

Washington's Obligatory Track in Yemen



Case Analysis

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Foreword

On Monday, February 28, following a unanimous vote in favor by all five permanent members, the UN Security Council adopted Resolution 2624, designating the Houthis as a 'terrorist group' which was tabled by the UAE. The unanimously endorsed resolution came after Abu Dhabi flirted with Beijing and Moscow by abstaining from the vote on a Resolution condemning Russia's attack on Ukraine.

Such conduct by a Washington ally did not originate in a vacuum. Rather, it emanates from the Arab Gulf states sense of the vacuum left by US retreat from the region's affairs. There are also indicators that removing the Houthis, who bombed Riyadh and Abu Dhabi, from the terrorism list will affect Gulf security. Besides, the return to the nuclear deal between Iran and the international community will make Tehran free to support its proxy militias and expand its presence in the region.

This study will review the obligatory track of the US in Yemen, especially with regard to the need of re-designating the Houthis as a terrorist group, in addition to the repercussions of the Russia-Ukraine crisis on Yemen. It is divided into five sections as follows:

1. Houthi capitalization on disputes and targeting Washington's allies
2. The American administration's confusion and failure to grasp facts on the ground
3. The American need to respond to the Houthis
4. The US response to Houthi behavior
5. The Russian attack on Ukraine and its repercussions on Yemen.

Introduction

In early 2021, the new American administration adopted a different policy towards Yemen. It ceased military support to the Saudi-led coalition, including arms sales, and appointed a special envoy to Yemen.^[1] It fully revoked the Trump administration eleventh hour decision designating the Houthis as a terrorist organization. The Houthis and Iran understood US behavior as a sign of withdrawal from the region, and that its allies in the Arabian Peninsula were in a weaker position than ever before.

These scattershot decisions were shocking and controversial. Some described Biden's Middle East policy, which is an extension of the Obama Doctrine, as bad because it provoked disagreements with Washington's close allies in the region. The logic of improvised policies is still evident in the Biden administration approach towards several issues such as his lenient position towards Iran, abandoning Gulf and European security, and the vague policy towards democracy and the Palestinian-Israeli 'peace process'. This cannot be attributed simply to doctrine or strategy. Rather, it is a floundering tradition that is far from an informed policy to tackle issues in the region.

As far as Yemen is concerned, the Biden administration policy backfired. The Houthis met the Biden's revocation of the designation of the group as a terrorist organization with launching large-scale attacks on Marib governorate. The emboldened Houthi offensive left thousands of casualties, in addition to displacement of tens of thousands of civilians in the main conflict zones.

According to the Americans, the large-scale and persistent Houthi offensive against Marib, hampered peace efforts in the country. Although their advance towards the city was slow, the Houthis felt that they could score a victory in Marib and inflict a major defeat on the legitimate government in its most important stronghold, and by extension the Saudi-led coalition backing it.

This explains the Houthi rejection of the various initiatives proposed by the United Nations, the United States, the international community, and Saudi Arabia. It also sheds light on their otherwise unexpected stubborn resistance of pressure exerted by Oman. The Omani delegation left Sana'a on June 11, 2021, following lengthy talks that lasted for weeks. However, no breakthrough was achieved towards reaching an agreement to end the years-long war, which had left more than 377,000 deaths, according to UN estimates, and pushed 80% of the country's population to the verge of starvation.

In January 2022, government forces and the Saudi- and UAE-trained Giants Brigades managed to push the Houthis back in Marib governorate. In neighboring Shabwa governorate, the Giants Brigades also announced retaking three districts that had been seized by the Houthis in September and October 2021. The Harib district, south of Marib, was also recaptured, and government forces managed to advance their lines of defense more than 30 kilometers in the Eastern Balq front, turning the most important Houthi gains in 2021 into a costly past and creating a new status quo that provided legitimate government forces with a better defensive position.

On the regional and international levels, as the international community heralded an imminent new agreement on the Iranian nuclear program, Russia launched a large-scale military offensive against Ukraine on February 24, 2022, striking major cities such as Kyiv, Kharkiv and Odessa. The attack, which is hailed by the Houthis and their regional ally, Iran, came after months of mobilization of troops, Russian warnings to the US and the NATO, negotiations with American and European leaders, and US warnings of what it labeled as an imminent "Russian invasion." The Russian attack was preceded by Moscow's recognition of the independence of two separatist regions in eastern Ukraine. The Russia-Ukraine war signals an important shift in global politics, which has been based on a unipolar system since the collapse of the Berlin Wall in 1989. This development will have repercussions on the situation in Yemen.

1. Houthi Capitalization on Disputes and Targeting

Washington's Allies

The Houthis monopolized the disputes between their adversaries. They believed that Abu Dhabi's announcement of withdrawal from the war in Yemen in 2019, following attacks on vessels in UAE territorial waters in the Arabian Gulf, was the result of Saudi-UAE disputes.

In the same year, some developments seemed to lend credence to speculations of a conflict between the legitimate government and the Saudi-led coalition. The Yemeni government lost control over Aden and other neighboring southern governorates to the UAE-backed Southern Transitional Council (STC), which champions the secessionist agenda and has command over a military force of about 120,000 fighters trained and funded by the UAE. Abu Dhabi also supported the Joint Forces led by Tariq Saleh, nephew of former Yemeni president. These latter troops had been stationed in the western coast since the announcement of the mostly-unimplemented Stockholm agreement in 2018. In November 2021, these troops retreated over 100 kilometers from their positions in the eastern vicinity of Hodeidah. Then the Giants Brigades - most of which withdrew to the Khokha and Mocha districts – were redeployed to Shabwa governorate to fight the Houthis.

Suffering massive losses in their positions in Shabwa and Marib, the Houthis blamed the UAE for their misfortunes, and launched retaliatory attacks targeting vital facilities in Abu Dhabi. On January 17, the Houthis claimed responsibility for a drone and ballistic missile attack on Abu Dhabi that left three people dead. A week later, two Houthi ballistic missiles were said to have been intercepted by Abu Dhabi, and then the Houthis launched a third ballistic missile attack, which Abu Dhabi said it had also intercepted. While the Iran-backed Houthis have long been launching attacks against targets in Saudi Arabia, this was the first time they intensified their attacks on the UAE. The US was alarmed by these attacks, especially after the Houthis had seized a UAE-flagged cargo vessel on January 02 in international navigational waters and dragged it to the strategic port of Hodeidah.

The attacks on Abu Dhabi did not merely target the UAE alone. The Houthis announced launching two attacks on Al Dhafra Air Base where American and other troops are stationed. The US Central Command confirmed those attacks and said that they were thwarted. This was the first direct confrontation between the Houthis and the United States. Al Dhafra Air Base is home to the US Air Force 380th Air Expeditionary Wing, and houses about 2,000 American troops. A few days after the January 24 attack, a Pentagon official said that his country had started to operate reconnaissance aircrafts in the skies over areas controlled by the Houthis. Moreover, Abu Dhabi Airport, which was targeted by the Houthis on January 17, is a busy hub constantly used by American citizens travelling to and across the Middle East, and such Houthi attacks are an enduring threat to them.

2. The American administration's confusion and failure to grasp facts on the ground

Many international politics experts argue that the assumed American focus on China, if not obsession with it, has led the Biden administration not only to abandon its friends in the region, but also to seriously harm its own interests. The US retreat "from world affairs, and especially from the Gulf region" created a "frozen conflict" policy that opened the door to growing clashes among multiple parties competing to fill the void, thus resulting in a "policy of chaos".^[2]

Biden's policy towards Yemen in 2021 completely failed to make any breakthrough to end the war in the country. It even had a reverse effect as fighting only intensified. Policymakers believed that a clear US decision to support UN peacemaking efforts would tempt the Houthis to return to the negotiating table.

Therefore, the American administration took practical steps, notably to pressure Saudi Arabia to reduce its military involvement in Yemen, as a sign of a changing U.S. policy. Instead of reacting proactively to the new US approach, the Houthis misinterpreted the US position as a sign of weakness and decided to seize the opportunity by seeking to achieve a military victory that they had been denied during the first six years of the conflict. The result was merely an escalation of conflict and aggravation of the concomitant humanitarian crisis. A study published by Abaad has anticipated and warned against this outcome only days after Biden announced revocation of the Trump administration decision designating the Houthi group as a terrorist organization.^[3]

In fact, the complimentary revocation of the designation of the Houthi group as a terrorist organization and putting pressure on Saudi Arabia to end the war have flared the war and threatened prospects for peace in the country. A Houthi control of Marib would have meant relentless expansion towards southern governorates, and would have created new small-scale wars that would be difficult to extinguish. Even if the Saudi-led coalition decided to withdraw from the war, Yemenis will continue to fight the Houthis, out of sheer rejection of Houthi hegemony and control of their areas.

The American administration began to realize the pitfalls of its policy when Biden's envoy to Yemen, Timothy Lenderking failed to make any progress in pushing the Yemeni parties to the conflict towards peace. However, this is not to say that Yemenis rejected US efforts. In fact, the legitimate Yemeni government agreed to return to the negotiating table and the Saudis put forth the initiative that had been proposed earlier by the United Nations. On the other hand, the Houthis absolutely refused to discuss the matter, even refusing to allow the new UN envoy to Yemen, Hans Grundberg, to arrive in Sana'a and meet with the group's senior leaders who own the decision of the group's involvement in negotiations. The Houthis also rejected the first publicized Omani mediation during the war, after it had remained in the shadow for years, in spite of the complimentary privileges provided by Muscat to the Houthis. The Sultan of Oman contacted the leader of the Houthi group, Abdul-Malik Al-Houthi, in an effort to pressure the Houthis to enter into consultations.

However, following the Houthi attacks on the US Al Dhafra Air Base, threatening US troops, and the attacks on Abu Dhabi International Airport, which is used by thousands of American citizens travelling to and across the region, a number of American thinkers and analysts quickly lost^[4] their sympathy with the Houthis. Undeniably, such sympathy had contributed to revoking the designation of Houthis as a terrorist group. However, some analysts continued to misinterpret facts on the ground as demonstrated by the following examples.

1. Bruce Riedel^[5] affirmed that “The Houthis won the war in Yemen, defeating their [Yemeni] opponents..., the Saudis who intervened... against them, and the United States which backed the Saudis.” Riedel wrote this in early February 2022, shortly after the Houthis had suffered severe defeats in the strategic governorates of Shabwa and Marib. In addition, he viewed the war in Yemen from the narrow perspective of providing weapons to Saudi Arabia. In Riedel's view, the war that is being fought in Yemen is a Saudi-Yemeni war rather than a war between Yemeni parties. He also failed to discuss the reception by the Houthis and their patron, Iran, of American pressure and reversal of the designation of the Houthis as a terrorist group as a sign of weakness of the legitimate government and the coalition that backs it rather than as an effort to seek a peaceful end to the war.

Riedel also ignored the fact that the Houthis, with their ideology which is based on the ‘divine right’ to power, their role in the ‘Iranian axis’, and their control over Yemen as victors does not merely affect Yemen, but also threatens US and international interests. In addition, he failed to assess the further deterioration that will be brought about by the subsequent small-scale wars that will most probably break out and go on unabated in the country. . The Houthis clearly showed this tendency by threatening international navigation, the latest instance being their seizure of the UAE-flagged vessel, Rawabi.

1. Paul R. Pillar^[6] wrote, "The Houthis are seized with a struggle over the political order in Yemen and have no interest in international terrorism, at least as long as it is not connected with foreign interventions in that struggle." His argument is based on the assumption that the Houthis are not Iran's proxies, ignoring international, including UN, reports and Iran's admission of providing support for the Houthis.

Daniel Kurtzer and Merlin Boone^[7] wrote “the United States and the United Nations need to intensify engagement with the Houthis that demonstrates the resolve to prevent a Houthi takeover of Yemen, on the one hand, but a willingness to include the Houthis in a political settlement process, on the other.” They added, “Enhanced diplomacy could show both parties a way forward toward a reduction in violence and renewed efforts to resolve the underlying conflict.” They concluded, “The Biden administration and Congress ought to give diplomacy a chance in Yemen, not re-designate the Houthis as a foreign terrorist organization. During this period of escalation on the battlefield, the United States should focus its energy on engaging the Houthis and reassuring Saudi Arabia — as difficult as that may be.”

The truth is that all parties to the conflict and the international community emphasize the need to engage the Houthis in power-sharing and political settlement, but the Houthis themselves resist all calls to negotiations. Their resistance to negotiations is informed by ideological motives. Moreover, they believe that achieving victory constitutes sufficient ground for them to seize power. Since 2018, when the Stockholm Agreement was signed, all efforts to push them to consultations have failed.

What is striking about these analyses is that they echo the 2021 vision of the Biden administration officials, who pushed to remove the Houthis from the list of foreign terrorist organizations and to exert pressure on Saudi Arabia and the UAE to concede to a peaceful settlement of the conflict. These assumptions stem from a misconception of the war in Yemen, which is mistakenly viewed as a Saudi-Houthi conflict rather than a war between the legitimate government and a rebel group. They fail to grasp the fact that the intervention of the Saudi-led coalition was only a later development that came after the Houthis orchestrated their coup d'état against the legitimate political authority in the country. Therefore, these analysts' suggestion to bring together the Houthis and the Saudis to negotiate a peaceful end to the war, in their supposed capacity as key stakeholders and main warring parties, to the exclusion of all other Yemeni parties, reflects a flawed understanding of the facts on the ground.

3. The American need to respond to the Houthis

US foreign policy needs to be reconsidered. The Houthi attacks on Abu Dhabi and the threat to the Arab Gulf states in all its regional and international dimensions offer an opportunity to the US to restore the confidence of its allies and to preserve its role as policeman of the globe. What makes the United States a great power is its alliances, but once these alliances are lost, US power will swing under the pressure of other nascent or re-emerging powers.

Therefore, the United States is facing a difficult test in the Arabian Peninsula and the wider Middle East. Its policy in Yemen will be a criterion for judging its influence.

a. US policy towards the Houthis will determine the extent of its ability to guarantee

Gulf security: The way Washington responds to the Houthis will affect the perceptions of Abu Dhabi and other Arab Gulf capitals of the United States as a guarantor of Gulf security. This is confirmed by the Gulf regimes' negative view of the response of the Trump administration to the attacks on the Saudi oil facilities, Khurais and Bqaiq, which were claimed by the Houthis, but later investigations showed that Iran was behind the attacks. It is further reinforced by the stereotypical image of the US following its withdrawal from Afghanistan in 2021, which exacerbated the negative image of Washington as withdrawing from the region in an effort to counteract Russia and the China.

Yemen presents a good opportunity for the United States to reassure its long-time allies. It will not take much effort on the part of the US to support its allies, or to help ensure the security of the Arabian Peninsula, including the vital Bab al-Mandeb Strait, which is a vital waterway and important passage for world trade.

It goes without saying that the foreign policy of any country, even that of a global superpower like the United States, is ultimately driven by self-interests — rendering the US abandoning of its allies and partners inexplicable. However, instead of acting in a way that preserves American interests, the Biden administration is fouling its own nest^[8]

The fact that the Arab Gulf states are critical to Biden's administration can be seen in relation to the Ukraine crisis. The Arab Gulf states contemplated providing Europe with energy in case a major war erupted and Russia decided to play the energy card. Biden met with the Emir of Qatar in Washington to discuss supplying gas to Europe and the White House's declaration that Doha is a non-NATO ally of the United States.^[9] In the same vein, the US Secretary of State held talks with Saudi officials regarding the uninterrupted flow of energy in case the Ukrainian crisis escalated.

b. The Vienna negotiations and the image of 'Washington's weakness': The White House takes into account the sensitivities surrounding the talks in Vienna. The Biden administration seeks to respond to the Houthis without undermining diplomatic efforts aimed at reviving the Iran nuclear deal. Therefore, Washington tried to disassociate Iran from the Houthi attacks from the first moment.

At the same time, it would be awkward to try to deal proactively with Iran in negotiations at this 'decisive moment'^[10] when Tehran's close allies in Yemen broaden the scope of their internal war against the internationally recognized government to regional dimensions by attacking not only an important ally of the United States, but also a major American military base.

While US officials can debate whether the Houthis are fully surrogates of Iran, it is indisputable that they get their missiles and drones, training, and the know-how to produce drones and other weapons from Iran's Quds Force and Hezbollah. The Iranians view the Houthis as a useful puppet to exert pressure on Saudi Arabia, especially as the Houthis attack civilian targets in Saudi Arabia, including the capital, Riyadh, and oil installations across the kingdom.^[11] That the Houthis have justifications for bombing Saudi Arabia in retaliation for Saudi bombing of Houthi military targets in Yemen does not rule out the fact that Iran is doing everything it can to flare up this conflict.

The attacks on Al Dhafra Air Base and Abu Dhabi International Airport prove to the Biden administration that it is necessary to deter the Iranian subversive and disruptive role in the region. The Iranian regime insisted that its activities in the region should be precluded from negotiations, emphasizing that those activities have nothing to do with the Iranian nuclear program. In fact, Iranian officials view their activities and proxies in the region as much more profitable than a nuclear bomb. The United States cannot afford to turn a blind eye to Iran's behavior in the region. Reaching an agreement to restore the Iranian nuclear accord does not mean at all allowing Iran's behavior in the region to go unchallenged. Iran's backing of the activities of its proxies shall be deterred.

When the nuclear deal was signed in 2015, the Obama administration avoided talking about Iran's activities in the region, fearing that the Iranians would refuse to move forward with the implementation of the Joint Comprehensive Plan of Action (JCPOA). However, the current state of affairs is different. The Houthis and other Iranian proxies in the region have created a belt of insecurity, instability and chaos in the countries bordering the Gulf, the Arabian Sea, the Gulf of Aden, the Bab al-Mandab Strait, and all the way to Iraq and Syria. The attack launched on Abu Dhabi in early February by an Iran-affiliated Shiite group from Iraq reveals the extent of pressure that Iran can exert by targeting the region. It is this network of Iranian proxies in Iraq, Syria, Yemen, Lebanon, Bahrain, and perhaps elsewhere, that makes Tehran's strategy in the region so fatal. This Iranian approach is a clever way of power projection, honed over decades, because it allows Iran to weaken its adversaries and achieve its strategic goals at the lowest possible cost.^[12] Thus, Iran will fight to the last Iraqi, Syrian, Yemeni, Lebanese, and Bahraini. Moreover, the attacks on Abu Dhabi were meant to convey an Iranian message to the international community and the United States in particular that the failure of the United States to return to the nuclear deal and to resort instead to imposing economic sanctions on Iran would drag the Gulf economies into a quagmire of recession.

Therefore, the United States needs to make it clear that the behavior of Iran and its proxies will be met with a greater deterrence strategy. American officials need to make clear to the Iranians that their rules of the game will implicate them in an asymmetric war, and that targeting American personnel and interests in particular has a steep price. Lenient US policy in the Middle East has opened the door for Russia and China to consolidate their positions in the region. The frustration felt by Washington's allies, especially the Arab Gulf states, during the years of the Obama and Trump administrations, which doubled during the first year of the Biden administration, led to the growth of relations between Washington's traditional allies and its opponents, Russia and China. Joint Saudi and UAE projects with Beijing and Moscow have grown on an unprecedented scale. However, the United States can use the relations of Riyadh and Abu Dhabi with Beijing and Moscow to push anti-Houthi resolutions and policies at the UN Security Council. A case in point is the Security Council Resolution 2624 (2022) under Chapter VII, which renews sanctions on Yemen, and designates the Houthi group, known as Ansar Allah, as a 'terrorist group'. The resolution also places the Houthi group as an entity on the list of the arms embargo on Yemen, condemns Houthi cross-border attacks of civilians and civilian infrastructure in Saudi Arabia and the UAE, and urges the group to immediately cease hostilities.^[13]

4. The US response to Houthi behavior

Based on the scale of the threat posed by the Houthis and their resistance to all attempts to push them to consultations to end the conflict, the United States needs to respond to the Houthis. Regardless of the Houthi self-perception and their rejection of peace initiatives, the United States shall send a clear message to the Houthis that their attacks will cost them dearly, that they are cut off from the world, and that the United States will help strengthen the defenses of its targeted allies.

Therefore, Washington will have several options, including:

a. Providing military and security support to its allies: In January 2022, US troops at Al Dhafra Air Base intercepted ballistic missiles launched by the Houthis. This was the first time when the United States fired Patriot missiles in combat in nearly 20 years. It is also the first direct confrontation between the United States and the Houthis.^[14] It came after the Biden administration's chaotic withdrawal from Afghanistan and its announcement of the end of the US combat mission in Iraq. Evidently, developments in the wake of the US retreat indicate that Washington pays a heavy price for its withdrawal in relation to its troops, reputation and allies.

Although the Ukraine crisis dominated American foreign policy during the past two months, the US provided Abu Dhabi with the sophisticated F-22 combat aircraft to help protect UAE airspace from Houthi attacks,^[15] in addition to sending the destroyer (USS COLE) to Gulf waters.^[16]

General Frank McKenzie, Chief of the US military's Central Command, said the UAE used the THAAD in two interceptions, noting that it was the first time the American-made system was fired in combat. The United States announced a potential \$65 million sale of parts for Hawk, Patriot and THAAD missile systems to the UAE.

The United States has a fusion cell with the Emiratis, but it focuses on al-Qaeda and the Islamic State, rather than the Houthis. Creating an anti-Houthi cell will require American resources, but it will be reassuring to the Gulf states and Abu Dhabi in particular. These resources could include two or three Predator tails and other American intelligence assets that would provide persistent, high-quality intelligence and warning of planned or impending attacks on U.S. personnel and bases or on those of the Saudi and Emiratis.^[17]

b. Providing military and security support to the Yemeni government: The fact that there exists a legitimate Yemeni government, recognized by the international community, including the United States, is in itself a sufficient ground for providing support for this government and for its armed forces, which represent a national force capable of drying up instability in the country. In addition to the reviving good military relations with Saudi Arabia and the UAE, supporting the Yemeni government will convey a clear message to Iran and its Houthi allies that Iranian-backed proxy groups in the region cannot be tolerated.

The Biden administration seeks to end the war in Yemen. This is why its catchword 'diplomacy first,' which aimed to put an end to the war that has given rise to the world's worst humanitarian crisis, received enormous support. However, regardless of whether the US administration decision was right or not, that policy failed in Yemen, and the Houthis have been the reason for that failure. Therefore, the American administration has a good reason for supporting the Yemeni government to defeat the Houthis. Only then will the Houthis agree to sit down at the negotiating table.

Moreover, since such support will enable the legitimate government to boost its power and position, and will render it the most powerful party in terms of military force, even in context of a post-war power-sharing government that includes the Houthis, this support will establish long-term stability in the Red Sea and Bab al-Mandab Strait.

The internationally recognized government has approached the United States for assistance with communications equipment and training of the naval forces to confront the Houthis, but the US has not yet replied to those requests. Similarly, American pressure on Saudi Arabia, the UAE and the legitimate government that they shall implement the security and military components of the Riyadh Agreement to be eligible for receiving further support, lest weapons fall into the hands of militias, is important in order to achieve positive results vis-à-vis the Houthis. It also ensures that American weapons and equipment shall remain in the hands of the Yemeni army and security forces.

c. Responding to the Houthi pursuit of victory: As long as initiatives to end the conflict are based on the facts on the ground, the Houthis will exert their utmost effort to score a victory in order to strengthen their negotiating position. Therefore, Washington, the United Nations and the international community, including the Arab Gulf states, are supposed to frame their initiatives on the basis of reconciling the two main warring parties regardless of the military status quo. This approach is likely to push the Houthis to stop their internal campaigns to expand their dominions. If the Houthis suffer a series of defeats and are denied the *raison d'être* for proceeding with their adventurous campaigns, their position will be weakened, and they will be induced to negotiate with the legitimate government to end the war.

Therefore, the key component of peace efforts is the utter disregard of the outcomes of the war relating to military gains, and focusing instead on the legitimacy of the state and its exclusive right to keep heavy and medium weapons. Failing that and choosing to uphold the military outcomes of the war instead, will only encourage armed groups/militias to opt for armed struggle. Any resulting peace will be fragile and devoid of its elements of strength. It will also have a considerable impact on stability in the short term.

If recognition of the military status quo is the basis for a future peace, then Washington and its allies can support the legitimate government to help it impose significant military balance.

d. Taking action at the UN Security Council: The Biden administration will be well-advised to submit a draft resolution to the UN Security Council, condemning the Houthis, designating them as a terrorist organization and building draft resolutions to impose international sanctions on the Houthi group. It is unlikely that China and the Russia will veto such resolutions, given their relations with the Emiratis and Saudis, and Moscow's need for the neutrality of the Arab Gulf states in the Ukraine crisis. The favorable position of these two permanent members of the Security Council was evident in their voting in favor of Security Council Resolution 2624 under Chapter VII.^[18]

the GCC Initiative and the relevant Implementation Mechanism, outcomes of the National Dialogue Conference, and Security Council Resolution 2216. Such measures will convey a message to the Houthis and any other parties that prolonging the war for bolstering political power and gaining a military victory will not change the international position towards the war in Yemen.

The US shall capitalize on the opportunity of the UAE status as a non-permanent member of the UN Security Council to bring the issue to the UN and mobilize widespread international support for condemnation of the Houthis' subversive campaigns. It would be difficult for the Houthis or their sponsors in Tehran to ignore such an international stance.^[19]

e. Reinforcing deterrence in the Red Sea: The Biden administration needs to take more comprehensive measures than just confronting the Houthis and supporting its allies in the Gulf, especially in view of the great Houthi threat to navigation in the Red Sea. The Houthi seizure of the UAE-flagged vessel sounds the alarm. Therefore, the United States shall assume its role in protecting international navigation routes in the Red Sea, the Gulf of Aden and the Arabian Sea. A swift and decisive action to re-establish deterrence in the Red Sea and Bab al-Mandab Strait is crucial. The United States responded to earlier Houthi attacks on shipping in the area by directly attacking Houthi onshore facilities that served as bases of launching the attacks. There must be clear messages to the Houthis and behind them, Iran, that the United States will not tolerate any threats to international navigation.

Yemen has a long coastline, so the United States and its Saudi and Emirati allies in particular need to conduct persistent maritime surveillance to prevent the smuggling of arms to the Houthis. Apparently, the United States is taking practical steps in this direction, as the Fifth Fleet of the US Navy, based in the Middle East, announced launching of a new joint fleet of drones to patrol vast expanses of water. Permanent surveillance will be more effective to prevent smuggling of Iranian weapons to the Houthis and provide a sense of safety to maritime navigation.^[20]

f. Re-designating the Houthis: US President Joe Biden announced that he was reconsidering reversal of his previous decision of revoke the designation of the Houthis as a terrorist organization.^[21] He is right, even though assessing the potential ramifications of such a move does not make it an easy decision. In fact, The Trump administration remained internally divided on this issue for years.^[22] In fact, the decision to place the Houthi group on terrorism lists came only during Trump's last days in office in January 2021. Understandably, the timing aroused the suspicions of the new Biden administration.

Placing the Houthis on terrorist lists is not in question even in the United States—the Houthis deserved to be placed on the list for committing massive offenses and abuses. Even as the Biden administration revoked the designation in February 2022, US Secretary of State, Anthony Blinken prepared a long list of Houthi offences. The list included “taking control of large areas of Yemen by force, attacking U.S. partners in the Gulf, kidnapping and torturing citizens of the United States and many of our allies, diverting humanitarian aid, brutally repressing Yemenis in areas they control, and the deadly attack on December 30, 2020 in Aden against the cabinet of the legitimate government of Yemen.”^[23]

In late 2021, the Houthis stormed the US embassy headquarters in Sana'a and confiscated papers and documents, despite the fact that the building had been closed since 2014. This act was viewed as a violation of US sovereignty. The Houthis also kidnapped dozens of former Yemeni embassy staffers, the last two of whom were arrested on 19 February 2022.^[24] The Houthis also targeted Al Dhafra Air Base, home to thousands of American soldiers, affirmed that the military base, which also houses troops from other countries, was a target of the group's attacks.

Perhaps the most important controversy surrounding the American administration's re-designation of the Houthis revolves around the following points:

*** The White House drive:** The White House's top Middle East official, Brett McGurk,^[25] led the drive for imposing the designation of the Houthis as a foreign terrorist organization. The White House National Security Council (NSC) circulated a memorandum in January 2022, exploring the possibility to designate the Houthis as a terrorist group. The memo confirms the designation of the Houthis as a Foreign Terrorist Organization, Specially Designated Global Terrorists, or a combination of both.^[26] However the plan faced a fierce pushback from other US officials at the February 04 White House NSC deputies meeting— one of a number of interagency meetings on the issue.

US officials who oppose restoring the Houthis to terrorist lists fear that it would inflict excessive hardship on Yemeni civilians. They decided to reconsider the plan and to determine whether there were other means, including imposition of targeted sanctions on individual Houthi officials that could be enforced without disrupting vital imports of food, medicines, and other essentials into Yemen.^[27] Moreover, designation of the Houthis as a foreign terrorist organization is embarrassing to the Biden administration as it involves reversing its reversal. However, failing to designate the Houthis will directly affect US relations with the GCC countries. The UAE is leading a campaign to put the Houthis back on terror lists, a move that Saudi Arabia and the Yemeni government have repeatedly pressed for.

This comes at a time when the Biden administration has acquired a solid understanding of the Houthis following its 2021 intensive diplomacy approach, and the shift in its perception of the war in Yemen. This transformation in the American position prompted the Saudi-led coalition to launch a military operation in Yemen in early 2022.^[28]

* **Congressional controversy:** After the Houthis seized the American embassy building and attacked American troops in Al Dhafra, a number of Congressmen,^[29] mostly Republicans^[30] and some Democrats, submitted draft resolutions to put the Houthis back on the terror lists, lobbying the Biden administration and authorizing it to restore the Houthis to its terror lists.^[31]

In a more benign reaction, a number of Congressmen signed a memorandum addressed to Blinken urging him to halt placing the Houthis on terrorism lists. At the same time, the memo emphasized the “destabilizing role played by the Houthis in the Yemeni conflict, including obstruction of humanitarian aid, enlisting children, cross-border attacks on civilian targets in Saudi Arabia and the UAE, and [that] the [Houthi] behavior is objectionable and prolongs the suffering of the Yemeni people.” Justifying their call, they argued that “designating the Houthis as a foreign terrorist organization will not compel them to desist from their actions, but instead risks negative consequences that will only increase the suffering of millions of Yemenis living in Houthi-controlled territories.”^[32]

* **Concerns about affecting imports and humanitarian action:** In 2020, when the Trump administration was considering the designation of the Houthis, there was a strong opposition to the designation in the international humanitarian community. Relief organizations feared that it would constitute a serious obstacle to badly needed relief efforts and harm innocent civilians without affecting the Houthis who did not have accounts or commercial establishments outside Yemen.

The concerns of humanitarian organizations about a potential negative impact of designating the Houthis as a terrorist group cannot be ignored. However, at this juncture, it may be better to carefully consider ways of mitigating those effects and make clear exceptions in the US sanctions regime rather than rule out the designation as such.^[33]

With the new Houthi attacks, expansion of the Houthi regional aggression and targeting Americans, many officials and analysts, some of whom had opposed designation in 2020, believe that it is the only way to protect American soldiers abroad.^[34]

Conversely, relabeling the Houthis as a terrorist group may also bring about peace in Yemen. The Houthi group has hitherto resisted all national and international peace efforts, especially as the international community lacks the necessary tools to pressure the Houthis. In the absence of other viable options to pressure the Houthis to abandon their military campaign and seek a peaceful and political outcome to the war, it would be a mistake not to consider the possibility of using the designation as a tool in America's kit. While this designation will not have a tangible and immediate impact on the Houthi leadership, it will send a powerful symbolic message that delegitimizes the Houthi group as a participant in Yemen's political future.^[35]

The Biden administration should not reproduce the same mistakes of the Trump administration by re-designating the Houthis without holding preliminary discussions with the various stakeholders and persuading suppliers and major Yemeni importers to make exceptions for trading with the Houthis. A substantial number of importers in the Chamber of Commerce in Sana'a maintain that the United States has not engaged them in discussions of basic foodstuff imports. They point out that they received threats from commercial establishments abroad of stopping exports to Yemen if the Houthis are added to terrorism lists.^[36] Washington shall also make exceptions and reassure international humanitarian organizations operating in Yemen that their interventions will not be disrupted or hampered by the designation. The United Nations in particular has expressed much concern about this issue.^[37]

5. The Russian attack on Ukraine and its repercussions on Yemen

Most countries in the Middle East and North Africa have avoided openly taking sides on the Russia-Ukraine crisis, and have not sought to provoke the wrath of Russia or the West. This is due to the fact that the Arab Gulf states have not yet learned how to deal with a non-unipolar world. If Russia emerges victorious from this crisis, it will very likely cast its shadow over the region for a longer period, but if it doesn't, tension will loom large in international politics for the years to come.

The Russian attack on Ukraine affects Yemen indirectly in various ways.

The Russian-Emirati deal: While Russia was amassing its troops around Ukraine, the war in Yemen was receiving more attention worldwide following the Houthi attacks on Abu Dhabi. The Houthis hastened to announce their support for Putin's operations in Ukraine only a few days after the Houthis presented their vision regarding the war in Yemen to Moscow. Before Russia announced launching the attack, the UAE mission to the UN circulated a proposal for a Security Council resolution labelling the Houthis as a terrorist group, and describing the Houthi attacks on neighboring countries as 'terrorist'. It also proposed expanding the arms embargo to include the entire Houthi group as an entity in lieu of the targeted arms embargo that was restricted to targeting individual leaders of the armed Iranian-backed militia.

On February 25, the United States and other Western powers pushed a draft resolution at the Security Council 'regretting' the Russian attacks on Ukraine. The UAE abstained from the vote, thereby blocking adoption. On February 27, it again abstained from the vote on the Russia-Ukraine crisis at the UN General Assembly, but the General Assembly convened the next day.

European diplomats pointed out that the UAE made a deal with Russia to abstain from the vote in return for Russian support for its proposal against the Houthis. On February 28, based on the proposal submitted by the UAE, the Security Council adopted Resolution 2624, and Moscow and Beijing along with nine other members, voted in favor, while four members abstained. Moscow's position on Yemen in the Security Council signals a departure from its previous approach. Over the past years, Russia had blocked a number of resolutions on Yemen. Moreover, objecting to describing the Houthis as a terrorist group or separately condemning the Houthis, Russia had also forced the Security Council to make amendments in terminology. In 2015, Russia abstained from voting on Resolution 2216, which affirmed the legitimacy of the intervention of the Saudi-led coalition in Yemen and the legitimacy of the internationally recognized government led by President Hadi.

The designation of the Houthis as 'terrorist'^[38] by the Security Council is an unprecedented development, affecting the leaders of the armed group, their Iranian backers and the Lebanese Hezbollah. It may also undermine the position of its local supporters, including businessmen who finance its war.

The Emirati position in the Security Council regarding Ukraine was informed by the good relations binding Abu Dhabi with Moscow and Beijing and by the Emirati interest in winning Russian support in the Security Council. This reflects the transformations in the GCC countries foreign relations during the past decade. The Arab Gulf states have sought to diversify their relations to guarantee their national security after the American retreat. Besides, there are more than 25,000 Russian citizens in the UAE. In addition, China and Russia view the UAE as the hub of their exports to the Middle East and Africa. Russian-Emirati relations have grown over the past decade to record levels, with trade exchange rising to more than \$4 billion in 2021. Both countries adopt identical policies with regard to the crises in the region, including Syria and Libya and as well as towards a number of African countries, while their policies converge in relation to Central Asia, home of the republics once part of the Soviet Union.

Therefore, Abu Dhabi's position, which implicitly supported the Russian attack on Ukraine, was returned by Moscow with a similar support for the Security Council resolution on Yemen, which was tabled by the UAE. After the first attack on Abu Dhabi on January 17, when the Russia-Ukraine crisis had not entered a war-oriented stage, Moscow saw the attack as a threat to the region and to Russian expatriates in the UAE, and described it as a 'terrorist act'.

Food in Yemen: There are fears that the war in Ukraine will affect Ukrainian and Russian wheat exports to Yemen. The country imports 80% of its basic food needs. Yemen imports 26% of its wheat from Ukraine, and over 20% from Russia. The country, which is already experiencing the world's worst humanitarian crisis, will be affected further if wheat prices rise globally. However, other countries currently avoid raising wheat prices for fear of Russian cut of prices that would allow Russia to gain access to new markets. At the same time, Yemen's wheat stock may cover the country's requirements for four months, in addition to the possibility of buying wheat from Romania, which produces the same quality of wheat as Ukraine. Yemen will be greatly affected, and wheat will rise to record levels if:

1. Russia expands in Eastern Europe.
2. the supply chain and international shipping are affected by escalation of the war or entry of other countries into the war. Yemen already suffers from high shipping insurance due to the risks in the Red Sea and the ongoing war.
3. oil prices rise and global measures to restore them to normal fail.

Consensus on conflicts: The Russia-Ukraine crisis does not simply signal the end of the post-Cold War era that has been unraveling over the past decade. It also marks the end of the post-9/11 era defined by counter-terrorism and global opposition to armed non-state actors.

In the new stage, whether Putin succeeds or fails, the Russian, and perhaps the Chinese, position towards armed non-state actors will depend on whether the group in question seeks to challenge the United States in a certain country or region. The ultimate goal will be to use such groups as a tool of exerting the utmost pressure on the US and Western countries generally. This projected scenario will influence the Yemeni issue, which has been the object of international consensus since the Houthi takeover of Sana'a in 2014. Peace efforts will especially be undermined. The Houthis and the rest of Iran's 'resistance axis' groups make it crystal-clear that they are opposed to the US and the West. Therefore, during the next stage, Russia may reverse course, violate the provisions of Resolution 2624 it voted in favor, and support the Houthis and other groups if urgent pressure is crucial in its war against Washington's allies.

On the other hand, this incident reinforces the enduring legacy of ideology and historical grievances. Iran stands as a good example of such grievances as it views the sanctions imposed on it as unjust, and deems the efforts to restore the Persian Empire as an essential step towards that goal.

Position of the Gulf States: The UAE abstention from the vote on the incursion on Ukraine confirms the frustration of Abu Dhabi, Riyadh and other Arab Gulf capitals with US policies towards the MENA region. For decades, the UAE and Saudi Arabia have marched to America's beat, but the decision to abstain from the vote confirmed that they are pursuing more independent foreign policy and cementing their relations with Washington's opponents in Moscow and Beijing.^[39]

Most of the Arab Gulf states, including Qatar, Bahrain, Kuwait and Oman, remained silent about the Russian incursion in Ukraine in an attempt to follow a neutral stance and to preserve cooperation with Moscow on geopolitical and energy issues, while deflecting western accusations that refusing to condemn Russia amounts to support for the attack on Ukraine. The US dubbed the UAE's abstention a 'dirty deal' between the two countries, accusing the UAE of bartering the abstention in exchange for Moscow's vote in favor of a resolution condemning the Houthis.

In a phone conversation in January, the Saudi king rejected Biden's request to pump more oil to the market^[40] to help keep oil prices down. Oil prices soared with the inception of the Russian attack on Ukraine, hitting a session high of \$105 per barrel, the highest level since 2014.^[41] Pumping more oil would reduce Russia's oil revenues. Russia earns \$660 billion in oil and gas revenues that can help it cope with US and European sanctions.

There was no American comment on the position of the Arab Gulf states and other Middle Eastern allies. However, in the near future the United States may resort to its well-known policy "You are either with us or against us" well-known to the Arab Gulf states throughout the war on terror era that commenced in the aftermath of 9/11 and the subsequent American invasions of Afghanistan in 2001 and of Iraq in 2003.

Till then, and over the few forthcoming weeks the GCC countries and the MENA region generally, like most of the world, will continue to hold their breath to see what scenario Putin will choose in his attempt to subjugate Ukraine. The war in Ukraine will have immediate social and economic consequences in the MENA region and will probably transform global geopolitics in unpredictable ways.

Oil and the Iran deal: The upsurge of oil and gas prices will probably mean reliance on other oil and gas producing countries to pump more oil and gas to help keep prices down, or, in a worst-case scenario, to fill the immediate shortage if Russia cuts off supplies to Europe in response to economic sanctions. This means that the Arab Gulf states will manipulate the Ukraine crisis to their advantage, and will probably be the only winner in this crisis.^[42] However, this bears actual political risks if Moscow views their manipulation of the crisis as alignment with the West.

It seems that the GCC countries are committed to the OPEC+ Pact to decrease production, stressing the refusal of OPEC+ to increase oil production and pump more oil to the market to keep prices low.^[43] Qatar pointed out its inability to cover European needs for gas in the event of a worst-case scenario, as it is bound by long-term contracts with countries that rely on its gas. For this reason, the United States may resort to Iranian oil and gas to pull prices down.^[44] This will provide Tehran with the advantage of capitalizing on global needs to make quick gains. However, this scenario is tied to the success of reviving the nuclear accord that the negotiators in Vienna are trying to achieve. Reliance on Iranian oil means that Tehran will have more resources at its disposal. Part of the funds will be devoted to supporting Iran's proxies in the region, principal among which is the Houthi group.

Putin after victory: Putin's ambitions will most probably grow after a victory in Ukraine. A victory in Ukraine may as well sharpen his appetite for partially restoring the standing of the Soviet Union in the MENA region. He currently has a foothold in Syria, and, through Iran's influence, may crave for a footing in Yemen. Likewise, through the influence of Abu Dhabi, if its position remains close to that of Russia, Putin may seek to restore Russian presence at the strategic Red Sea entrance that the Soviets enjoyed during the Cold War. By the same token,

he may seek to expand his influence in Iraq and Lebanon, which are adjacent to Syria, in search of consolidating the position of his 'empire,' and may go as far as Libya to face Europe and Turkey on the opposite side of the Mediterranean.



Conclusion

New geopolitical changes that will transform global politics and affect the Middle East loom large on the horizon. These changes are the first since the emergence of the world order in the aftermath of World War II. Such projected developments will have repercussions on the unipolar world order through which the United States ruled the world after the collapse of its rival, the Soviet Union, in the early 1990s. Yemen and the Arab Gulf states will be affected too. An American nuclear agreement with Iran, Russia's victory over Ukraine, or the United States' retreat from the region will make the fate of the Gulf region and Yemen uncertain, unless decision-makers rush to take preemptive measures. These include drawing the contours of the military status quo in Yemen and creating a new reality that cuts off Iran's expansion strategy, creating a balance of terror with the greedy countries, and dealing with international developments and wars from the standpoint of political, military, security and economic interests. It is high time that these countries abandon their age-old dependency approach and to realize that it is this approach that paved the way for the ascendancy of militias and gave way to such upstart groups to topple governments.

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