

Is There a Path Out of the Yemen Conflict?

Why it Matters

BY GERALD FEIERSTEIN

Among the countries affected by the Arab Spring, only Yemen was able to negotiate a peaceful political transition. In November 2011 Yemen's major political parties, with the support of the United States and the international community, signed the Gulf initiative that included provisions for the:

- replacement of the government of former President Ali Abdallah Salih;
- election of a new interim president; and
- establishment of a two-year roadmap for new presidential and parliamentary elections to include the creation of a National Dialogue as a forum to address Yemen's problems.

Taken on its own, the overall implementation of the initiative was relatively successful.¹ Yemenis elected Abd Rabuh Mansur Hadi as interim president in an election/referendum featuring a high voter turnout. The Yemeni military and security services, with substantial assistance from the United States, the United Kingdom, and other international participants, drafted new organization charts and set about restructuring their operations.

A National Dialogue Conference—the key step in the transition process—concluded in the spring of 2014 and a constitutional drafting committee worked through the summer to complete recommended revisions and amendments to Yemen's constitution for final approval by the National Dialogue.² By the fall of 2014, few steps remained before the Yemeni people would be able to go to the polls and elect a new government, completing a peaceful transition of power.

Developments outside of the initiative, however, were ominous and proved fatal to the transition process. Comprised equally of members drawn from Ali Abdallah Salih's General

Ambassador Gerald Feierstein served as U.S. Ambassador to Yemen from 2010–13 and as Principal Deputy Assistant Secretary of State for Near East Affairs from 2013–16. He now serves as the Director for Gulf Affairs at the Middle East Institute, where he is also a Senior Fellow.

People's Congress and the opposition Joint Meeting Parties, under the leadership of Prime Minister Mohammed Basindwa, the interim government was weak, dysfunctional, and riven by party and personal rivalries. Governance and security collapsed, while corruption surged to new levels. Sabotage and insurrection around the country brought economic activity to a halt as the capital, Sanaa, and other urban centers were plunged into darkness for days and weeks at a time.³

Despite the fact that the negotiators of the initiative were committed to addressing legitimate Huthi grievances and included in the roadmap special provisions to that effect, and despite the fact that the Huthis participated in all of the agreement activities (except for the February 2012 election of Abd Rabuh Mansur Hadi to serve as interim president, which they boycotted), and specifically endorsed the National Dialogue process, they remained a disruptive force.⁴ They refused to withdraw their armed elements from the resistance encampment in Sanaa, dubbed Tagher (Change) Square, and frequently adopted obstructionist positions within the Gulf initiative mechanisms.⁵

Most concerning, the Huthis resumed their siege of a Salafist madrasa in the town of Dammaj, forcing its evacuation and breaking a ceasefire that had existed for two years. Emboldened by their success at Dammaj, the Huthis continued their advance into Amran governorate, neighboring Sanaa. There, they defeated forces loyal to arch enemy Ali Mohsen (the architect of six failed military campaigns against the Huthis from 2003–09) and elements of the Hashid tribal confederation, followers of the al-Ahmar family that had also fought against the Huthis previously. Former President Ali

Abdallah Salih, despite his earlier antagonistic relationship with the Huthis, joined his forces with theirs, seizing the opportunity to confront their common enemies: the government of Abd Rabuh Mansur Hadi, Ali Mohsen, the al-Ahmars, and the Islah party—Yemen's branch of the Muslim Brotherhood.

The combined Huthi/Salih forces placed increasing military pressure on the government through the summer and fall of 2014 aimed at overturning the political process. The Huthi/Salih forces were able to take advantage of the weakness of the transitional government and the collapse of Yemen's security forces to move aggressively into Sanaa. In September 2014, the Huthis forced the signing of a new political agreement, the Peace and National Partnership Agreement, organizing a new government under Prime Minister Khalid al-Bahah. But by early 2015, amid fresh fighting between Huthi elements and government security forces, the Huthis moved to dissolve parliament and the government and force President Hadi to resign. Hadi, who had been placed under house arrest by the Huthis, fled initially to Aden in February 2015 and, when Aden itself came under attack, escaped to Oman and then Saudi Arabia, a month later.

As the political crisis deepened inside Yemen, the Huthis also menaced neighboring Saudi Arabia. Thousands of Huthi fighters and military cohorts joined military "maneuvers" near the Saudi–Yemeni border in a move clearly intended to provoke the Saudis. Mohammed al-Bukhaiti, a member of the Huthi Political Office, told the *Yemen Times* that "the maneuvers aim...to send a message to regional powers that the Huthi

popular committees will not allow any plots against Yemen to succeed.”⁶

Operation Decisive Storm Begins

The precipitous collapse of the Hadi Government, and the power grab by a group closely associated with the Government of Iran and hostile to key U.S. goals and objectives, alarmed the Obama Administration as well as our friends and partners in the region. In urgent consultations between the U.S. Government and the Government of Saudi Arabia in March 2015, the United States accepted that Saudi Arabia would intervene militarily to prevent the Huthis from completing their occupation of Yemen and would seek to stabilize the area around Aden to permit the Hadi Government to reestablish its operations in the south as a prelude to a return of the government to Sanaa to complete implementation of the Gulf initiative.⁷ For their part, the Saudis organized a coalition of predominantly Sunni Arab states, principally the United Arab Emirates (UAE), to support their military campaign. The United States committed to logistically support the Saudi intervention, including provision of limited intelligence information. It was further agreed that the intervention by the international community in Yemen should seek to:

- restore the legitimate government in Yemen to complete the implementation of the Gulf initiative and the National Dialogue;
- prevent a Huthi/Ali Abdullah Salih takeover of the government through violence;
- secure the Saudi–Yemeni border; and

- defeat Iran’s efforts to establish a foothold in the Arabian Peninsula threatening Saudi and Gulf security.

As events unfolded in the spring of 2015, the rapid collapse of the Hadi Government undercut Coalition plans to defend Aden and to establish a secure position there to push back against Huthi/Salih aggression.⁸ Despite initial optimism that the Saudi-led Coalition could achieve its limited military objectives quickly, the fighting devolved into a protracted stalemate. Forces loyal to the Hadi Government and the Coalition have secured most of the southern and eastern portions of the country while the Huthi/Salih forces are entrenched in the North, including Sanaa.⁹

The Costs of Conflict in Yemen

The Coalition has relied heavily on airpower in the conflict, placing it in a situation not dissimilar to the asymmetric warfare facing U.S. forces in places like Afghanistan. Members of the Coalition are fighting a low-tech insurgency where their massive advantage in sophisticated weapons is neutralized. The insurgents are mostly fighting on their own turf; they blend in with the local population, making identification of legitimate targets difficult; and they are willing to accept extraordinary losses to avoid defeat. The consequences have been considerable.

Saudi Arabia

The impact of the conflict on Saudi Arabia has been steep. The military has suffered significant casualties and Saudi security forces have proved incapable of defending their country from missile and ground attack;

the financial burden has been enormous at a time that the social safety net has been trimmed; and Saudi performance has been criticized domestically and internationally.

The Saudi air campaign has complicated Saudi relations with the Yemeni people, who hold Saudi Arabia responsible for the death and injury of thousands of Yemenis and trauma suffered by tens of thousands more. In retaliation for Saudi attacks inside Yemen, the Huthi/Salih forces have launched dozens of Scud and SA-2 missiles refitted as surface-to-surface missiles targeting Saudi cities, especially Najran and Jizan, as well as mounted cross-border raids into Saudi territory. As a result, the Saudis have suffered dozens of civilian and military casualties while being forced to evacuate civilians from towns and villages along the border.

The financial burden of the conflict in Yemen, too, has been considerable for the Saudis. Estimated costs of the Saudi air campaign in 2015 alone were in excess of \$5 billion.¹⁰ Moreover, the Saudis report that they have provided more than \$8.2 billion in humanitarian assistance to Yemen from 2015–17.¹¹

Perhaps the greatest, and most unanticipated, impact of the conflict has been the strain it has placed on Saudi Arabia's relationships with its key western partners, principally the United States and the United Kingdom. The reputational damage to Saudi Arabia and its Coalition partners should not be underestimated. Accusations of war crimes leveled against Saudi and Coalition armed forces and threats to end arms sales to the Saudis have the potential to inflict long



U.S. NAVY

International naval forces in the Arabian Sea in spring 2016 seized multiple shipments of illicit arms that the United States later assessed originated in Iran and were likely bound for Huthi insurgents in Yemen.

lasting damage to these relationships that go well beyond the scope of the Yemen conflict and could undermine the international community's determination to confront Iran's regional threats. Furthermore, as noted by the International Crisis Group: "The [Saudi] intervention has layered a multidimensional, thus more intractable, regional conflict between Saudi Arabia and Iran onto an already complex civil war, significantly complicating prospects for peace."¹²

Iran

For the Government of Iran, the Coalition's inability to defeat the insurgents and restore the legitimate government in Yemen is a significant win. Iranian support for the Huthis comes at very little cost in contrast to the financial, human, and reputational damage suffered by the Coalition.

During the past several years, there has been some debate as to the extent of Iran's support for the Huthis and whether the Huthis are an instrument of Iranian policy as determined by the Iran Revolutionary Guard Corps (IRGC) and the hardline factions surrounding Ayatollah Khamenei. In fact, while Iran's control over the Huthis may be less determinative than some have speculated, its intervention in Yemen's internal affairs in recent years has been unambiguous. It is difficult to discern any vested interest that Iran might have in Yemen aside from a desire to provoke and threaten Saudi Arabia and the other Gulf states.

In 2014, the Iranians exploited Huthi successes in Sanaa by encouraging and facilitating threatening actions on the Saudi-Yemeni border. Allegations of Iranian intervention have been a commonplace for years but there was never compelling

evidence to support the claim. Following the Arab Spring, however, Iranian support for the Huthi movement became clearer. Well before the breakdown of Yemen's political transition in early 2015, Iran was engaged in smuggling weapons, in some instances highly sophisticated weapons, to Yemen for the Huthis. In early 2012, Yemeni authorities seized a shipment containing fabrication equipment for explosively formed penetrators (EFPs), the improvised explosive devices (IEDs) used to devastating effect against American forces in Iraq a decade earlier, destined for a Yemeni businessman with close ties to the Huthis, according to a senior Yemeni security official.¹³ A year later, U.S. naval forces, in cooperation with the Yemeni Navy, seized an Iranian dhow carrying 40 tons of military equipment with markings indicating they came from IRGC facilities.¹⁴

Since the political situation in Sanaa deteriorated in the fall of 2014, Iranian intervention has expanded in scope and become more blatant. Former Secretary of State John Kerry told PBS Newshour in April 2015 that Iran had sent "a number of flights every single week" to Yemen with supplies for the Huthis.¹⁵ In addition to the materiel supplies, Iran dispatched IRGC Quds Force and Hezbollah trainers to assist the Huthis. A USA Today article, citing Reuters sources, quoted unnamed senior Iranian officials as saying that the Iranian Revolutionary Guards had hundreds of military personnel in Yemen training Huthi fighters: "About 100 Huthis traveled to Iran in 2014 for training, and the pace of money and arms transfers has increased since the seizure of Yemen's capital, Sanaa, this year."¹⁶ A number of IRGC personnel and their Hezbollah allies have been killed or captured in Yemen, but

compared to the toll in Syria, the losses have been negligible.

Between April 2015 and October 2016, U.S. or allied naval forces seized four weapons shipments from Iran for the Huthis, according to the U.S. Fifth Fleet Commander, Vice Admiral Kevin Donegan. The Australian Government released photos of an additional shipment of light anti-armor weapons seized from a smuggling vessel in January 2017.¹⁷ But there is no reason to believe that the various naval forces patrolling in the Red Sea successfully interdicted all or close to all of the Iranian weapons destined for Huthi forces. The bulk of Iran's weapons supply has been low-tech weapons, including small arms, C4 explosives, anti-tank and anti-armor missiles. During the conflict, however, Iranian weapons supplies have included increasingly sophisticated arms, including surface-to-surface and anti-ship missiles. In October 2016, USS *Mason* detected incoming missiles, deploying countermeasures to defeat the attack. That attack appeared similar to the attack two weeks earlier on an Emirati supply vessel. The U.S. Naval Institute News, citing experts, reported that the missiles resembled Chinese-built C-802 anti-ship missiles. The same model had been sold to Iran previously and reverse engineered by the Iranians, who fielded it as the Nour missile.¹⁸

The missile attacks, as well as a "drone boat" attack on a Saudi frigate in January, make explicit the threat from the Huthis and Iran to challenge shipping in the vital Red Sea waterway and the Bab al-Mandeb. Long before the crisis, President Hadi had warned of Iranian ambitions to gain a chokehold on the global economy through its ability to block shipping transiting the Strait of

Hormuz and the Bab al-Mandeb.¹⁹ In a rare video, Mehdi Tayeb, a senior cleric who reportedly advises Supreme Leader Ali Khamenei, acknowledged that Iran had provided the missiles to the Huthis, declaring that: "Iran's catering [sic] of missiles to the Huthis was carried out in stages by the Revolutionary Guards and the support and assistance of the Iranian Navy."²⁰ In a further development, the U.S. Office of Naval Intelligence in April warned of a possible threat to commercial shipping in the Bab al-Mandeb from naval mines possibly placed in the area by the Huthis.²¹

Al-Qaeda

Al-Qaeda in the Arabian Peninsula (AQAP) has also been a beneficiary of the political conflict in the country. Having suffered a series of setbacks from 2012–14 as a result of focused coordination and cooperation between the United States and the Hadi Government, AQAP has reconstituted itself and regained much of the ground that it lost. "In recent years," notes the Sanaa Center for Strategic Studies, "AQAP has heavily exploited the increasing polarization of Yemeni society, the retreating authority of the Yemeni state and security services, and gained significant financial largesse when it controlled the port of al-Mukalla from April 2015 to April 2016, such that today, AQAP and its affiliate Ansar al-Sharia are arguably stronger and wealthier than they have ever been."²²

In particular, al-Qaeda has successfully positioned itself within the framework of tribal resistance to Huthi advances in three governorates of southern and western Yemen, al-Bayda, Abyan, and Shabwah, capitalizing on specific socio-political, tribal, security and

economic dynamics there as well as perceptions that the civil conflict is, in fact, a sectarian struggle between Sunni and Shia Yemenis.²³ Although Yemenis are very conservative religiously, they are generally not drawn to al-Qaeda’s ideology. Nevertheless, desperate times call for desperate measures, and many Yemenis, confronting perceived existential threats to their social and economic survival, have aligned with al-Qaeda as a matter of self-preservation.

The idea that the Huthis are a “natural enemy” of AQAP because of their sectarian differences is a misconception. They have no history of fighting against al-Qaeda and may well conclude, as the Salih regime did, that

the presence of violent extremist groups is useful leverage in obtaining financial support and neutralizing western and regional opposition to their rule. As al-Muslimi and Barron of the Sanaa Center for Strategic Studies conclude, “as long as Yemen continues its slide into failed statehood and catastrophic humanitarian crisis, AQAP and similar groups will continue to thrive.”²⁴

Humanitarian Suffering

Rough estimates of civilian casualties since fighting began in March 2015 now exceed 10,000 killed with more than 40,000 injured, according to press reports, and the human toll continues to mount. The UN Office of



Yemen transportation map from 2012.

CIATWorld Factbook

the Coordination of Humanitarian Affairs reports that more than 3 million of Yemen's 27.5 million citizens have been displaced by the conflict, while more than half of the population is considered to be food insecure. Famine and epidemics of disease may be on the near horizon for Yemen.

This April, a humanitarian relief fund raising conference, co-sponsored by the Governments of Sweden and Switzerland, generated an estimated \$1.1 billion in fresh pledges, including a \$94 million commitment by the United States, or half of the \$2.1 billion UN appeal, according to press reports.²⁵ Despite the improved donor response, more than half the population, or 17 million people, is considered by the UN to be food insecure. The World Food Program's regional director, Muhammad Hadi, said in an interview that the WFP provided rations to five million people in March but it is seeking to expand deliveries to reach nine million "severely food insecure" people a month.²⁶ The humanitarian crisis is driven by supply and demand challenges.

On the supply side, a Famine Early Warning System Networks report from late March noted that: "recent food import data suggest that food imports into al-Hudaydah port recently declined sharply. As this port supplies many key markets in western Yemen, declining imports raise concerns about future supply levels and food markets that rely on this port as a source."²⁷ Overall, however, the UN Verification and Inspection Mechanism for Yemen (UNVIM) reported that March deliveries of food, fuel, and general cargo equaled a total of 636,810 metric tons—an increase of 223,467 metric tons from February.²⁸

The key to addressing the supply side of the food crisis confronting North Yemen, home to an estimated 75 percent of the total Yemeni population, is restoring to full operation the port of al-Hudaydah and guaranteeing access for humanitarian supplies. According to the UN, al-Hudaydah is the entry point for 70–80 percent of the country's humanitarian deliveries and an even higher percentage of commercial food and fuel imports. But operations at the port have been severely limited by damage from Coalition airstrikes in August 2015 and subsequent fighting. Port workers have been forced to offload cargo by hand.²⁹ The Hadi Government and the Coalition are insistent that the port is the entry point for Iranian smuggled weapons as well as a source of substantial funding to the Huthi/Salih war effort. They have, therefore, insisted on a rigorous system of inspection slowing the process of deliveries. The Huthis have also interfered in port operations, and their control of the road from Hudaydah to Sanaa, the principal route for supplies leaving the port, has posed an additional obstacle for humanitarian deliveries.

Early this year, the Coalition made clear its intent to cut off the Huthis from the Red Sea coast, known as the Tihama, believing that a successful operation to gain control of the coastal region would cripple the Huthi war effort and pressure them to return to the negotiating table. Coalition forces successfully seized control of the port of Mocha, 200 km (124 mi) south of Hudaydah, and began to move north. But progress has been stalled since March.³⁰ Local observers report that pro-Huthi elements are well-entrenched in Hudaydah, home to more than one million people, and warn that a military assault on

the city would likely be highly destructive. The observers voiced skepticism that, even with a successful operation, the Coalition would be able to maintain security, re-open the port, and open the roads to normal traffic.³¹ As of this writing, the planned offensive appears to be on hold.

Equally, obstacles to the distribution of food and medicines rest on the demand side. Even where food remains widely available in the marketplace, the lack of liquidity, exacerbated by the failure since August 2016 to pay the public sector salaries upon which 25 percent of Yemeni workers depend, has contributed to the developing crisis. The International Crisis Group reported that the failure to pay salaries “is a product of shrinking state finances, an acute liquidity crisis and the banks’ inability to move financial resources between areas controlled by conflict parties.”³² In a letter this April to UN Special Envoy Ismail Ould Chaikh Ahmed, Huthi “Foreign Minister” Hisham Abdullah proposed that a technical team drawn from Central Bank personnel in Sanaa and Aden, headed by a neutral individual, be allowed to operate from either Cairo or Amman. The team would communicate their decisions to the in-country branches of the Central Bank of Yemen (CBY) for implementation.³³ However, Deputy Central Bank governor Khalid al-Abbadi responded that bank management is not the issue. He reiterated that the failure to receive anticipated donor funding or oil revenue is the real source of the bank’s difficulties. He called again for the Huthis to permit the Sanaa branch of the CBY to function without political interference. Nevertheless, al-Abbadi did acknowledge that the CBY branch in Aden is in possession of YR 150 billion

(\$597 million)—an amount roughly equivalent to two months of the government payroll—in fresh currency from the bank’s Russian printers.³⁴

The Situation Today—Ending the Insurgency Will Not End the Conflict

Two years of fighting in Yemen reveal that the fissures dividing Yemeni society persist and will not be resolved by an end to the conflict. One potential flashpoint is the possible de facto re-division of Yemen along the pre-1990 border. The majority of anti-Huthi/Salih fighters in the former South Yemen, according to the International Crisis Group, belong to a network of loosely allied militias dubbed the “Southern Resistance,” who are fighting for independence and resistance to “northern invaders.”³⁵ These groups are likely to reassert their desire for southern independence once the threat from the Huthi/Salih forces is eliminated. While there are some outside of Yemen who might welcome that prospect, it is fundamentally an outcome to be avoided, as it will mean two (or more) failed states in the southern Arabian Peninsula, each one incapable of providing adequately for its population and both becoming breeding grounds for violent extremist groups.³⁶

Moreover, the two Yemeni coalitions that are parties to the conflict are, themselves, internally fragile. The Huthi-Salih alliance, in particular, is a marriage of convenience rather than a true partnership and is unlikely to survive in a political environment rather than an armed conflict. Long years of enmity between Salih and his followers and the Huthis have been papered over, not resolved. And both sides have political aspirations that will be difficult to reconcile when it comes to

a real political process. It has long been anticipated that the final act of the drama over political control in Sanaa will be a showdown between Salih and the Huthis, and signs of tension between the two sides abound.

The pro-Hadi Government side also contains the seeds of its own dissolution. The defense of Taizz, under siege by Huthi forces for 18 months, is divided between pro-Hadi forces aligned with the Muslim Brotherhood under Adnan al-Hamadi and forces aligned with the Salafist militia commander, Abu al-Abbas, who are both anti-Huthi and anti-Muslim Brotherhood, and receive support from the Coalition. Their internal conflict reflects deeper fractures within the pro-government coalition.³⁷

What this Means for the United States

Five years after Abd Rabuh Mansur Hadi's election as interim president started the clock on the only negotiated political transition of the Arab Spring, the future of the survival of Yemen hangs in the balance. In the almost certain absence of strong governance or law enforcement, the likelihood is that internal dynamics, as well as the revived tribal rivalries and enmities, will drive continued instability and conflict in Yemen, at great consequence to U.S. interests.

Saudi Arabia's Internal Stability

A failure in the campaign would open the House of Saud, especially King Salman and his son, Crown Prince Muhammed bin Salman, to charges of mismanagement and incompetence. It could increase tension surrounding succession and also affect the Saudi military, generating restiveness and a loss of morale. Domestic instability in Saudi

Arabia would have ripple effects globally and would complicate U.S. efforts to re-stabilize the region. The Kingdom is a pillar of the global economy, owing to its role as the world's largest oil producer, and Riyadh has partnered with Washington for promoting regional stability and security since the end of World War II.

Heightened Saudi-Iranian Tension

A Coalition failure to ensure that Yemen's government remains in friendly hands would almost certainly mean that the Iranians would, once again, seek to establish a military presence in Yemen threatening Saudi Arabia's southern border. The Saudis would see a need to respond, either militarily against Iran or by destabilizing the government in Yemen. This would mean, at the very least, prolonged instability on the Saudi-Yemeni border.

As Saudi Arabia perceives a heightened threat from an Iranian-supported, Huthi-dominated regime in Sanaa, they almost certainly will expect that the United States will step up its pressure on Tehran. For their part, the Iranians may see Huthi success in Yemen as further evidence that their campaign for regional domination is succeeding. This could encourage them to become more aggressive at challenging U.S. interests, particularly in the Gulf. A pro-Iranian regime in Sanaa would also represent a continuing security concern for freedom of navigation in the Red Sea and the Gulf of Aden. The Iranians may see that holding the global economy hostage by credibly threatening to close the Strait of Hormuz and the Bab al-Mandeb simultaneously is their most effective insurance policy against international pressure.

Gulf Cooperation Council (GCC) Cohesion

Saudi Arabia and the UAE are unhappy over the role that Oman has played in the Yemen conflict, which they see as enabling the Huthis and facilitating Iranian intervention. Should the Huthis succeed and establish a government in Sanaa that is hostile to Saudi Arabia and other Gulf states, there will likely be fingers pointed at the Omanis from Riyadh and Abu Dhabi. A failure may also generate tension between Saudi Arabia and the UAE. The Emiratis joined the Coalition to support Saudi Arabia, but they have reservations about the conflict, are dissatisfied with many aspects of Saudi leadership, and believe the fighting has gone on too long. An unsatisfactory outcome could have repercussions for Saudi–Emirati security cooperation.

U.S.–GCC Relations

Although the United States has been heavily criticized domestically for what is perceived as open ended support for an illegitimate Saudi war on Yemen, this is not the way it is perceived in the region. The Saudis see that U.S. assistance, including arms sales and tactical and logistics support, has been grudging from the start and steadily scaled back during the conflict. While the Trump Administration has suggested that it intends to change course, details of renewed cooperation are unclear. Opposition remains strong in the U.S. Congress and among the public. The Saudis may conclude that U.S.–GCC security cooperation is a one way street. When the U.S. perceives a security challenge, it calls for GCC support. But when the reverse is true, even in an instance where the Saudis believe they are confronting an

existential threat, the United States is at best a reluctant and unreliable partner.

Recommended Actions for the United States to Take This Year

The conflict in Yemen has grown more complex and can no longer be characterized primarily as a clash between two rival coalitions fighting for political power in Sanaa. Indeed, the social, economic, and political structure of the country has been fractured and Yemen’s ultimate survival as a unified country, which ought to be a principal objective of U.S. policy, is not assured. In view of that reality, the United States should seek to achieve several goals this year.

Secure a Limited Political Agreement through the UN-led Negotiations

UN Security Council Resolution 2216 remains the basis for a resolution of the political conflict in Yemen. While changes in the government may come about as a result of subsequent political negotiations, they should not be determined through force or violence. A successful outcome to the negotiations would provide for: the restoration of security in Sanaa; resumption of government operations while negotiations for a new interim arrangement continue; restoration of Central Bank operations; and the return of diplomatic missions to support the process. Utilizing Oman’s diplomatic channels to Iran, the willingness of the Iranian leadership to support negotiations should be assessed.³⁸

Assist the Saudi-led Coalition in Ending the Conflict

Achieving an end to the fighting is the *sine qua non* of progress toward a political

resolution. Moreover, it is important to recognize that Saudi Arabia has legitimate concerns about the potential Iranian threat to its security should a pro-Iranian regime come to power in Sanaa. Limitations on U.S. assistance to the Coalition, whether through restrictions on the resupply of munitions or denying advice and assistance to Coalition armed forces is counter-productive. The United States should reengage with the Saudi military and political leadership to strengthen Saudi border security and encourage a more careful, deliberative use of military force in Yemen, limited to defensive operations and emphasizing avoiding collateral damage. Offensive military actions should only be undertaken to advance the political process.

The fundamental reality that there is no purely military solution to the threat that al-Qaeda poses has not changed. Our objective of defeating and destroying violent extremism in Yemen is a long-term challenge and it requires that we take a long view on how to achieve it.

Relieve Humanitarian Suffering

Securing the port of Hudaydah remains the key to addressing the deepening humanitarian crisis in Yemen, which must be the highest priority. Coalition determination to mount a military offensive to take the port and city of Hudaydah appears to be fading in the face of tactical obstacles as well as intense international opposition. The pause provides an opening to seek a political rather than military solution to the problem. The UN has proposed, and the government and Coalition should accept, halting plans for a military

offensive and establishing a neutral third party mechanism to operate the port in exchange for a Huthi/Salih commitment to withdraw their forces from the port, city, and surrounding environs, including the road connecting Hudaydah to Sanaa. The neutral party would be responsible for inspecting all cargo, ensuring that the port was not being used in violation of the UN arms embargo, providing for unfettered access to the port for humanitarian relief organizations, and contracting with local transport companies to distribute relief supplies throughout the country.

Preserve the Goodwill of the People

AQAP's success in embedding itself within the larger Sunni resistance to the Huthi insurgency poses challenges to the United States. Legitimately concerned by al-Qaeda's ability to resurrect its presence in Yemen and potentially pose new threats to global peace and security, the United States has resumed kinetic operations to deter and defeat the organization. Although U.S. motivation is understandable and justifiable, the additional layers of complexity that we now confront in Yemen argue for extreme caution in conducting military operations targeting al-Qaeda there. The fundamental reality that there is no purely military solution to the threat that al-Qaeda poses has not changed. Our objective of defeating and destroying violent extremism in Yemen is a long-term challenge and it requires that we take a long view on how to achieve it.

Preserving the goodwill and cooperation of the Yemeni people is essential if we are to be successful, and there is no quicker way to lose that goodwill than through ill-considered military operations that generate high

numbers of innocent civilian casualties. Thus, military operations should be limited to those instances where our intelligence is impeccable, and we must maintain the standard of near certainty that there will be no collateral damage.

Recommendations for Outlying Years

If these efforts are successful this year, we should seek to accomplish additional steps next year. Without these measures, Yemen's continued descent into complete social, political, and economic collapse is all but guaranteed.

Establish a New, Time-limited Transitional Government

Based on the successful conclusion of UN-led political negotiations, the United States should support the establishment of a new, credible interim government with a mandate limited to implementation of the GCC transitional arrangement and the conclusions of the National Dialogue Conference and charged with conducting new parliamentary elections within one year.³⁹ During its limited tenure, the interim government can begin the process of restoring security and stability, repairing damaged infrastructure, and restarting economic activity.

Begin a Discussion of Reconstruction

The United States ought to help facilitate a pledging conference to begin a discussion of reconstruction and provide the Yemeni people with confidence that the international community will assist them moving forward. Yemen has suffered billions of dollars in damage to its infrastructure and key economic capacity. Beyond pledges for infrastructure reconstruction, the international

community can provide essential assistance in institutional capacity building, especially in providing adequate schools and health facilities. In addition, GCC member states have suggested that they would consider offering Yemen full membership in the organization (Yemen participates in a number of GCC specialized committees but is not a full member). Such an offer would be very well-received by the Yemeni population. **PRISM**

Notes

¹ Not everyone would agree with the characterization of the implementation of the Gulf initiative as reasonably successful. See Nadwa al-Dawsari, "Breaking the Cycle of Failed Negotiations in Yemen," POMED (May 2017), and "Yemen: Is Peace Possible," International Crisis Group Middle East Report No. 167 (February 2016). I would not dispute that there were shortcomings in the process, but the implementation was as good as could have been expected given the state of political organization, weakness of the political parties and civil society, and the deep fractures, especially within the southern movement that undermined coherent policy making.

² Both the Huthis and Southern Movement representatives expressed unhappiness at the outcome of the National Dialogue. Several southerners either resigned in advance or refused to sign the agreement. The Huthis boycotted after their representative, Dr. Ahmad Sharifuddin, was assassinated. Southern and Huthi unhappiness was particularly focused on the decision to create six "federal" units. While there was broad, albeit not universal, agreement that Yemen should institute a federal system, the drawing of new boundary lines among the federating regions was

poorly done and was clearly intended to disadvantage the Huthis who had supported federalism in principle. (The Islah Party, the Muslim Brotherhood affiliate, disapproved of the federal system in principle.) The author had many conversations with President Hadi about this issue, arguing that the country would be better off maintaining existing governorates as the federating units. But the President was determined to re-draw the map, observing that the Yemeni people would demand to see “something new.” In the end, his effort was probably the most significant cause of the failure to implement the conclusions of the National Dialogue Conference.

³ Author observations.

⁴ “Agreement on the Implementation Mechanism for the Transition Process in Yemen in Accordance with the Initiative of the Gulf Cooperation Council,” Article 21(d): “Examination of the Various Issues with a National Dimension, Including the Causes of Tension in Saada.” See also Haythem Mouazahem, “Yemeni Houthi Leader Committed to National Dialogue,” *Al-Monitor*, posted May 20, 2013.

⁵ Both on the Yemeni side and within the international community, there were extensive efforts to bring the Huthis into the transition process more constructively. The UN Special Envoy and the European Union representative, in particular, traveled frequently to Saada to meet with Abdul Malik al-Huthi and his inner circle to encourage their engagement. Despite those efforts, the Huthis remained obstructive both within the transition mechanisms and in the street.

⁶ Bassam al-Khameri, “Houthi Military Exercises Continue Near Saudi Border,” *Yemen Times*, March 16, 2015.

⁷ The author participated in the discussions as Principal Deputy Assistant Secretary of State for Near East Affairs

⁸ Aden wouldn’t be liberated until July 2015 when UAE forces successfully expelled the Huthi/Salih occupiers.

⁹ Coalition spokesmen accurately note that this leaves some 75–80 percent of Yemen’s landmass in pro-government hands. But the statistic is misleading, as most Yemenis live in the 20–25 percent of the country that is contested or in the hands of the Huthi/Salih forces.

¹⁰ Mehmood Hussain, “Saudi Intervention in Yemen and Its Impact on Saudi’s Economy,” *Foreign Policy News*, December 11, 2016.

¹¹ Handout from the King Salman Humanitarian Aid and Relief Center. The Saudis provided \$8.2 billion in assistance to Yemen between April 2015 and April 2017. The aid includes \$847,598,580 in humanitarian aid and relief, \$1,130,186,557 for aid to Yemenis in Saudi Arabia, \$2.95 billion in development assistance allocated to Yemen, \$2.276 billion in bilateral government assistance, and \$1 billion as a deposit in the Central Bank of Yemen.

¹² International Crisis Group Middle East Report No. 167, February 9, 2016, i.

¹³ Eric Schmitt and Robert Worth, “With Arms for Yemen Rebels, Iran Seeks Wider Mideast Role,” *New York Times*, March 15, 2012.

¹⁴ Barbara Starr, “Weapons Seized Off Yemen Point to Iran, U.S. Official Says,” CNN, January 29, 2013.

¹⁵ Oren Dorell, “Iranian Support for Yemen’s Huthis Goes Back Years,” *USA Today*, April 20, 2015.

¹⁶ Ibid.

¹⁷ C.J. Chivers and Eric Schmitt, “Arms Seized Off Coast of Yemen Appear to Have Been Made in Iran,” *New York Times*, January 10, 2017.

¹⁸ Sam LeGrone, “Destroyer USS *Mason* Unsuccessfully Attacked from Yemen,” *U.S. Naval Institute News*, October 10, 2016.

¹⁹ Conversation with the author.

²⁰ “Iranian Cleric Admits IRGC Provides Weapons to Huthis in Yemen,” Iran Observed, Middle East Institute, April 20, 2017.

²¹ Dale Wainwright, “Shipping Faces Fresh Yemen Mine Threat,” *Tradewinds: The Global Shipping News Service*, April 18, 2017.

²² Farea al-Muslimi and Adam Barron, “The Limits of US Military Power in Yemen: Why al-Qaeda in the Arabian Peninsula Continues to Thrive,” Sanaa Center for Strategic Studies, March 27, 2017, 3.

²³ Ibid.

²⁴ Ibid; Finally, it is the author’s experience that the Ambassador on the ground is a key player in maximizing the effectiveness of U.S. military operations, both as the main interlocutor with the host government and as the U.S. official with the most accurate perspective on the impact these operations are having on the ground. The role of the Ambassador should be preserved.

²⁵ “UN Seeks Help for Famine-Hit Yemen, Where a Child Dies Every 10 Minutes,” *Business World*, April 26, 2017, S1/8.

²⁶ Ibid.

²⁷ Yemen at the UN—March 2017 Review, Sana'a Center for Strategic Studies, 5.

²⁸ *Ibid.*, 7.

²⁹ Mohammed Ghobari, "Yemen's War-Damaged Hodeidah Port Struggles to Bring in Vital Supplies," Reuters, November 24, 2016.

³⁰ Yemen at the UN— March 2017 Review, 3.

³¹ Author interviews.

³² "Instruments of Pain: Conflict and Famine in Yemen," International Crisis Group Middle East Briefing No. 52, (April 13, 2017), p. 4.

³³ "Subject: Yemeni Salaries, An Update & Proposal," Letter from Hisham S. Abdullah, "Minister of Foreign Affairs, Sana'a" to H.E. Ismail Ould Cheikh Ahmed, UNSG Special Envoy to Yemen, April 15, 2017.

³⁴ Statement by Khalid al-Abadi, Deputy Governor of the Central Bank of Yemen, "Yemen—The Way Forward," A Yemen Crisis Workshop Co-sponsored by the U.S. National Defense University/NESA Center and the Gulf Research Center, May 5, 2017.

³⁵ "Yemen: Is Peace Possible," 12.

³⁶ There is no reason to believe that a re-division of Yemen would stop at the borders that existed between the Yemen Arab Republic and the People's Democratic Republic of Yemen prior to 1990. In 2011, the author hosted a lunch for a visiting senior U.S. Government official to meet with southern Yemenis. The discussion was dominated by representatives from Aden and Abyan, who argued on behalf of a re-separation of the country. Several guests from the eastern part of the country remained silent until the end of the lunch when they launched into a harsh indictment of the Aden/Abyan contingent and made clear that, should the country divide, they wanted an independent state of their own, comprising Hadramawt, al-Mahra, and Socotra. The other Yemenis were as nonplussed as the Americans.

³⁷ Maysaa Shuja al-Deen, "The Endless Battle in Taiz," Atlantic Council, April 26, 2017, 2.

³⁸ The Saudis argue that Yemen is an "Arab problem" and want to exclude Iran from the discussion. But Iran is a party to the conflict playing an unconstructive role. It is deeply involved in supporting the Huthi/Salih forces and exacerbating Yemen's internal problems. Hardline elements around Ayatollah Khamenei, especially the IRGC, have dominated Iran's Yemen policy until now. Deepening tensions between Iran and the Sunni Arab Gulf states of the GCC, however, are not in Iran's interest. Moreover, there is every reason to believe that Iran's

leadership fears that the current confrontation with the United States could lead to a war, with devastating consequences for Iran. Recent efforts by President Rouhani and Foreign Minister Zarif to engage friendlier GCC leaders in a dialogue to reduce tensions suggest that many in the Iranian leadership recognize this reality and would like to find a way to tamp down the regional tensions. Ending the conflict in Yemen would be the easiest and least costly avenue that the Iranians could pursue should they decide to adjust their strategy to the new conditions. There may be a window of opportunity following the upcoming Presidential elections to test whether the Iranians might be willing to encourage the Huthis to return to the negotiating table and find a peaceful resolution to the conflict. The Omanis would be the best positioned of the GCC countries to test this proposition.

³⁹ Any agreement on a new interim arrangement should not be open ended. The two-year transition envisioned by the GCC initiative has already extended to six years. There are only a few steps left to complete the implementation and those should be concluded rapidly. One outstanding issue will be the fate of Ali Abdullah Salih and his family. Permitting Salih to return to any position of authority, either directly or by remote control through his family, will make all of the efforts and the suffering of the last six years meaningless. Salih should be required to abandon his positions and leave Yemen permanently without any further involvement in Yemen's public affairs. Alternatively, he should be stripped of his immunity and prosecuted.

Photos

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