis and may increase Saudi willingness to negotiate a peace settlement.

Ending the fighting in Yemen could help reduce the potential threats posed by AQAP, the Islamic State, and the Houthis to Yemenis as well as Americans. It would also clear the way for more effective humanitarian relief efforts to address shortages of food, water, and medicine. To accomplish these goals, Washington should support a negotiated settlement that achieves four objectives:

- **Minimizes Iranian influence, terrorist threats, and threats to international shipping.** Iran has opportunistically exploited Yemen's civil war to recruit the Houthis as allies and gain leverage over Saudi Arabia. Washington should explore whether the Houthis are willing to distance themselves from Iran, halt attacks on international shipping, and withdraw from southern Yemen in exchange for a peace agreement that recognizes them as a legitimate political force and includes foreign aid for post-war reconstruction in northern Yemen.

A settlement should also include commitments by the Yemeni government and Saudi Arabia to step up efforts to defeat AQAP and abandon ties to the Islamist militias they have recruited to fight the Houthis. For example, the deployment of Saudi-backed militias in Yemen's Mahra Governorate has destabilized the tribal balance of power and raised legitimate security concerns in neighboring Oman.

- **Supports the security needs of regional allies.** In addition to rebelling against the Yemeni government, the Houthis have attacked military bases, civilian airports, and oil infrastructure in Saudi Arabia, as well as Saudi and UAE naval forces interdicting Iranian arms transfers. A peace agreement should include guarantees that will permanently end these threats, as well as Iranian arms transfers that violate U.N. Security Council resolutions. The U.S. Congress should also refrain from cutting arms sales to Saudi Arabia, which would weaken the anti-Houthi coalition and reduce the chances of reaching an acceptable peace agreement.
- **Facilitates inclusive talks that address historical grievances and promote decentralization.** Yemen's civil war is partially rooted in long-standing grievances that the National Dialogue failed to resolve. Historically, Sana'a's political elite dominated the economic, political, and security sectors, consolidating power among certain northern tribes and marginalizing both southern and Houthi areas.

To preserve a unified Yemeni state, a negotiated settlement must include provisions assuring the Houthis a role in the central government and access to state resources in proportion to their numbers. Southerners will be unlikely to accept a deal that leaves the northern political structures intact and continues to marginalize the south. Negotiations to give southerners greater representation in the central government and enhanced authority over local affairs may avert southern secession.

However, if Yemen dissolves into two or more states, Washington must be ready with a "Plan B" to work with the UAE and its Yemeni allies to defeat AQAP and the Islamic State, which have operated primarily in southern areas.

- **Lays out a framework for post-war reconciliation that includes SSR alongside a DDR program for ex-fighters.** To minimize the

potential for conflict, a negotiated settlement needs to include reconciliation mechanisms in a comprehensive DDR program to tackle large-scale abuses on the local and national level. DDR and SSR programs would allow a smoother war-to-peace transition and minimize the risks of renewed conflict.

From Chaos to Stability

The United States should encourage an inclusive peace settlement while also supporting the Arab coalition and its non-Islamist Yemeni allies to maintain security on the ground. The United States can play a supporting role in facilitating negotiations, but ultimately the prospects for peace will be up to the Yemenis and their Arab allies to hash out.

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