



Statement before the House Committee on Foreign Affairs Subcommittee on Middle East, North Africa, and International Terrorism on “The Humanitarian Crisis in Yemen: Addressing Current Political and Humanitarian Challenges.”

# **Taking the Lead Back in Yemen**

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America has vital national security interests in Yemen. Al Qaeda in the Arabian Peninsula (AQAP), one of the terrorist groups most focused on attacking the US homeland, retains a safe haven and support among local populations there. A small Islamic State affiliate also persists and could emerge as a threat. The Iranian-backed al Houthi movement threatens the free flow of goods through one of the world's most important maritime chokepoints, the Bab el Mandab Strait, and increases the risk of regional conflict by attacking population centers in Saudi Arabia and the United Arab Emirates. The deepening humanitarian catastrophe in Yemen fuels the conflict and threatens to spread waves of refugees through an already-destabilized region. The US must refocus on Yemen to develop a policy that recognizes and addresses all of these interests. America must, above all, retake a leadership role in securing itself and shaping the actions of its allies so that they support our interests and accord with international law and norms.

American leadership in Yemen does not mean deploying massive military forces. It does mean ending the practice of outsourcing pursuit of our interests in Yemen to local partners who do not share our concerns or objectives and lack our capabilities to develop and execute sound plans.

The leadership most required in the first instance is strategic and political. The US must help our partners develop sound strategies that will lead to a resolution of the underlying conflicts that create space for both al Qaeda and Iran to operate in Yemen, rather than partial and limited approaches that are only exacerbating those conflicts. The US must also engage diplomatically not only with the formal Yemeni government it recognizes and the United Nations-led peace process, but also with substate actors throughout Yemen whose views will ultimately determine the durability of any negotiated settlement.

Experts and practitioners generally agree about the problems in Yemen as the country enters its fifth year of war. Few, if any, believe that the Arab coalition can deliver a political resolution to the conflict. Some believe, or hope, that Yemenis might be able to resolve the political conflict on their own or with international pressure. None can deny Iran's support to the al Houthi movement and how it has changed, or that al Qaeda retains support zones and some popular support in parts of the country. Nearly all assess the overall engagement of the coalition at this point to be harmful rather than helpful in the long term. All agree on how dire the humanitarian situation in Yemen is and that it is worse than the official UN reporting. Consensus does not exist, however, on the best way forward except that the solution is not a military one. That consensus is correct—there is no purely military solution to the problems in Yemen. We must remember, however, that Yemen is a theater in which multiple wars are being fought, so neither can there be any solution that does not have a military component.

The United States bears some responsibility for the conditions in Yemen. The US subcontracted the protection of its interests to Gulf partners under the Obama administration while the US pursued the Iranian nuclear deal. The US has since allowed a fear of entanglement in Yemen's civil war to dictate policy. The US supports Emirati counterterrorism efforts that have been tactically and operationally effective, but are unlikely to deliver a strategic defeat of al Qaeda and other Salafi-jihadi groups in Yemen. The US supports the coalition in its efforts to restore the internationally recognized Yemeni government to power against the Iranian-backed al Houthi movement but has not helped provide a strategic framework for the coalition and has not begun to help address the myriad grievances that led to the civil war in the first place. American efforts to stay out of the Yemeni mire have helped make the situation worse and reduced the likelihood that our vital national interests will be secured.

## **Solving Yemen**

The complexities of Yemen make finding a solution seem impossible. It is tempting to write Yemen off and leave it to its fate while offering emergency humanitarian assistance to ease Yemenis' suffering and throwing some minimal support behind the UN peace process. Trying to simplify the problem to focus on achieving one or another of these interests to avoid dealing with Yemen's local conflicts will lead to failure across the board. A counterterrorism strategy of striking high-value targets will not defeat al Qaeda in Yemen any more than it has anywhere else. Yemen does not matter enough to Tehran that pressure against the al Houthis materially advances any campaign against Iranian regional activities. And cutting off

support to Saudi Arabia and the United Arab Emirates (UAE) will deprive the US of leverage to shape their actions, as well as throwing them into the arms of states such as Russia and China that have no qualms about partners acting with wanton disregard for civilian casualties and human life. A US strategy to secure its national security interests and advance our values requires dealing with the problem in all its complexity and stopping the search for simplistic, short-term, feel-good solutions.

Yemen's civil war is now entangled in regional conflicts and multiple local conflicts that touch on US interests. The national-level conflict is over control of the central government. While much is centered on the status of the al Houthi movement in a future government, former ruling party factions also seek to protect their share of power.<sup>1</sup> Southern factions have aligned with the internationally recognized government to remove northern influence and, in some cases, to strengthen and gain more autonomy for southern Yemen. The empowerment of Salafis has strengthened parts of the Salafi-jihadi movement in Yemen even with counterterrorism pressure on al Qaeda and the Islamic State. The role of Islah, a Yemeni Islamist party, in the central government has linked Yemen to the Saudi-Emirati-Qatari crisis and the UAE effort against the Muslim Brotherhood. The UAE has maneuvered to weaken the Muslim Brotherhood in Yemen, with Islahi leaders now denying ties to the transnational Islamist movement.<sup>2</sup> Saudi Arabia's military intervention and the Iranian-supported al Houthi escalation in response have made Yemen another active theater for the Iran-Saudi proxy war.

America's reliance on Gulf partners to secure its interests in Yemen has been largely counterproductive. The coalition's military intervention has made few strategic gains over the past four years while worsening the humanitarian catastrophe. The toll on civilians from both coalition and al Houthi actions is indefensible. Iran's influence over the al Houthi movement has undeniably grown during this time. Coalition support to various Yemeni factions will help fuel a second round of conflict that will again damage US interests once the current civil war ends. UAE counterterrorism operations have been partially effective, but the Emiratis are also inadvertently shaping the future conditions that could permit al Qaeda to reconstitute.

But abandoning America's Gulf partners in Yemen would be even more disastrous both for American interests and for the humanitarian and international legal concerns driving most of those who advocate this course. Our partners are unlikely to find a way out of the war and will continue fighting without US support. Unlike many of our other partners, Saudi Arabia and the UAE do not depend on the US for financial support and can readily purchase weapons and expertise from other states that do not remotely share our values or concerns. Driving them into the arms of those states, which would be damaging to American interests writ large, would also remove any restraint on their military actions. The desire to dissociate from the bad actions of America's partners is therefore understandable, but misplaced. Although limited, American influence has shaped both Saudi and Emirati actions for the better. The US could do even more to shape their behavior if it engaged more seriously in the effort. Instead of retreating in disgust, the US must work to extricate its partners from Yemen by actively pursuing a long-term political resolution and using its considerable leverage with them to rein in the worst aspects of their own practices and inclinations.

US policy must also recognize that the current efforts to deliver a political resolution to the conflict are flawed. The UN-led effort to negotiate a political resolution to the current war is unlikely to succeed and will not address the conditions that drove Yemenis to war in the first place. These conditions, which include the grievances that united Yemenis against Ali Abdullah Saleh's government in 2011, create opportunities for Salafi-jihadi groups such as al Qaeda and for Iran to increase their influence in Yemen. The humanitarian conditions, poor before the war and worsening still, will not stabilize without a settlement better than the one the UN is currently championing.

That effort is to establish a ceasefire or some sort of interim agreement in order to return Yemen to the political transition process launched in 2011. Yet the current conflict results from the inherent problems in that political transition process, which failed to address the grievances of major opposition groups, including the al Houthis and the southerners. These groups are unlikely to accept the outcomes of a process today that led them to go to war in 2014.

The UN-led peace process also exaggerates the importance of the internationally recognized Yemeni government over the actual factions on the ground. These factions have supported the Yemeni government against the al Houthis as a shared near-term interest, but diverge with the government over the future shape of Yemen. UN Special Envoy Martin Griffiths has recognized the need to discuss what postwar Yemen will be through Track II discussions, but ultimately remains focused on brokering an initial settlement between the al Houthis and the Yemeni government.

War in Yemen has acquired a momentum of its own, moreover, that will not be easily stopped. The manner in which the war and political economy in Yemen has developed incentivizes spoilers. The fracturing of the country has led to the growth of regional powerbrokers who benefit from continued chaos and conflict.<sup>3</sup> The governor of Ma'rib, west of Yemen's capital region, has a mini-fiefdom that has grown rich during the war. The military units in his governorate would probably support him rather than any new central government emerging from the current peace process. The UAE supported the establishment of the Southern Transitional Council (STC), which unifies some powerful southern figures, including secessionists and members of the Yemeni government, into a body seeking to secure southern rights. UAE-backed Yemeni security forces would almost certainly support the STC against the Yemeni government. Yemen's frontlines are also soft: Goods and people equally traverse them, and adversaries on the battlefield all benefit from sales in the same black-market arms networks.<sup>4</sup> Elite negotiations will not resolve these problems; the US must recognize the importance and interests of these substate actors and engage them directly and through our partners to shape conditions for an enduring peace.

The international community has turned from efforts to negotiate a full peace to attempts to ameliorate the humanitarian disaster resulting from the current conflict. These attempts will fail to do either. UN Special Envoy Martin Griffiths negotiated a groundbreaking agreement between the al Houthis and the internationally recognized government in Stockholm, Sweden, in December 2018.<sup>5</sup> Unfounded optimism continues to surround the agreement as it opens up the possibility of broader negotiations for a national ceasefire. Implementation of the agreement remains problematic. Sustained international pressure, rapidly deteriorating humanitarian conditions, and the inevitable al Houthi loss of al Hudaydah port to coalition-backed forces helped facilitate this agreement. But the al Houthis do not perceive overall military defeat as inevitable and have been recalcitrant in the face of international pressure and local humanitarian conditions. The al Houthis have knowingly diverted much-needed food assistance from starving populations for profit to support their war effort.<sup>6</sup> There is no likely road from the current agreement to any larger elite agreement, and even elite settlement would not resolve the substate-actor problem that will continue to drive conflict in ways that open the door to continued al Qaeda and Iranian penetration.

Even a return to a focus on the elite settlement via the UN-led peace process in Yemen is unlikely to deliver a long-term political solution for Yemen acceptable to the United States and partners such as Saudi Arabia, however. Saudi Arabia and the Gulf States have conceded publicly that the al Houthis will be part of a political solution, and the al Houthis have announced they are open to political negotiations, but these statements conceal a possibly insurmountable gap between the expectations of influence in a future Yemeni state. The al Houthis' continued relationship with Iran and possession of certain weapons systems will likely drive Saudi Arabia off. The al Houthis are unlikely to give up their military capabilities in advance of any solution. They also have little incentive to agree to any solution that reduces the extent of their influence over northern Yemen and the central Yemeni government institutions without a coalition military victory, which would come at significant expense and cost of life, if at all. It is almost certainly necessary to persuade the al Houthis that they will ultimately lose before an enduring settlement can be reached—an undertaking that requires a more skillful and nuanced strategy than the coalition has been pursuing along with more serious and energetic diplomatic engagement by the US and its extra-regional partners.

### **Defeating al Qaeda and the Islamic State in Yemen**

The Salafi-jihadi movement in Yemen, including al Qaeda and the Islamic State, has transformed in the context of the civil war. It has decentralized in such a way that defeating AQAP and the Islamic State in Yemen (ISY) will not eliminate the Salafi-jihadi threat from Yemen. Additional Salafi-jihadi groups have established themselves over the past four years and exist independent of AQAP's support. The rise of Salafi militias and leaders in Yemen has also created conditions that strengthen new Salafi-jihadi groups

because both share immediate objectives in the civil war. The current US counterterrorism strategy does not address this transformation.

AQAP is still the dominant and most capable Salafi-jihadi group in Yemen, which continues to serve as a critical safe haven supporting al Qaeda's global operations and providing sanctuary to senior al Qaeda leaders.<sup>7</sup> For example, former Guantanamo detainee Ibrahim al Qosi, who was transferred to Sudan in 2012 and appeared in an AQAP video in December 2015, now has a senior leadership role within AQAP.<sup>8</sup> AQAP strengthened significantly in Yemen until April 2016, when the UAE began supporting ground operations to oust the group from populated centers. AQAP continues to fight alongside local tribal militias in central Yemen where the coalition does not have a strong presence.<sup>9</sup> The surge in US and UAE counterterrorism operations against AQAP in 2017 and into early 2018 markedly weakened the organization.<sup>10</sup> The operational leadership of AQAP is now young with less experience, as many of the mid-level operatives who would have been groomed into more senior positions and who had fought with AQAP in 2011–2012 have been killed. UAE-led operations have sustained that pressure. However, the group remains positioned to resurge from setbacks and benefits from the continuation of the civil war. This younger cadre also poses a long-term threat.

Decentralization and the development of local proxies and partners characterized AQAP's development since its experience in southern Yemen in 2011. AQAP cultivated local forces, originally Ansar al Sharia and then the Sons of Hadramawt or Sons of Abyan, to be its face among Yemeni people. These groups were the ones that took control of populated centers such as Yemen's third-largest port city al Mukalla in the east for a year. Anecdotal reports indicate that AQAP operatives are working with non-AQAP militias on the war's frontlines. The push for decentralization coincided with the rise of new Salafi groups, many brought together after on-and-off fighting against the al Houthis in Dammaj, in Sa'ada governorate in northern Yemen from 2011 to 2014.<sup>11</sup> US-designated Salafi militia leader Abu al Abbas is one such fighter who cut his teeth in Dammaj and has risen to power in Taiz, Yemen's third-largest city, through his fighting strength.<sup>12</sup> Abu al Abbas's fighters, along with other hardline militia, have carved out space for AQAP in Taiz today, a city that historically did not have an al Qaeda presence. The alignment of these non-al Qaeda Salafi-jihadi groups with AQAP and its goals requires broadening the counterterrorism aperture beyond specific affiliation with designated groups—and recognizing that simply attacking AQAP high-value targets will have no effect on the growing strength of the Salafi-jihadi movement in Yemen writ large.

The Islamic State in Yemen retains a small presence and has not claimed a major attack in over a year.<sup>13</sup> ISY has engaged in localized clashes with AQAP over the past six months in central Yemen. US airstrikes targeted ISY training camps in central Yemen in 2017, and ISY has not seemed to have recovered since. Yemeni security forces in Aden described ISY as recruiting primarily from urban youth, building terrorist cells, and then deploying those cells. Yemeni security forces, with support from the UAE, have disrupted the ISY networks.<sup>14</sup> But ISY remains alive and could recover ground if conflict continues or escalates. It is unlikely to unseat AQAP as the leader of the Salafi-jihadi movement in Yemen, but could conceivably drive AQAP and other Salafi-jihadi groups to greater efforts to retain that leadership—a dynamic observed in other theaters.

US and UAE counterterrorism operations have significantly disrupted operations and degraded the leadership of AQAP and ISY. The US counterterrorism strategy in Yemen, which relies heavily on targeting high-value individuals and partner forces for ground operations, has changed little since the Obama administration, which began providing support to the UAE in its counterterrorism efforts in Yemen. The US has provided medical, intelligence, and maritime support to Emirati forces engaged in ground counterterrorism operations in Yemen since 2016.<sup>15</sup> UAE forces have taken lead in training, advising, and assisting local Yemeni forces to counter AQAP in eastern Yemen. The UAE stood up the Hadhrami and Shabwani Elite forces in Hadramawt and Shabwah governorates, respectively, in 2016 to "fight local with local."<sup>16</sup> The forces have responsibility for securing key roads and for clearing populated areas of AQAP. AQAP no longer directly controls major populated centers in southern and eastern Yemen.

The UAE has been a critical enabler for counterterrorism successes in Yemen, but its efforts in Yemen are unlikely to yield permanent success.

First, counterterrorism operations have not eliminated or reduced AQAP's historical sanctuaries. The UAE-backed counter-AQAP operations have occurred primarily in areas to which AQAP expanded during the civil war. AQAP's historical sanctuaries, especially along the al Bayda-Abyan-Shabwah border and in remote parts of Hadramawt and al Mahrah, are tough terrain both from a geographic standpoint (craggy and mountainous) and from a human terrain standpoint (occupied by strongly anti-government tribes). The UAE will not be able to recruit many fighters from these areas, and the current composition of the UAE-backed forces, including the Hizam brigades (Security Belt brigades) operating in southern Yemen, creates a high risk of a new intertribal conflict if they are deployed to clear these sanctuaries.

Second, it is not clear how these counterterrorism operations nest into a strategy to prevent AQAP and other Salafi-jihadi groups from returning in the future. A successful counterterrorism offensive in southern Yemen in 2012 weakened AQAP significantly, but AQAP resurged because the conditions that enabled it to strengthen initially continued to exist. Allegations of torture and arbitrary detention at the hands of Yemeni and UAE forces, regardless of their accuracy, undermine their legitimacy and create resentment that AQAP could exploit.<sup>17</sup> The UAE has sought to address some of the most prominent development and humanitarian asks in southern Yemen, but its big projects run through the Emirati Red Crescent rather than local structures that would sustain them over the long term and might not therefore yield lasting results. The US experienced a similar failure with its major projects in Afghanistan in the early years of the war. Additionally, UAE resource inputs could generate additional instability as they inadvertently create new "haves" and "have-nots" within the population. There is also a possibility that the UAE-backed forces in southern and eastern Yemen might decide to sever ties with the internationally recognized Yemeni government, opening a new front for conflict.

Third, the US and the UAE do not share the same answer to the question of how to define al Qaeda and which forces are acceptable ground partners. This challenge of working with counterterrorism partners is not unique to the UAE—Saudi Arabia, Qatar, Turkey, Egypt, Jordan, and others all hold different definitions. (Turkey, for example, directly supports a US-sanctioned organization in Syria.) The UAE partnered with the most effective fighters on the ground to fight the al Houthis. These partners included many Salafi militias, including the Abu al Abbas brigade, which strengthened further with the influx of UAE money and weapons. UAE support flowed through these groups to AQAP.<sup>18</sup> The unintentional support to AQAP and the strengthening of Salafis—such that Taiz now has a strong Salafi influence—raise the risk of the Salafi-jihadi movement reconstituting once military pressure is lifted. The situation in Yemen somewhat mirrors that in Afghanistan in the 1980s, when the US inadvertently fueled extremists because they were some of the most effective fighters against the Soviets.

The risk that counterterrorism gains will be reversed in the short-to-medium term is high unless the US helps shape Emirati operations in Yemen and nests the counterterrorism effort into a larger effort to resolve the underlying drivers of instability in the country. The US should continue to leverage its support for Emirati counterterrorism operations to improve how these operations fit into the bigger picture. The US should also pressure the Emiratis to allow the UN or another international body to lead in the stabilization effort in southern Yemen. The US must also ensure that its partners are not amplifying the positions of Salafis within Yemen because this risks strengthening the Salafi-jihadi movement.

### **Reducing the Iran's Influence in Yemen and the al Houthi Movement's Threat**

The threat from the al Houthi movement to the Kingdom of Saudi Arabia, the United Arab Emirates, and the Red Sea is unacceptable and has grown, largely through support from Iran's "Axis of Resistance," (known in the US as the Iranian Threat Network). Al Houthi forces have fired ballistic missiles at Riyadh, used water-borne improvised explosive devices (IEDs) and anti-ship missiles against tankers in the Red Sea, and used a so-called kamikaze drone against a Yemeni military parade. They have threatened Abu Dhabi and are developing weapons capable of carrying through on that threat. Iran's influence over the al Houthis has increased since the start of the war, and the coalition's actions have had little strategic effect. A relatively limited Iranian investment in the al Houthis has generated outsized effects in Yemen. No clear incentives exist for Iran to stop this support to the al Houthis or for the al Houthis to refuse Iranian outreach.

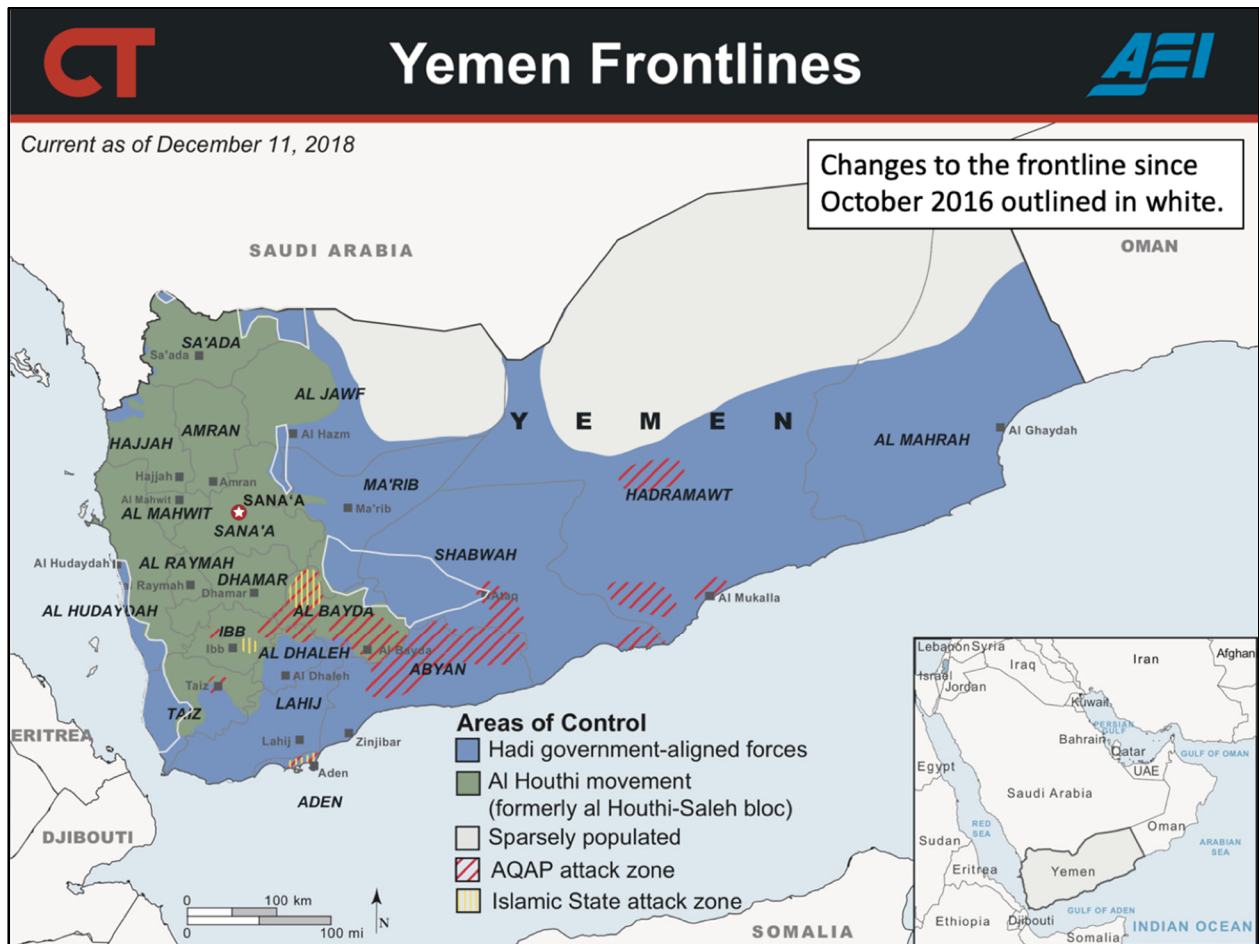
The al Houthi movement is not a monolith. Its core leaders and followers, however, see the US as an enemy and are willing to use armed force for political purpose. Conflict has hardened a movement that had initially gained supporters through its opposition to an authoritarian president and the Yemeni government's widespread political marginalization and economic neglect of regions in northern Yemen. The al Houthis reversed a trend of inclusivity at top leadership levels and have built a family-dominated structure. Anecdotal reporting has surfaced that the al Houthis have used coercive measures against families and tribes that have wavered in their support for the movement. The death of former President Ali Abdullah Saleh splintered some of the al Houthi base from the movement in December 2017, and a recent tribal uprising in northern Yemen, which has received coalition support, indicates that additional families and tribes could still splinter from the movement.<sup>19</sup>

The al Houthis are not simply a proxy of Iran. Tehran neither commands nor controls the al Houthis, though the relationship is deepening. Al Houthi officials have met repeatedly with members of the Axis of Resistance—including Hassan Nasrallah, the leader of Lebanese Hezbollah, and Qais al Khazali, the leader of an Iraqi Iranian proxy force Asa'ib Ahl al Haq—and have received offers of support from other Iranian proxy groups in Iraq.<sup>20</sup> Al Houthi officials meet with Iranian officials in Tehran and in the region, and Islamic Revolutionary Guards Corps (IRGC) Qods Force commander Qassem Soleimani has met with other top IRGC officials to discuss how Iran can support the al Houthis.<sup>21</sup> Lebanese Hezbollah supports the al Houthi media channel, al Masirah, and Iran's PressTV now simulcasts live statements from the al Houthi leader. Lebanese Hezbollah and almost certainly a small team of IRGC members have also provided the al Houthis with weapons expertise.

External support from Iran and Lebanese Hezbollah has transferred asymmetrical attack capabilities to the al Houthis that threatens maritime security and US Gulf partners. The US Defense Department has exhibited evidence of such support to the al Houthis, including ballistic missiles smuggled into Yemen and reassembled in country, Iranian-manufactured surface-to-air missiles (SAMs) and drones, and a computer navigation system used in a naval unmanned surface vehicle attack in the Red Sea.<sup>22</sup> The al Houthis have used drones to knock out Patriot missile battery systems protecting Emirati forces ahead of an incoming missile attack and have also dropped ordnance from drones in attacks.<sup>23</sup> Signature Lebanese Hezbollah IEDs are also in Yemen along the Red Sea Coast.<sup>24</sup> The al Houthis are producing standardized mines and IEDs locally, indicating the transfer of expertise.<sup>25</sup>

The al Houthi movement has consolidated its control over northern Yemen and the Yemeni state infrastructure in Sana'a, Yemen's capital. Anti-al Houthi forces have made limited gains over the past few years, hitting natural lines within the Yemeni human terrain.<sup>26</sup> [See Figure 1.] The al Houthis control access to northern Yemen as well as the headquarters of Yemen's ministries, many of which continue to function across the divided country. They control the media and reporting out of northern Yemen—those who have spoken out against the al Houthis have been silenced or forced to flee.<sup>27</sup> The loss of control of the al Hudaydah port is unlikely to weaken the al Houthis' control or will, and the al Houthis will probably generate much of the revenue collected at the port at checkpoints established to enter al Houthi-held territory. The air campaign has had no strategic effect on the al Houthis.

**Figure 1. Map of Yemen Frontlines**



Map of Yemen's frontlines as of December 2018 created by Maher Farrukh. Changes since October 2016 marked in white added by the author.

It is a mistake to bucket the al Houthis in the same category as the Assad regime, Lebanese Hezbollah, or Iranian-controlled Shi'a militias in Iraq. The al Houthi movement existed before Tehran was much interested in it, and Iranian support remains too limited to give the Iranians control over al Houthi policies. The IRGC certainly would love to have such control and, no doubt, to provide more support, but the difficulties of getting Iranian agents and material into al Houthi areas are simply too great. Iran has transferred to the al Houthis the means of producing lethal weapons as a mitigation. This indigenous capacity reduces Iranian leverage over the al Houthis, but also increases the risk that the al Houthis could proliferate these capabilities further, potentially giving Iran additional cover in its efforts to create and support other regional proxies with less direct involvement. But they retain their independence—the al Houthis are not so much under Iranian influence that Tehran could cause them either to make or to reject a peace deal.

Yemen is thus a defensive front for the US in the struggle against Iranian regional malign behavior. It is important to deprive Iran of the ability to strike Riyadh and Abu Dhabi by proxy or to disrupt traffic through the Bab el Mandab Strait. Countersmuggling efforts to block the transfer of ballistic missile and drone components and computer systems will limit the al Houthis' ability to carry out such attacks. But pressure on the al Houthis does not harm Iran enough to affect Iranian policy throughout the region.

**Stabilizing Humanitarian Conditions in Yemen**



The humanitarian situation in Yemen sharply declined over the course of the civil war. Today, UNOCHA estimates that over 24 million people in a country with a population of 28 million need assistance. Of these, 15.9 million people need food assistance.<sup>28</sup> Cholera cases continue as water treatment facilities are damaged in conflict or not maintained. The rising cost of food is prohibitive for many Yemenis, who simply can no longer afford to buy basic foodstuffs. Many have already sold off their source of livelihood to feed their families, which means that the crisis could worsen significantly over the next year. Efforts to stabilize the Yemeni rial have helped, though it will probably continue to depreciate as food prices rise.<sup>29</sup> The operation of al Hudaydah and Salif ports remain critical since about 70 percent of all food imports and 40–50 percent of all fuel imports to Yemen still enter through these Red Sea ports. Further, humanitarian access constraints are high in some of the hardest-hit areas of the country, and actors continue to divert assistance from intended recipients.

The war is driving this complex humanitarian crisis. The coalition's blockade of Yemen's Red Sea ports, which slows the delivery of food, fuel, and commercial goods; ground actors' intentional diversion and politicization of humanitarian assistance; and ongoing airstrikes that damage or prevent the repair of critical infrastructure are exacerbating the situation. Immediate steps must be taken to prevent the humanitarian catastrophe in Yemen from deteriorating further, such as the provision of food aid and repair of water treatment facilities. The Yemeni population was not strong before the war—over 10 million people needed food assistance in September 2014. The war has taken its toll on the resilience of the population.

Any emergency humanitarian assistance without a political settlement is simply a band-aid solution to the problem. Yemen's humanitarian challenges were serious even before the civil war, compounded by development challenges. The country's few resources were poorly distributed within the population. Yemenis have a high rate of illiteracy, and over half were living below the poverty line. A 2011 estimate held that over 40 percent of the population was under the age of 15. Long-term engagement from the international nongovernmental organization community to improve Yemen's weak state institutions and economy will be required for any lasting effect on the humanitarian situation. Low-level conflict will continue without the framework of a political settlement, disrupting humanitarian and development operations and reversing future gains.

## **A Way Forward in Yemen**

The Trump administration and Congress must decide to prioritize securing a political resolution in Yemen as the way forward to addressing the humanitarian crisis over the long term and to securing America's interests.

A first step is for the United States to try to rebuild its trust capital with Yemenis and to strengthen relations with those powerbrokers who are not close to Riyadh. The State Department's decision to maintain its embassy to Yemen in Saudi Arabia undercuts the US position by closely tying it to Riyadh.<sup>30</sup> The al Houthi leadership distrusted the US before the embassy relocated, but the US loses its neutrality among other Yemeni political groups, such as some of the southerners, by locating in Saudi Arabia. The US might consider a neighboring country to host the embassy and could also consider whether US diplomats might be able to meet with Yemeni powerbrokers in Aden.

This step would enable the US to lead the effort prioritizing a negotiated settlement to the civil war and setting the framework for a long-term political resolution. American leadership in the effort does not necessarily imply that Americans must do everything or that this cannot be done through the auspices of a renewed UN process. The relationship with the al Houthis is unlikely to improve, so the US should leverage Omani efforts to work with the al Houthis while recognizing the role that the al Houthis play for Oman in checking Saudi Arabia's influence. The US-led efforts must be inclusive and actively engage substate actors who might otherwise act as spoilers.

The US must also use its leverage to drive our partners away from practices that cause unnecessary civilian casualties and exacerbate the humanitarian crisis. We should not deprive ourselves of that leverage by cutting off aid, but neither should we defend or tolerate those practices. We can and should publicly call out and criticize our partners when they do wrong, and we can make clear to them that they must change

their behavior if they wish to continue to receive our support. However, the time has not yet come to end that support because the US has simply not put enough effort into either shaping their behavior or helping them think through better strategies and objectives.

America must regain a position of leadership in shaping coalition policies and strategies in Yemen. It need not—and should not—deploy many troops to Yemen or otherwise attempt to take over the fighting. Nor do our partners on the whole require money. They require instead our abilities to develop coherent theater campaign plans that transcend national concerns and our position as an extra-regional superpower to help drive negotiations toward sustainable solutions.

Real success that anyone could be comfortable with might not be possible in Yemen, but disastrous failure that severely undermines vital American interests certainly is. The most important thing the US can do right now for Yemen is simply to start paying attention to it again. The stakes are worth at least that much of our effort.

Thank you for the opportunity to testify.

*The author would like to recognize the contributions of the [Critical Threats Project](#) research team at the American Enterprise Institute and the Iraq research team at the [Institute for the Study of War](#).*

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<sup>1</sup> The General People's Congress (GPC), the ruling party of the late president of Yemen Ali Abdullah Saleh, is now fractured. It split at the start of the conflict when Saleh loyalists following his lead and supported the al Houthi movement while other GPC supporters remained opposed to the al Houthis. The al Houthis' assassination of Saleh further fractured the GPC, when part of the group that had initially joined him in supporting the Houthis turned on the al Houthis.

<sup>2</sup> Barbara A. Leaf and Elana DeLozier, "The UAE and Yemen's Islah: A Coalition Coalesces," Washington Institute, December 6, 2018, <https://www.washingtoninstitute.org/policy-analysis/view/the-uae-and-yemens-islah-a-coalition-coalesces>.

<sup>3</sup> Peter Salisbury's research on Yemen's war economy describes this development in detail. For a summary, see Peter Salisbury, "Building Peace in Yemen from the Ground Up," *Foreign Affairs*, February 28, 2018, <https://www.foreignaffairs.com/articles/middle-east/2018-02-28/building-peace-yemen-ground>.

<sup>4</sup> Sanaa Center for Strategic Studies, "The Sana'a Center Editorial," December 11, 2018, <http://sanaacenter.org/publications/the-yemen-review/6732>.

<sup>5</sup> The Stockholm agreement includes an agreement on demilitarizing al Hudaydah city and part of the Red Sea Corridor, an understanding on the Taiz, a prisoner exchange, and a commitment to resume talks in January 2019. UN Office of the Special Envoy of the Secretary-General for Yemen, "Full Text of the Stockholm Agreement," December 13, 2018, <https://osesgy.unmissions.org/full-text-stockholm-agreement>. See also Peter Salisbury, "What Does the Stockholm Agreement Mean for Yemen?" *Washington Post*, December 21, 2018, <https://www.washingtonpost.com/news/monkey-cage/wp/2018/12/21/what-does-the-stockholm-agreement-mean-for-yemen/>.

<sup>6</sup> Food assistance diversion occurs across Yemen. Maggie Michaels, "AP Investigation: Food Aid Stolen as Yemen Starves," Pulitzer Center, December 31, 2018, <https://pulitzercenter.org/reporting/ap-investigation-food-aid-stolen-yemen-starves>; Danielle Haynes, "U.N.: Houthi Rebels Selling Food Aid on Black Market in Yemen," UPI, December 31, 2018, [https://www.upi.com/Top\\_News/World-News/2018/12/31/UN-Houthi-rebels-selling-food-aid-on-black-market-in-Yemen/8561546283939/](https://www.upi.com/Top_News/World-News/2018/12/31/UN-Houthi-rebels-selling-food-aid-on-black-market-in-Yemen/8561546283939/); Associated Press, "WFP Calls on Yemen's Rebels to Bring Aid Theft to an End," January 4, 2019, <https://www.apnews.com/cbfd01aff8f34c75836aabdcf0d58926>; and Samy Magdy, "Yemeni Groups Call on WFP to Reveal Aid 'Corruption,'" Associated Press, January 9, 2019, <https://www.apnews.com/aa2eeb34612541cf95b3954957e2583a>.

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<sup>7</sup> Daniel R. Coats, "World Wide Threat Assessment," statement before the Select Committee on Intelligence, US Senate, January 29, 2019, <https://www.dni.gov/files/ODNI/documents/2019-ATA-SFR---SSCI.pdf>.

<sup>8</sup> Thomas Joscelyn, "Former Guantanamo detainee Warns Against Spilling Secrets," Long War Journal, January 19, 2018, <https://www.longwarjournal.org/archives/2018/01/former-guantanamo-detainee-warns-against-spilling-secrets-in-aqap-video.php>; Thomas Joscelyn "Ex-Guantanamo Detainee Now and al Qaeda leader in Yemen," Long War Journal, December 9, 2015, <https://www.longwarjournal.org/archives/2015/12/ex-guantanamo-detainee-now-an-al-qaeda-leader-in-yemen.php>; and "Ibrahim Ahmed Mahmoud al Qosi," *New York Times*, <https://www.nytimes.com/interactive/projects/guantanamo/detainees/54-ibrahim-ahmed-mahmoud-al-qosi>.

<sup>9</sup> For background on AQAP's rise in Yemen, read Katherine Zimmerman, "AQAP: A Resurgent Threat," *Combating Terrorism Center, CTC Sentinel* 8, no. 9 (September 2015): 19–23, <https://ctc.usma.edu/aqap-a-resurgent-threat/>.

<sup>10</sup> Gregory Johnsen characterizes the inflection in counterterrorism operations well in Gregory Johnsen, "Trump and Counterterrorism in Yemen: The First Two Years," Sana'a Center for Strategic Studies, February 27, 2019, <http://sanaacenter.org/publications/analysis/7105>.

<sup>11</sup> The Dar al Hadith religious center in Dammaj, Sa'ada, is a Salafi center in the heartland of Zaydi Islam. The al Houthis laid siege to the school in October 2011, and a ceasefire went into effect in December 2011. Fighting broke out again in October 2013 and ended after a second ceasefire came into effect in January 2014. Many of the Salafi fighters regrouped at the onset of the civil war to combat the al Houthis. Laurent Bonnefoy provides a comprehensive exposition of Salafi trends in Yemen in Laurent Bonnefoy, "Sunni Islamist Dynamics in Context of War: What Happened to al-Islah and the Salafis?" in *Politics, Governance, and Reconstruction in Yemen*, edited by Stacey Philbrick Yadav and Marc Lynch, eds, Project on Middle East Political Science, January 2018, [https://pomeps.org/wp-content/uploads/2018/02/POMEPS\\_Studies\\_29\\_Yemen\\_Web-REV.pdf](https://pomeps.org/wp-content/uploads/2018/02/POMEPS_Studies_29_Yemen_Web-REV.pdf).

<sup>12</sup> Bashra al-Maqtari, "The Evolution of Militant Salafism in Taiz," Sana'a Center for Strategic Studies, September 29, 2017, <http://sanaacenter.org/publications/analysis/4843>.

<sup>13</sup> The last major terror attack claimed by ISY was in February 2018 in Aden. Katherine Zimmerman and Maher Farrukh, "Yemen Situation Report," Critical Threats Project at the American Enterprise Institute, March 1, 2018, <https://www.criticalthreats.org/briefs/yemen-situation-report/2018-yemen-crisis-situation-report-march-1>.

<sup>14</sup> Author's conversations, Aden, Yemen, March 2018.

<sup>15</sup> Thomas Gibbons-Neff and Missy Ryan, "U.S. Forces Now on the Ground Supporting Combat Operations in Yemen, Pentagon Says," *Washington Post*, May 6, 2016, <https://www.washingtonpost.com/news/checkpoint/wp/2016/05/06/u-s-forces-now-on-the-ground-supporting-combat-operations-in-yemen-pentagon-says/>.

<sup>16</sup> Author interview, Abu Dhabi, UAE, March 2018.

<sup>17</sup> Maggie Michael, "In Yemen's Secret Prisons, UAE Tortures and US Interrogates," Associated Press, June 22, 2017, <https://www.apnews.com/4925f7f0fa654853bd6f2f57174179fe>; and Maggie Michael, "Sexual Abuses Rampant in UAE-Controlled Prisons in Yemen," Associated Press, June 20, 2018, <https://www.apnews.com/0f0e4d6c5e35469e8faa9866a30f73bb>.

<sup>18</sup> Maggie Michael, Trish Wilson, and Lee Keath, "AP Investigation: US Allies, al-Qaida Battle Rebels in Yemen," Associated Press, August 6, 2018, <https://www.apnews.com/f38788a561d74ca78c77cb43612d50da>.

<sup>19</sup> The Hajoori tribe has clashed with al Houthi forces along a key road in northern Yemen for the past month. The coalition airdropped supplies into the area and has supported the advance of Yemeni forces against the al Houthis in an area to the north. Ali Mahmood, "Arab Coalition Airdrop Bolsters Yemeni Tribe Fighting Houthis Besieging Hajjah," *The National* (Abu Dhabi, UAE), February 26, 2009, <https://www.thenational.ae/world/mena/arab-coalition-airdrop-bolsters-yemeni-tribe-fighting-houthis-besieging-hajjah-1.830541>; and Critical Threats Project at the American Enterprise Institute, "Threat Update," February 21, 2019, <https://www.criticalthreats.org/briefs/threat-update/escalating-salafi-jihadi-activity-in-burkina-faso-may-spread-to-neighboring-countries>.

<sup>20</sup> Kata'ib Sayyid al Shuhada, the commander of Iraqi Shi'a militia, offered forces to fight alongside the al Houthis in June 2018. Saidshuhada.com, "Speech of the Secretary-General Haj al Walai at the Festival of Kata'ib Sayyid al Shuhada with the People of Yemen," June 27, 2018, [http://saidshuhada\(.com\)/index.php/iraq/19079.html](http://saidshuhada(.com)/index.php/iraq/19079.html).

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<sup>21</sup> For example, al Houthi spokesman and lead negotiator Mohammad Abdul Salam met with Iranian Foreign Minister Javad Zarif in Tehran in February 2018. Reuters reported on an IRGC meeting on the al Houthis in February 2017. Xinhua, "Iran, Houthis Discuss Political, Humanitarian Situation in Yemen," February 13, 2018, [http://www.xinhuanet.com/english/2018-02/13/c\\_136973610.htm](http://www.xinhuanet.com/english/2018-02/13/c_136973610.htm); and Jonathan Saul, Parisa Hafezi, and Michael Georgy, "Exclusive: Iran Steps Up Support for Houthis In Yemen's War—Sources," Reuters, March 21, 2017, <https://www.reuters.com/article/us-yemen-iran-houthis/exclusive-iran-steps-up-support-for-houthis-in-yemens-war-sources-idUSKBN16S22R>.

<sup>22</sup> The US Defense Department first released this evidence in 2017. It updated the exhibition in November 2018. Ryan Browne, "US Displays Weapons It Says Iran Provided to Militants," CNN, November 29, 2018, <https://www.cnn.com/2018/11/29/politics/us-iran-weapons/index.html>.

<sup>23</sup> Conflict Armament Research, "Iranian Technology Transfers to Yemen," March 2017, <http://www.conflictarm.com/perspectives/iranian-technology-transfers-to-yemen/>.

<sup>24</sup> Conflict Armament Research, "Radio-Controlled Improvised Explosive Devices (RCIED)," March 2018, <http://www.conflictarm.com/perspectives/radio-controlled-improvised-explosive-devices-rcied/>.

<sup>25</sup> Conflict Armament Research "Mines and IEDs Employed by Houthi Forces on Yemen's West Coast," September 2018, <http://www.conflictarm.com/dispatches/mines-and-ieds-employed-by-houthi-forces-on-yemens-west-coast/>.

<sup>26</sup> Major advances in the frontline stalled in fall 2015. It moved in January 2017 when coalition forces seized Mokha port, and only picked up again after the death of Ali Abdullah Saleh in December 2017. Katherine Zimmerman, "Yemen Situation Report," Critical Threats Project at the American Enterprise Institute, November 2, 2015, <https://www.criticalthreats.org/briefs/yemen-situation-report/2015-yemen-crisis-situation-report-november-2/>; and Colum Lynch, "Confidential U.N. Report Suggests Saudi-Led Coalition Failing in Yemen," *Foreign Policy*, August 18, 2017, <https://foreignpolicy.com/2017/08/18/confidential-u-n-report-suggests-saudi-led-coalition-failing-in-yemen/>.

<sup>27</sup> Human Rights Watch has documented al Houthi cases of detention. Hisham al Omeisy, a prominent Yemeni activist who reported for years from Sana'a on developments related to the war, was detained in August 2017 after tweeting about some corruption and was released in January 2018. He was tortured and never charged. Human Rights Watch, "Yemen: Houthi Hostage-Taking: Arbitrary Detention, Torture, Enforced Disappearance Go Unpunished," September 15, 2018, <https://www.hrw.org/news/2018/09/25/yemen-houthi-hostage-taking>; and BBC News, "Hisham al-Omeisy: Yemen Rebels Release Activist After Five Months," January 15, 2018, <https://www.bbc.com/news/world-middle-east-42694603>.

<sup>28</sup> Defined as being at IPC Phase 3 or above. See FEWS NET, "Integrated Phase Classification," <http://fews.net/IPC>.

<sup>29</sup> FEWS NET, "World's Largest Food Security Emergency Continues as Conflict Enters Its Fifth Year," December 2018, [http://fews.net/sites/default/files/documents/reports/YEMEN\\_Food\\_Security\\_Outlook\\_December\\_2018\\_final.pdf](http://fews.net/sites/default/files/documents/reports/YEMEN_Food_Security_Outlook_December_2018_final.pdf).

<sup>30</sup> Michael Rubin, "It's Time to Move the US Embassy to Yemen out of Saudi Arabia," *Hill*, November 14, 2018, <https://thehill.com/opinion/international/416498-its-time-to-move-the-us-embassy-to-yemen-out-of-saudi-arabia>.