

## Countering the Rise of the Houthis in Yemen

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### Abstract

Iranian supported Houthi rebels are the primary destabilizing factor in Yemen. Iranian provision of money, training, and lethal aid to this quasi-Shia minority empowered them to oust the internationally recognized government of Yemen and plunge the impoverished nation into civil war. This Houthi-caused strife precipitated a significant humanitarian disaster by creating over one million internally displaced people that greatly exacerbated preexisting food, water, and fuel shortages. The Houthis also expanded the fighting into Saudi Arabia in retaliation for the Saudi-led coalition fighting to return ousted Yemeni President Hadi to power. Iranian armed Houthi fighters could easily threaten global shipping passing through the Bab el-Mandab Strait in which 4.7 million barrels of oil transit daily. Lastly, the Houthi-generated civil war disrupted U.S. counterterrorism operations targeting Al-Qaida in the Arabian Peninsula, arguably one of the most dangerous extremist groups attempting to target the U.S. homeland. U.S. intervention through diplomatic dialogue and economic incentives to persuade Iran to abandon their lethal aid and decrease financial support to the Houthi rebels would likely revert the Houthis to a localized danger vice a regional threat.

## **Countering the Rise of the Houthis in Yemen**

While recent United States (U.S.) attention in the Middle East has focused primarily on ongoing counterterrorism operations in Iraq and Syria, the Yemeni civil war that began in 2015 threatens U.S. national interests in the region as well. Seeking to broaden its influence in the region, Iran empowered a long oppressed Shia minority to plunge Yemen into civil war. The resultant conflict created a catastrophic humanitarian disaster, widened into a conflict with Saudi Arabia, derailed U.S. counterterrorism efforts in Yemen, and created a potential threat to international shipping. The deplorable situation in Yemen demands U.S. action. A spectrum of U.S. response options with direct military involvement in Yemen on one side and expanding diplomatic as well as economic action with Iran on the other helps to frame this complex problem. While ongoing operations in Iraq and Syria are important, the U.S. cannot afford to ignore Yemen and the destabilizing presence of the Houthis.

### **The Houthi Insurgency**

As in many insurgencies, the Houthi conflict involves a disenfranchised minority group that feels marginalized and persecuted by the ruling majority. The term Houthi actually refers to a large and influential family that leads the Zaydi minority.<sup>1</sup> The Zaydis are a sub-sect within Shia Islam who devotedly followed the Prophet Muhammad's great-great-grandson Zayd bin Ali.<sup>2</sup> After Zayd bin Ali's brutal death in 739 AD, his followers sought sanctuary in northern Yemen's mountains where they established their own imamate.<sup>3</sup> For centuries, the prominent Zaydi families, like the Houthis, ruled over northern Yemen.<sup>4</sup> However, Yemen's civil war during the 1960s resulted in the establishment of a republic and the demise of the Zaydi rule.<sup>5</sup> During this chaotic upheaval within Yemen, the Zaydi dynasty that governed for over 1,000 years, instantly

became powerless and once again found themselves withdrawing to the mountains to escape persecution.<sup>6</sup>

After decades of subsisting on the fringes of Yemen's society, in 1992, the Zaydis founded Shabab al Moumineen (Believing Youth), a political movement to champion rights for the Zaydi minority.<sup>7</sup> Some Sunni scholars point to the creation of Shabab al Moumineen as the first tangible evidence of Iranian influence over this Shia minority, and, as a result, the first step in unifying the Zaydis toward the current conflict.<sup>8</sup> Indeed, a prominent Yemeni scholar and leader of a rival political party asserted that the founding members of Shabab al Moumineem, Mohammed Salem Azzan and Abdul-Karim Jadban, maintained close connections with prominent Shia leaders in Iran and Lebanon.<sup>9</sup>

Over the next decade, the Government of Yemen under President Saleh successfully maintained the status quo in regards to relations with the Zaydis; they remained on the fringes of Yemen society. However, this Shia minority found their voice in Hussein al Houthi, a prominent cleric whose rhetoric against Saleh grew increasingly direct and violent.<sup>10</sup> In an effort to decapitate this growing movement, Saleh ordered his forces to attack in June 2004, resulting in four months of intermittent fighting that culminated with Hussein al Houthi's death in September.<sup>11</sup> However, instead of ending the Zaydis' movement, al Houthi's death served as an accelerant, ushering in the Houthi insurgency.

After al Houthi's death, the Houthi insurgency against Saleh's regime ebbed and flowed, ultimately weakening the Government of Yemen and outlasting Saleh. Between 2004 and 2012, the Houthis utilized classic insurgent tactics by taking advantage of the

mountainous terrain and channelizing road network to attrite Saleh's military when they conducted their raids into the northern mountains. Due to the civilian casualties and economic damage wrought by Saleh's military sweeps against the Houthis, these incursions served to galvanize the Houthi population against Saleh and exacerbate the conflict.<sup>12</sup>

Enduring Saleh's military sweeps into their homeland, the Houthis responded by employing terrorist tactics such as sniping operations and bombings that frequently incited a disproportionately heavy-handed response from the military. On rare occasions, a Houthi terrorist would even infiltrate Sana'a, the capital of Yemen, and conduct a simple attack as exemplified by a late April 2005 grenade attack and May 2005 assassination attempt of a military officer.<sup>13</sup> The military's clumsy and heavy handed tactics against the Houthis coupled with their seemingly inability to defend the capital made Saleh and his military appear inept and undisciplined. Noted scholar Gregory Johnsen succinctly described these tumultuous years when he stated, "In time, the fighting that started in the north would grow into a contest between Yemen's powerful Zaydis and its more numerous Sunnis, weakening Salih and his military..."<sup>14</sup> The Zaydis outlasted Saleh as Abd Rabu Mansur Hadi replaced him as president in February 2012.<sup>15</sup>

Not surprisingly, Hadi inherited a deeply fractured and weakened country, largely due to its long-standing struggle with the Houthis. The fighting between the Houthi rebels and Saleh not only drained the economy, but had indeed made the military weak, thus encouraging various factions within Yemen to press their agendas. For example, in addition to the growing Houthi movement, the Government of Yemen also faced Al-

Hirak, a southern Sunni separatist movement, and Al-Qaida in the Arabian Peninsula (AQAP), a dangerous and effective sub-element to Al-Qaida who conducted regional attacks as well as operations directed at Europe and America.<sup>16</sup> Like sharks smelling blood in the water, these elements circled Hadi's government waiting for the opportune time to strike.

For the Houthis, Hadi's end to fuel subsidies in July 2014 and the resultant sharp rise in fuel prices served as the catalyst to broaden their support base and organize anti-Hadi protests.<sup>17</sup> Mass demonstrations organized by the Houthis clashed with Hadi's supporters and Sunni groups, creating chaos in Sana'a. Capitalizing on the resultant bedlam, Sunni southern separatists took this opportunity to increase their demands for independence. Assaulted from all directions of society, Hadi's government started to fracture along these long-standing societal fault lines with even the military splitting as formations left Hadi to support the southern separatists, the Houthis, and even former President Saleh who ironically also eventually sided with the Houthis.<sup>18</sup> As Hadi's regime rapidly deteriorated, the Houthi rebels captured the capital in September 2014.<sup>19</sup>

In January 2015, the Houthis solidified their control of Sana'a, resulting in the government dissolving and Hadi fleeing to Saudi Arabia where he remains the internationally recognized legitimate leader of Yemen.<sup>20</sup> In February 2015, the Houthis boldly issued a new constitution and established their own government while their military arm sought to expand their control over Yemen by marching west and south to capture critical port cities.<sup>21</sup> Concerned by the destabilizing security situation on their southern border, Saudi Arabia created a coalition in March 2015, drawn from the other members of the Gulf Coalition Council (GCC) to beat the Houthi rebels back in order to

reestablish Hadi's government. Yemen remains fractured by war as Houthis, the Saudi Coalition, and Sunni extremists groups, notably AQAP, all fight for control. Since its inception in 1992, the Houthi movement endured harsh military repression, outlasted Saleh's oppressive regime, broadened their support base, and ultimately achieved their goal of reasserting themselves as the ruling party of the region. The Houthis could not have achieved such remarkable success without Iranian support, discussed next.

### Iran's Support to the Houthis

The combined assessment by U.S. political and military officials, Saudi political officials, and numerous Yemeni public and private voices points to a definitive Iranian-Houthi connection. Ever since the 1992 inception of the current Houthi insurgency, Iran provided direct and indirect support to this Shia minority. Iranian support greatly empowered the Houthis, enabling them to openly challenge the Government of Yemen and ultimately overthrow Hadi's regime.

Iran's provision of support to the Shia Houthis in Yemen aligns with Iran's broader strategy of using proxy groups to exert their influence in a region. This strategy is articulated in Iranian doctrine as exemplified by publications from the Revolutionary Guard's Command College that emphasized, among other things, "...the use of pro-revolutionary proxies outside Iran's borders."<sup>22</sup> For example, Iran maintains a long-standing relationship with Hezbollah to assert influence in Lebanon and Syria while also indirectly targeting Israel.<sup>23</sup> Moreover, since 2001, Iran supported disparate elements in western and southwestern Afghanistan to undermine U.S. sway in Afghanistan while simultaneously seeking to increase their own power.<sup>24</sup> Iranian political, economic, and possibly even lethal support to the Shia majority in Iraq serves as another clear example of Iran creating and leveraging proxy forces.<sup>25</sup>

Iran essentially establishes proxy groups in key regional countries in order to provide an unconventional defense in depth. In other words, while Iran assists these groups in achieving their own agendas, it simultaneously pushes Iranian interests in the region. Then, should Iran feel threatened, it could leverage these proxy groups to conduct terrorist attacks against its opponents. As senior analyst Stephen Ward described, “Iran’s concept of war appears to be to avoid a conventional military conflict, especially with the United States, and to rely on irregular warfare...and terrorism to deter or inhibit an opponent.”<sup>26</sup> Iran’s proxy groups, the means for this strategy of irregular warfare, are therefore central to Iran’s national concept of warfare.

Given Iran’s reliance on proxy forces, it is not surprising that Iran supported the Houthi minority in Yemen. As previously mentioned, Yemeni Sunnis point to Hezbollah’s direct connection to Shabab al Moumineem founders Mohammed Salem Azzan and Abdul-Karim Jadban as evidence of Iran’s involvement prior to the Houthi insurgency. Prominent Hezbollah leaders in Lebanon allegedly provided material support and indoctrination tools to the two Zaydi leaders.<sup>27</sup> For example, a representative from al Haq, a political party that opposes the Houthis, asserted that Azzan and Jadban disseminated videos throughout northern Yemen religious centers that featured notable Lebanese Shia leaders to include Hassan Nasrallah, the third Secretary General of Hezbollah.<sup>28</sup>

Yemen officials also asserted that the Houthis received other direct Iranian support in the form of military training and financial support.<sup>29</sup> For example, in 2008 the Yemeni Deputy Premier for Defense and Security Affairs declared that Houthi fighters had received training in Iran focused on sabotage and basic terrorist tactics.<sup>30</sup>

Furthermore, this Yemeni official attributed hand grenade attacks in Sana'a and overt plots against the Saudi ambassador to Iranian-trained Houthi rebels.<sup>31</sup> Additionally, the Government of Yemen executed a Zaydi cleric for seeking Iranian financial support for Shabab al Moumineem.<sup>32</sup> According to the related press release, the cleric was guilty of directly contacting Iran's ambassador for support to Shabab al Moumineem and for taking a group to Iran for education, training and the procurement of references for designing organizational policy.<sup>33</sup>

In addition to long-standing assertions by Yemenis that Iran backs the Houthis, numerous senior U.S. political officials have also derided Iran's destabilizing support to the rebels. For example, in his recent testimony before the Senate Foreign Relations Committee, Stephen Seche, the former U.S. ambassador to Yemen from 2007 to 2010, stated, "And in Yemen, the armed Shia insurgency known as the Houthis, which Iran has supported in a variety of way for years, still controls the capital...".<sup>34</sup> Another former U.S. ambassador to Yemen, Gerald M. Feierstein, declared "Iran has continued to provide financial support, weapons and intelligence to the Houthis; this assistance has encouraged their destabilizing activities."<sup>35</sup> Additionally, in an April 2015 interview with *PBS NewsHour* about the Houthis, Secretary of State John Kerry affirmed, "There are obviously supplies that have been coming from Iran...there are a number of flights every single week...We are well aware of the support that Iran has been giving to Yemen...".<sup>36</sup> Convinced of external support, the United Nations Security Council on 14 April 2015 imposed UN Resolution 2216 which prohibits the provision of arms to the Houthis.<sup>37</sup>

Additionally, the U.S. Navy was involved in an incident that indicated Iran supported the Houthis. On 26 September 2015, one of the GCC ships with the assistance of the *USS Forrest Sherman* operating as part of a Combined Maritime Force intercepted an Iranian dhow 150 miles off the Omani coast in the Arabian Sea.<sup>38</sup> The Iranian registered ship departed Iran carrying 72 anti-tank guided missiles (ATGMs) and four ATGM launchers.<sup>39</sup> While the dhow crew claimed their destination was Somalia, it is much more likely that the Houthis were the intended recipients of the Iranian and Russian made ATGMs, as discussed next.

With the Saudi-led coalition deploying armored vehicles in Yemen and along the border in Saudi Arabia, ATGMs greatly enhance Houthi capability against such threats. Indeed, Houthi fighters have successfully targeted Saudi armored vehicles near the Saudi border with existing ATGMs, highlighting their value to the Houthis and also alluding to Iran as a likely trainer for such advanced weapons systems.<sup>40</sup> The Saudi Foreign Minister heralded the 26 September missile seizure as a clear violation of UN Resolution 2216, citing that “Iran is trying to fan flames in Yemen by smuggling weapons to the Houthis...”.<sup>41</sup>

#### Importance to U.S. National Interests

The Houthi generated war in Yemen directly impacts three national interests as outlined in President Obama’s February 2015 National Security Strategy: seek stability and peace in the Middle East and North Africa; combat the persistent threat of terrorism; and assure access to shared spaces.<sup>42</sup> For stability in the Middle East, denying Houthi rebels Iranian support would decrease Houthi capability to sustain operations, increasing the Saudi-led coalition’s ability to return Hadi’s regime. A decrease in Houthi capability ultimately translates into greater access for humanitarian aid organizations, a

corresponding reduction to risk of mass migration from Yemen to neighboring countries or Northern Africa, and greater security along Saudi Arabia's border. For combating terrorism, reversing Iran's disruptive influence would allow for the resumption of counterterrorism operations against AQAP. Lastly, to assure access to shared spaces, preventing Iranian armed Houthis from threatening or disrupting the Bab al-Mandab Strait will ensure unrestricted passage for international shipping.

#### Impacts of Iranian-backed Houthi War

The Iranian-backed Houthi Civil War not only created a Yemeni humanitarian disaster, but also threatened Saudi Arabia, disrupted U.S. counterterrorism operations, and potentially threatens international shipping. In other words, the conflict in Yemen has destabilized the entire Gulf of Aden region.

#### Yemeni Humanitarian Disaster

Already an impoverished country, the Houthi rebellion greatly exacerbated an already deplorable humanitarian situation. Prior to the civil war, over fifty percent of Yemen's 25 million people lived below the poverty line making Yemen one of the poorest countries in the Middle East.<sup>43</sup> Furthermore, Yemen relied heavily on fuel and food imports just to maintain status quo.<sup>44</sup> For example, Oxfam, a United Kingdom-based international federation of relief organizations, asserted that Yemen imported over eighty percent of its food with ninety percent of Yemen's staples; wheat and rice, coming from outside sources.<sup>45</sup>

The Houthi revolt shattered the already precarious lifestyle for the average Yemeni citizen, especially once the fighting increased with the March 2015 introduction of the Saudi-led coalition to reassert Hadi. For example, in July 2015 the United Nations estimated that the fighting drove over one million Yemenis from their homes.<sup>46</sup> Later in

November 2015, the United Nations doubled their estimate to over two million internally displaced personnel (IDP).<sup>47</sup> The war disrupted food imports as well, leading the United Nations to claim that approximately thirteen million people, roughly half of Yemen's entire population, lacked reliable access to food and that "more than 21.1 million people – four in five Yemenis – need some form of humanitarian assistance."<sup>48</sup> Devoid of a legitimate government and basic human needs such as food, security, and shelter, the Yemenis' humanitarian situation devolved into one of the worst in the region.

Absent consistent food sources and forced to abandon their homes, the Yemeni population has become a casualty of this civil war. For example, in July 2015, the World Health Organization assessed the fighting had resulted in 3,200 Yemenis killed and approximately 16,000 injured.<sup>49</sup> According to a November 2015 article in *Time*, the United Nations later downgraded the assessment of civilians killed to 2,500.<sup>50</sup> To complicate the situation, Yemen's internal medical infrastructure almost completely collapsed according to the non-governmental organization Doctors Without Borders.<sup>51</sup> Furthermore, due to the deplorable security situation, international aid organizations were not able to operate in Yemen. For example, in April 2015, the International Medical Corps claimed an airstrike injured six of its personnel while Oxfam claimed airstrikes destroyed one of their warehouses.<sup>52</sup> Increasing civilian casualties, a collapsed internal medical infrastructure, and limited external aid compound the growing IDP problem and food shortages.

Yemen's civil war-generated humanitarian disaster threatens to expand outside of Yemen's borders and therefore destabilize the broader region. A lack of internal support and relatively limited external aid due to the unstable security situation may

result in Yemenis seeking sanctuary in neighboring countries. For example, various humanitarian organizations predict overland exoduses into neighboring Saudi Arabia and Oman while smaller numbers may even try to escape across the Gulf of Aden to northern Somalia.<sup>53</sup> In fact, numerous refugee camps lacking food and water already exist in northern Yemen along the border with Saudi Arabia.<sup>54</sup> Large movements of IDPs into neighboring countries would create an unwelcomed economic burden while simultaneously threatening security and stability within these other countries. Recognizing this threat, Saudi Arabia pledged \$274 million to United Nations' Yemeni aid operations in order to provide some immediate relief, thereby discouraging an exodus into Saudi Arabia.<sup>55</sup> Yemeni refugees threaten the stability of the entire Gulf of Aden region should they migrate into Saudi Arabia, Oman, and Northern Africa.

### Threat to Saudi Arabia

The crisis in Yemen directly threatens stability in Saudi Arabia. Broadly speaking, Saudi Arabia's perceived threat from Yemen is grounded in three broad Saudi strategic concerns: that the war-weary U.S. is seeking to disengage from the Middle East, that Iran is increasing its efforts to assert influence throughout the region, and that the social unrest displayed in the 'Arab Spring of 2011' will materialize in Saudi Arabia.<sup>56</sup> More specifically, these three general strategic concerns are present in Yemen: the U.S. remains indirectly involved in Yemen; Iran is the 'puppet master' behind the Houthis; and the Yemen refugee migration could easily serve as a catalyst for wider Saudi internal social unrest. Furthermore, the Houthi civil war also served as a test for the new Saudi king, Salman bin Abdulaziz, as internal powers and regional leaders – especially among other Sunni nations – waited to see how the new monarch reacted.<sup>57</sup> In March 2015, Saudi Arabia responded by creating a coalition comprised of Bahrain, Egypt,

Jordan, Kuwait, Morocco, Qatar, Sudan, and the United Arab Emirates to combat the Houthis in order to reestablish Hadi's regime.<sup>58</sup> However, Iranian-supported Houthi rebels responded to Saudi intervention by expanding the conflict through attacks in Saudi Arabia.

One way the Houthis escalated the conflict against Saudi Arabia was through cross-border raids against Saudi security forces. Operating from their traditional base in northwestern Yemen, the Houthis conducted numerous cross-border raids into southern Saudi Arabia that caused relatively minor damage but served as propaganda and moral victories. For example, from June to August 2015, the Saudi Press Agency reported twelve Saudi military personnel – to include a National Guard brigade commander – killed by Houthi cross-border attacks.<sup>59</sup> However, these casualty numbers are likely conservative as Houthi rebels frequently video tape their raids for propaganda purposes and such footage from August alone highlighted the destruction of several Saudi tanks and infantry fighting vehicles.<sup>60</sup> Such footage displayed damage indicative of ATGMs, thus highlighting the importance of the Iranian provided ATGMs previously discussed. Furthermore, Houthi footage of an August raid suggests it completely overran a Saudi Border Guard base three kilometers north of the Saudi-Yemen border; an event the Saudi Press Agency did not report.<sup>61</sup> While a propaganda boon, the cross-border raids were merely harassment. As a result, the Houthis sought a more dangerous way to threaten Saudi Arabia.

While concerned about cross-border raids, Saudi Arabia genuinely fears Houthi theater ballistic missile (TBM) attacks. At the start of Saudi intervention in March 2015, the Houthis possessed around six TBM launchers.<sup>62</sup> The Houthis fired four missiles into

Saudi Arabia. The first attack occurred on 6 June 2015, targeting the King Khalid Air Base, but the Saudis touted it as a failure due to the successful intercept by their Patriot missile defense.<sup>63</sup> The second attack occurred on 29 June, targeting the Al-Sulayyil missile complex.<sup>64</sup> Of note, the Saudis failed to intercept this missile, which missed its target, and the Saudi Press Agency was notably silent about its launch.<sup>65</sup> The third launch on 20 August targeted the Jizan Coast Guard facility; Saudi Arabia failed to intercept this missile as well, which also missed its target.<sup>66</sup> Again, the Saudi media was notably quiet about this attack. Lastly, the Saudis intercepted a 26 August launch also targeting facilities in Jizan and widely discussed their success in the media.<sup>67</sup>

While not aimed at Saudi Arabia, a fifth TBM launch proved the most damaging to the Saudi-led coalition. On 4 September, a successful TBM strike on a coalition base in Yemen likely was the cause of death for 10 Saudi troops, 5 Bahraini soldiers, and 22 UAE troops reportedly killed on that base on the same day as the strike.<sup>68</sup> All of these attacks served to undermine Saudi authority as the Saudi regime repeatedly claimed to have destroyed the launchers.<sup>69</sup> Video postings of launches by the Houthis and the resultant deaths from the 4 September launch strongly suggest that the Saudis did not destroy the launchers. Furthermore, concerns that the Houthis could and would target Saudi cities, to include Mecca, plagued senior Saudi leaders.<sup>70</sup> In direct response to the Houthi TBM threat, the Saudis redeployed the majority of its Patriot batteries from eastern Saudi Arabia to its southern provinces bordering Yemen.<sup>71</sup> Furthermore, on 14 October 2015, Saudi Arabia agreed to purchase 320 upgraded Patriot missiles from the U.S. and indicated a desire to purchase another 280 in 2017.<sup>72</sup>

Houthi cross-border raids and TBM launches challenged the Saudi regime's authority due to the propaganda successes of illustrating how the Saudi military was unable to protect their nation from attack. Coupled with the broader strategic concerns of a rising Iran and the spreading social unrest new King Abdulaziz faces, the Yemen crisis could serve to undermine the Saudi regime. A weakened Saudi Arabia would directly translate into a destabilized Middle East.

### Disruption to U.S. Counterterrorism Operations

An important indirect consequence to the Iranian-backed Houthi civil war is that the resultant chaos in Yemen disrupted U.S. counterterrorism operations against AQAP. More specifically, empowered by Iran, the Houthi rebels ousted President Hadi, a key partner who greatly enabled U.S. counterterrorism operations in Yemen. As former Assistant Secretary of Defense for International Security Affairs Mary Beth Long stated in her recent testimony to the Senate Foreign Relations Committee, "Yemen is still home to the 'single most active extremist organization planning attacks against the U.S.': al-Qaeda in the Arabian Peninsula (AQAP), according to State Department and the Counter Terrorism Center."<sup>73</sup> Two examples of AQAP's efforts to conduct operations abroad are the failed 2009 Northwest Airlines 'underwear bomber' and more recently the fatal 2015 attack on *Charlie Hebdo* in Paris.<sup>74</sup>

In order to counter AQAP, the U.S. had partnered well with the Hadi regime to target and degrade this terrorist group. Working with Hadi, the U.S. prosecuted drone strikes, trained and prompted Yemeni forces to combat AQAP, and had greater access to intelligence sources in Yemen.<sup>75</sup> Journalist Damian Paletta described Hadi's direct support for U.S. counterterrorism operations against AQAP when he wrote, "Mr. Hadi frequently would sign off on U.S. drone strikes, making him a willing partner in this

controversial practice.”<sup>76</sup> Such support garnered praise from President Obama in September 2014 when he publically described Yemen counterterrorism operations as a success story.<sup>77</sup>

The Houthis severally disrupted U.S. counterterrorism efforts against this viable threat when these Iranian-backed rebels ousted Hadi. With Yemen having devolved into civil war, the U.S. trainers and counterterrorism operators left the country and Yemeni forces combating AQAP turned their attention to Houthi rebels. Unilateral drone strikes even became more challenging due to a lack of reliable and timely intelligence.<sup>78</sup> As a result, AQAP likely recovered from the previously unrelenting pressure experienced under the Hadi regime and reconstituted their numbers, undoubtedly assisted in their recruitment by the growing Houthi threat. The disruption of U.S. counterterrorism operations in Yemen resulted in the reviving of a dangerous extremist group bent on attacking western cities. The reemergence of AQAP serves to destabilize Yemen and the surrounding region.

#### Potential Threat to International Shipping

An Iranian-backed insurgency in Yemen also presents a potential threat to international shipping transiting the Bab al-Mandab Strait, a narrow chokepoint contiguous to Yemen between the Red Sea and Gulf of Aden. The Bab al-Mandab, or ‘Gate of Grief,’ is the gateway for 25-30 percent of the oil consumed by America as well as oil and goods critical to the international economy.<sup>79</sup> In other words, 4.7 million barrels of oil transit this twenty-mile wide chokepoint daily.<sup>80</sup> With Iran providing lethal aid to the Houthis and the Houthis demonstrating an ability to operate higher technical weaponry like TBMs, senior U.S. officials harbor a viable concern that the Houthis could threaten this vital shipping lane. For example, President Obama in an April 2015

interview with MSNBC alluded to concerns over Houthi rebels obtaining weapons, such as sea mines, that they could effectively employ to disrupt international shipping.<sup>81</sup> While the Houthis have not yet targeted the international shipping transiting off their coast, they may have or be able to acquire the capability. Such a threat contributes to the overall unpredictability and chaos of the Gulf of Aden region.

#### Possible U.S. Responses to Countering Iran's Influence in Yemen

To counter Iran's growing destabilizing influence in Yemen, the U.S. could, at one end of the spectrum of response options, conduct military operations inside Yemen to support the Saudi-led coalition's efforts to defeat the Houthi threat and return Hadi's regime. At the opposite end of the spectrum, the U.S. could engage Iran through diplomatic overtures and economic maneuvering to persuade Iran to cease support to the Houthis. Describing these two strategies as the 'book-ends' on a spectrum of response options might help address an extremely complex and deplorable situation.

#### Yemen Focus

Broadly speaking, a Yemen focused strategy would involve direct U.S. military involvement to support the Saudi-led coalition to defeat the Houthi rebels in order to allow the return of the Hadi regime, allow rapid access for humanitarian organizations, and to resume counterterrorism operations against AQAP. While the U.S. currently supports the GCC coalition through the provision of intelligence, logistical, naval, and search and rescue support, this option would increase support through the employment of U.S. air, ground, and naval assets to target Houthi forces directly.<sup>82</sup> U.S. air assets would focus on bombing Houthi military targets and interdiction of Iranian aid flights while U.S. ground forces would essentially be Special Forces who augment GCC ground troops to enable accurate U.S. targeting while simultaneously advising GCC

partners. Naval assets would continue to interdict Iranian aid shipments and protect shipping transiting the Bab al-Mandab Strait. The objective of this option is to defeat the Houthis; meaning that the Houthis have temporarily lost the will to fight and are not able to significantly interfere with Hadi's return to power.

While this strategy relies mainly on military power, the other three levers of national power play critical support roles. For example, diplomatic efforts will focus on two key tasks: support Hadi's resumption of power while securing authorizations to resume counter-AQAP operations and to manage tensions with Iran through détente by capitalizing on recent improvements in bilateral diplomatic dialogue garnered through the successfully negotiated Iran nuclear deal. Complementary economic efforts would focus on three tasks: reduce sanctions against Iran to help manage tensions, support Hadi's regime in their resumption of governance and provision of services, and support humanitarian aid organizations working to provide immediate relief. Information efforts will convey these economic goals to international audiences while strategic communication will inform domestic audiences of U.S. diplomatic and economic objectives. U.S. information efforts and strategic communication initiatives would focus on four themes: the U.S. helps return the legitimate government of Yemen to power, helps end a civil war that devastated the Yemeni people, the U.S. protects its homeland by resuming counter-AQAP operations, and that the U.S. protects international shipping.

The Yemen focus option contains two notable risks; the first is inherent to U.S. resourcing options, the second involves Iran widening the conflict by initiating anti-U.S. operations in other parts of the region. To address the first risk of resourcing this

strategy, the U.S. could redirect military assets already deployed to the Central Command Theater for counterterrorism operations in Iraq and Syria or surge fresh units to the region. Both resourcing options come with risk: either degrading ongoing operations in Iraq and Syria or risk domestic backlash from Congress, domestic media, and a portion of the population for perceptions of getting entangled in ‘another war in the Middle East.’ To mitigate these resourcing risks, the U.S. could rely on coalition partners, possibly even Russia, to increase operations in Iraq and Syria to counter the loss of U.S. assets. Another mitigation strategy would be to encourage greater commitment from GCC countries already fighting in Yemen coupled with enticing more countries to join the Saudi-led coalition, allowing the U.S. to continue focusing its efforts in Iraq and Syria. Of these two mitigation strategies, deferring to Russia for increased operations in Syria is the most likely to succeed, though many U.S. policy makers would not approve of encouraging greater Russian influence in the region. Therefore, deferring to Russia primacy in Syrian operations to free up U.S. military power for operations in Yemen would require detailed strategic communication to inform domestic audiences of the consequences of ignoring Yemen.

To mitigate the risk of Iran widening the conflict, the U.S. would need to leverage all four elements of national power. Militarily, U.S. commands in the region could temporarily increase force protection postures while increasing security personnel at embassies in the region. Leveraging the information arm, the U.S. could intentionally broadcast that these associated measures were purely defensive in nature to avoid exacerbating tensions. The U.S. could reduce this surge in force protection once there were indicators that the diplomatic and economic levers of national power had arrested

Iran's desire to widen the conflict. The U.S. could capitalize on the greater bilateral diplomatic channels created by the successful Iran nuclear deal to assure Iran of the limit of U.S. operations in Yemen. Removing U.S. economic sanctions on Iran separate from the Iran nuclear deal could serve as a plausible incentive to dissuade Iran from widening any conflict beyond Yemen.

Despite the inherent risks to this Yemen focused strategy, it contains four notable advantages. Firstly, this strategy would accelerate ongoing GCC operations to defeat the Houthis. While disrupting the fledgling U.S.-Iranian relationship created by the successful Iran Nuclear Deal, this strategy would greatly bolster U.S. relationships with GCC countries and of course, the Hadi regime. This strategy would also enable long-term security for international shipping transiting the Bab al-Mandab Strait. Lastly, this strategy provides for the unrestricted resumption of U.S. counterterrorism operations in the region to degrade and defeat AQAP.

### Iran Focus

The Iran focused strategy relies primarily on the diplomatic and economic levers of national power to pressure Iran to reduce its monetary support and abandon its lethal aid to the Houthis. Without a benefactor, the Houthi's could not sustain their war, resulting in a GCC Coalition victory and the corresponding return of Hadi. While the U.S. would maintain its existing intelligence, logistical, naval, and recovery support to the Saudi-led coalition, this strategy would not increase U.S. military commitments. This strategy relies almost exclusively on diplomatic bargaining and economic leverage.

Diplomatically and economically, the U.S. could capitalize on the Iran nuclear deal – otherwise known as the Joint Comprehensive Plan of Action (JCPOA) – breakthrough to persuade Iran to decrease its support to the Houthis.<sup>83</sup> For example, the

JCPOA calls upon the U.S. to seek legislation to “‘cease the application’ of the major economic sanctions against Iran’s financial and energy sector...[permit Iran] access to the roughly \$115 billion of oil revenue frozen abroad...rescind many banking sanctions...[and] lift restrictions on third parties engaged in trade with Iran’s automotive, shipping and insurance industries...”.<sup>84</sup> However, despite these incentives associated with the JCPOA, Iran remains frozen out of U.S. markets and the U.S. maintains separate non-nuclear related sanctions justified by Iran’s human rights abuses and support to terrorism.<sup>85</sup> Therefore, the U.S. could incentivize Iranian abandonment of support to the Houthis through two things: faster U.S. implementation of JCPOA incentives and lifting the separate non-nuclear sanctions. As the JCPOA uses somewhat subjective phrases like “‘seek such legislative action’ at Transition Day- language that falls significantly short of a guarantee...” the U.S. could offer to accelerate corresponding legislation should Iran stop providing lethal aid and financial support to the Houthis.<sup>86</sup> Additionally, the U.S. could further incentivize Iran by offering to suspend all sanctions linked to ‘support to terrorism’ if Iran terminated Houthi support.

While diplomacy and economic power are the focus of effort for this strategy, the information lever of national power plays an important supporting role. For example, one of the key information themes for international audiences and strategic communication messages for domestic consumption would involve the U.S. avoiding war through the pursuit of diplomatic overtures. Additionally, coupled with diplomatic efforts, another key information theme would entail assuring Sunni allies – notably Saudi Arabia – that the U.S. remains committed to the region; that the U.S. was not ‘selling the Sunnis out for Iran.’ An additional information theme to reassure regional allies would highlight ongoing

naval patrolling dedicated to safeguarding international shipping through the Bab al-Mandab Strait.

Upsetting relations with GCC members, especially Saudi Arabia, Iran's resumption of support to the Houthis after receiving U.S. promised economic incentives, or the Houthi ability to continue destabilizing Yemen despite a cessation of Iranian support are the three notable risks associated with the Iran focused strategy. To mitigate the first risk, as previously discussed the U.S. would have to heavily leverage the information and diplomatic levers of power. The U.S. could assuage Saudi concern by utilizing well-emplaced diplomatic relations and incentives associated with foreign military sales of defensive military equipment such as the aforementioned Patriot missile. The second risk essentially involves Iran reneging on the agreement to not support the Houthis. Former ambassador to Yemen Stephen Seche explained this realistic concern when he stated, "the [nuclear] agreement will provide Iran with a financial windfall...which Iran will turn around and use to fuel greater instability in the region by arming insurgents, and bankrolling subversion of the Gulf states."<sup>87</sup> To counter this second risk, the U.S. could announce a commitment to resuming 'support to terrorism' related sanctions while simultaneously employing direct military action as outlined in the Yemen focus strategy should Iran resume lethal or financial support to the Houthis. Such threats would serve as a strong deterrent to Iran. Lastly, while the loss of Iranian support would heavily degrade Houthi capabilities, the Houthis would possibly retain the ability to destabilize Yemen. However, with Saudi-led assistance, the returned Hadi regime would likely be able to contain the Houthi threat within Yemen. In

other words, without Iranian support the Houthis no longer threaten the region, only Yemen.

In light of the associated risks, the Iran focus strategy contains three advantages. Firstly, it would not divert military combat power from ongoing operations within Central Command or require the deployment of additional military forces. Notably, this strategy is unlikely to provoke Iran into widening the conflict to the entire Middle Eastern theater. Lastly, the JCPOA provides an established launching point for additional diplomatic discourse and economic dialogue.

### Comparison

By comparing strategies using the feasibility, acceptability, and suitability test, the Iran focused approach offers the best chance for countering Iranian influence in Yemen without further destabilizing the Middle East. While both strategies are technically feasible as the U.S. possesses the required amount of diplomatic, military, and economic power to execute either strategy, the Yemen focused approach is less feasible since it would require greater effort due to the need to free up and sustain additional military combat power in the region. Conversely, the Iran focused strategy overrides existing diplomatic and economic venues cemented by the approved Iran nuclear deal, making the Iran approach a more feasible strategy.

In regards to acceptability, the Iranian approach would likely be more acceptable to domestic audiences and Iran while domestic audiences would likely reject the Yemen focused strategy despite its appeal to GCC allies and Hadi. Domestic audiences, specifically Congress, U.S. media outlets, and the public would likely not support the employment of military forces in Yemen in light of ongoing conflicts in Iraq, Syria, and Afghanistan. Iran would likely accept any U.S. efforts to improve relations inaugurated

by the JCPOA. Conversely, Iran would not accept U.S. broadening its direct military involvement in the region by initiating operations in Yemen. However, other regional allies, such as Saudi Arabia, would not find strengthening U.S.-Iranian relations acceptable due to their concerns of Iran becoming a regional hegemony. While either strategy would require the U.S. to assuage concerns of countries within the Middle East, the U.S. public, media, and Congressional leaders would likely not find a purely Yemen focused strategy acceptable.

In determining suitability to achieving the three U.S. national interests in the region, the Yemen focus strategy appears more suitable in the short-term while the Iran focused approach is likely to result in a better long-term, sustainable solution. In other words, direct U.S. military involvement in Yemen would hasten the GCC defeat of the Houthis and Hadi's return to power, but would fail to eliminate Iran's support for the Houthis. Therefore, it is more than conceivable that the Houthi rebels would continue to challenge Hadi and threaten regional stability. Admittedly, the Iran focused strategy cedes a lot of initiative to Iran, forcing the U.S. to wait for Iran to accept the newly proposed terms and to monitor Yemen to ensure Iran adheres to the cessation of support. Furthermore, even if Iran terminates financial and lethal aid support to the Houthis, the U.S. must wait while the GCC Coalition defeats the Houthis and reestablishes Hadi. However, lacking their external benefactor, the Houthis, once defeated by the GCC Coalition, would likely not re-emerge as a serious regional threat.

In summary, U.S. responses to the conflict in Yemen closer aligned to the Iran focused end of the spectrum appear more feasible, acceptable, and suitable to a longer-term solution. Responses aligned strictly to the Yemen focused end of the spectrum of

response options, while feasible, would likely not be acceptable and appear suitable to only a short-term solution. Applying the feasibility, acceptability, and suitability test suggests the U.S. should employ a more Iran focused approach to counter the conflict in Yemen.

### Conclusion

The Iranian-sponsored Houthi civil war has destroyed Yemen and destabilized the region by creating turmoil in Saudi Arabia, allowing the reemergence of AQAP, and potentially threatening a critical global chokepoint. In order to assert U.S. national interests in the region, the U.S. must first deny the Houthi rebels their critical Iranian support. In addition to the ongoing support provided to the GCC coalition, the U.S. should more forcibly assert its national interests through a comprehensive strategy that capitalizes on recent successes associated with the Iran nuclear deal by implementing direct diplomatic engagement and economic incentives to persuade Iran to abandon lethal assistance and decrease financial support to the Houthis. Failure to counter the Houthi's destabilizing influence in Yemen will result in a deplorable humanitarian crisis, a failed state where radical Islamists such as AQAP fester, and a direct threat to important regional allies as well as international shipping.

### Endnotes

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