

The Hardest ‘Soft’ Approach on the Yemeni Crisis: An Opportunity to Retake the Initiative in the Middle East

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Key Points

- Risks, vulnerabilities, and opportunities: How the US looking away from Yemen’s ongoing conflict will favor China’s ascension in the region.
- Is there a truly viable way to peace? The real challenge for Yemen, as shown by the last few decades of their history, is not how to get peace, but how to make it last.
- While chasing short term goals seems to bring some volatile gains, long term benefits of stabilizing Yemen are invaluable for the US and the world.
- The KSA-Iran deal is the window of opportunity and Yemen the gate through which the US can begin to wrestle back the initiative from the global competitors regarding the Middle East region, in both diplomatic and economic domains.
- Solving the Yemen conflict through the USCENTCOM lens (People, Partners, and Innovation) is beneficial to all three of USCENTCOM’s Lines of Effort across AOR.
- As the world moves forward, due to increased and cheap access to information and technology, the use of military options through sheer force is becoming less efficient, being severely affected by the cultural and psychological make-up of the given target; thus, a paradigm shift in the way the force is applied is deemed necessary.

Introduction

Armed conflicts, across human history, brought unquantifiable loss of fortune, lives, and cultural diversity, effectively stalling, nullifying, or even reversing civilization progress, in countless occasions. This paper aims to clear the “fog of war” that is covering Yemen and the surrounding areas, by presenting the involved actors, their interest in the region, and their current and probable future actions. In addition, it provides a series of recommendations, focused on seizing the opportunities beneficial for both US and the Middle East partners, and leads on processes that might reverse the current trend in the Global Powers Competition, in the light of the new Chinese-brokered Iran-KSA reconciliation.

To effectively deal with conflict, one should always aim to identify the core causes, whether real, perceived or contrived. The real reasons must be addressed and the perceived ones clarified. The contrived must be unequivocally debunked. The struggle will not end until either this is completed or one side completely dominates the other(s). Various degrees of instability will be the result of a mix of imposed “solutions”.

In Yemen’s case, the underlying reasons of the crisis are not only represented by internal factors. As one of the attributes of being a regional/global power is represented by the ability to project influence over distant

countries or entities, this is one of the goals that Iran is seeking to achieve through involvement in the Yemen conflict. Hence, limiting this kind of action is a way to limit Iran's aspirations to become even more influential in the Middle East, along with denying Iran's *de facto* access, basing, and overflight (ABO) in the Southern end of the Arabian Peninsula, which can strongly affect the freedom of movement on strategic Red Sea lines of communication, in case a high intensity confrontation with the Islamic Republic (and not only) will suddenly spark.

Yemen, a land of historical struggles

Yemen's hostile and unstable environment draws its current configuration from deep historical roots, entangled relationships and cultural differences that greatly exceed the current efforts to stabilize the region, both by *scale* and *nature*, but also regarding the misplaced scope of varied parties.

For more than two millennia prior to the arrival of Islam, Yemen was the home of a series of powerful and wealthy city-states and empires whose prosperity was largely based upon their control over the production of frankincense and myrrh, and their exclusive access to various spices and condiments.¹



Figure 1. Yemen's Old Walled City of Shibam – the oldest metropolis in the world to use vertical construction.²

The lands witnessed the struggle for power between Romans, Arabs, Jews, Byzantines, Persians, Ottoman and British all the way until early 20th century. A consistent rift among Yemeni people was accentuated during the 19th century, when the British Empire took control over the Aden port and adjacent territories, while the Ottoman Empire seized the Northern Yemen lands, establishing themselves in Sanaa and Ta'izz.

The North became independent at the end of World War I in 1918. Zaydis' dynasty sought to extend its influence over "historical" Yemeni lands, which included an area farther north that had been occupied only recently

¹ Encyclopedia Britannica, "History of Yemen", July 26, 1999 – January 05, 2023, <https://www.britannica.com/place/Yemen/History>, (accessed January 8, 2023).

² Gulnaz Khan, "This Ancient Mud Skyscraper City is the 'Manhattan of the Desert'", *National Geographic*, April 3 2017, <https://www.nationalgeographic.com/travel/article/shibam-mud-skyscraper-yemen> (accessed January 9, 2023).

by an expanding Kingdom of Saudi Arabia, leading to clashes between Yemen and its neighbors. This aggressive attitude backfired in the South, where more statelets were considered fit to ally versus a threatening North. By 1965 all but 4 of the 21 protectorate states had joined the Federation of South Arabia. Shortly after, Britain announced that it will leave southern Arabia.

In the aftermath of the 1962 revolution, the imam fled to Saudi Arabia, and the new Yemeni Government asked for Egyptian military support. The revolution also generated an independence movement in the South, to which the British conceded in 1967, and the People's Republic of South Yemen was created. While the North went through a dreadful civil war until 1970 between revolutionaries and royalists in which Saudi Arabia, Iran, and Jordan supported the royalists, whereas Egypt, the Soviet Union and other Eastern-bloc states supported the republicans, South Yemen became a fully Marxist state under USSR influence.

After some shaky tides and the assassination of several leaders in both countries, the discovery of oil and natural gas in a region where both governments were laying claims (from Ma'rib to Shabwah) and the fall of the USSR created the conditions for the 1990 unification (which was previously publicly declared as desirable by both North and South), despite the ideological differences and economic development gap between the two states.

Yemen's refusal to join the US-Saudi military coalition against Iraq prompted Saudi Arabia to expel several hundred thousand Yemeni workers and to cut all foreign aid to Yemen; most of the other Arab oil states followed suit. Within months, the republic's economy plunged. Modest increases in oil revenues did not add much to the capacity of the new government to ease the growing suffering and to stem the collapse of the economy.³

Due to a failed secession attempt led by the Southern political formation Yemeni Socialist Party in 1994, the northern General People's Congress party took almost complete political control of the country, dominated by President Saleh. Their main issues at the time were generated by a border dispute with Saudi Arabia. Following several clashes, many rounds of talks and a Yemeni threat to resort to international arbitration, in June 2000 Yemen and Saudi Arabia signed the long-sought final border agreement.

The Saleh regime was caught in a continuous struggle to fulfill IMF/World Bank requirements and properly exploit oil and natural gas reserves on one hand, and pleasing the increasing mass of corrupt oligarchs that were supporting the regime on the other hand. This led to the failure to properly implement the legislative measures that would bring the so needed revitalization of Yemen economy. To this was added the increased radicalization of extremist Islamic militants in the area, which antagonized some Western powers, including the US, regardless of the assurance given by President Saleh himself in a visit to Washington in 2000.

Due to the aforementioned events, a Zaydī youth network, led by the charismatic activist and parliamentarian Hussein Badr al-Din al-Houthi, gained traction as an opposition movement against the regime. It reflected the general concerns of Zaydī revivalists, who worried about foreign influence in the country and regarded the Saleh regime as pro-American and pro-Israeli to the detriment of Yemen's people. While the Houthis started a series of open protests in the North in 2007, challenging even the republicans and contemplating the return of Zaydi dynasty, in the South protests were triggered by perceived (and often real) discrimination.

The 2011 Arab Spring was another aggravating factor. Amplified by foreign intervention, it generated a civil war with vast humanitarian consequences. The protesters chanted pro-democracy slogans and condemned poverty and official corruption. Yet the revolutionaries were organized by a coalition of opposition Yemeni groups.

After several cycles of attempted concessions and retracted promises, violence broke out, mostly between Government loyalists on one side and Houthis and AQAP (Al-Qaeda of Arabic Peninsula) on the other side. A wounded president Saleh signed an internationally mediated agreement to transfer power to Vice President Hadi in November 2011. Hadi was sworn in as president on February 25, 2012, after winning the elections.

But the difficulties continued. Much of the country faced shortages of food, water, and basic goods. In the North, Houthis and Islamist militants were increasingly active, while in the South a secessionist movement amplified. After the protests in September 2014, when Yemeni security forces opened fire on protesters, the situation escalated

³ Encyclopedia Britannica, "History of Yemen", July 26, 1999 – January 05, 2023, <https://www.britannica.com/place/Yemen/History>, (accessed January 9, 2023).

and the Houthi tribesmen took over the capital, Saana, and threatened to overrun Aden, which prompted the Saudi-led military intervention in March 2015, in support of now-in-exile Yemeni Government. Saudi-led bombing raids killed many civilians and did massive damage to Yemen's infrastructure but failed to loosen the Houthi rebels' grip on the capital.

In December 2018 an uneasy ceasefire was signed. In June 2019 the United Arab Emirates began disengaging its forces from Yemen as a victory seemed hard to achieve. Fighting intensified in early 2020 as Houthi missile attacks happened more and more often and the Saudis increased their air strike frequency.

The outbreak of the COVID pandemic led to falling prices of Saudi oil and generated concerns about the possible evolution of the pandemic in Yemen. Due to this, Saudi Arabia announced a unilateral ceasefire in April 2020. In the same month, southern secessionists declared self-rule under a body known as the Southern Transitional Council (STC). In June, the STC took control of the island of Socotra, ousting local officials of the Hadi government. After months of negotiations between the STC and the Hadi government, members of the STC were incorporated into the cabinet of Prime Minister Maeen Abdulmalik Saeed, in December 2020.

Fighting continued between Houthis (backed by Iran) and Islamist militias on one side, and government forces (backed by the Saudi-led coalition) and STC (backed by UAE) on the other side, until April 2022 when a ceasefire was signed which remained in effect until late October 2022. Sporadic clashes occurred between all aforementioned belligerents, regardless the affiliation. In the same year, Hadi announced his resignation and ceded power to a council formed of military and political figures in hope for a possible reconciliation. Both sides are struggling to impose conditions that are difficult to accept for the opponents, thus pushing the prospect of peace further and further into the future.

Meanwhile, war destruction, rampant corruption and impeded trade brought the country into the largest famine of the century. A staggering 23.4 million people — almost three quarters of the population — required some form of humanitarian assistance in 2022.⁴

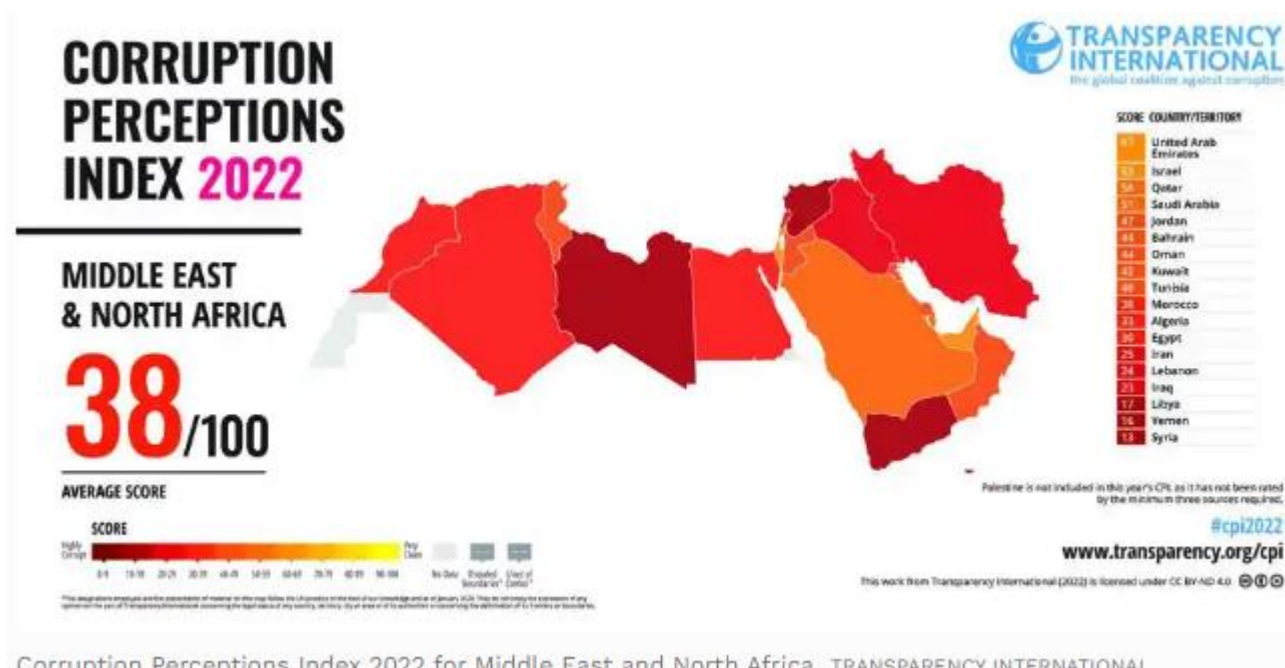
Current situation and possible developments

Aid agencies describe the situation in Yemen as the world's worst humanitarian crisis. The UN estimates that at least 377,000 people have been killed in Yemen since 2014. More than 4 million people have been displaced, running from the horrors of continuous fighting and air-strikes. Seventeen million inhabitants struggle for food daily. In Sana'a, there is food, but people don't have the money to purchase it. The situation is generated by the violence, but also aggravated by a bureaucracy that slows everything down, by closed mines, roads, ports, and airports. The fact that Yemeni cultivate khat, a psychotropic substance, instead of food on more than 90% of the arable land is also a problem. People lack jobs (with a roughly 25% unemployment rate)⁵, and when they do work, it is mostly temporarily and extremely low-paid, while prices of food, medicines and other basic commodities skyrocketed.

There seem to be an extensive disregard for and inability to provide the people basic needs or required public services from both the Houthis and Yemeni governments. The Houthis were supposed to pay the salaries for the public servants from the oil revenues (part of Stockholm agreement conditions) and port taxes revenues. Unfortunately, this does not happen, and the money mysteriously vanishes. At the same time, millions of children are out of school, a fact that will darken even more the prospects of this nation. Meanwhile, the whole country's infrastructure is a wreck, both from neglect/corruption and because of the repeated attacks from all parties involved in conflict.

⁴ United Nations Population Fund, "Yemen: One of the world's largest humanitarian crises", October 11, 2022, <https://www.unfpa.org/yemen>, (accessed January 09, 2023).

⁵ CIA.gov, "The World Factbook: Yemen", January 11, 2023, <https://www.cia.gov/the-world-factbook/countries/yemen/>, (accessed January 20, 2023).



Corruption Perceptions Index 2022 for Middle East and North Africa TRANSPARENCY INTERNATIONAL

Figure 2. Yemen is one of the most corrupted countries in the whole MENA region⁶

There are issues beyond the desires of the Yemeni people. The power is disputed between the International Recognized Government of Yemen (IRGY), Houthi rebels and the Southern Transitional Council (STC). In addition, various armed groups are expanding, with different goals and trajectories emerging during the conflict. Other extremist groups, like Al Qaeda in the Arabian Peninsula (AQAP), which emerged in 2009, play a more peripheral role in the power struggle equation, but are complicating the perception of the whole security picture of the embattled Yemen. In theory, the UN has the lead when it comes to settling international conflicts. Still, in practice, not much progress was made through the efforts of UN institutions since the violence ignited in Yemen. While the UN Security Council issued Resolution 2216 in May 2015, which authorized a coalition led by Saudi Arabia to intervene and restore order in the country, regionally, the Kingdom of Saudi Arabia (KSA) and United Arab Emirates (UAE) are the most important players since both are the major contributors to the coalition that is struggling to restore the peace, also backed by the US, during various moments of the conflict.

Undoubtedly, the Islamic Republic of Iran is deeply involved in this conflict, supporting the Houthis, seeking to spread not only the Shia ideology but also its influence across the Middle East, maintain military access in the region, destabilize the surrounding governments not supportive to the Tehran regime, and forging a new ally for its relentless struggle against their archenemy, Israel. Consequently, Hezbollah is supporting the Houthis cause, through training, counseling on using new technologies and even by kickstarting fund-raising campaigns in various countries.⁷

While Saudi Arabia has been trying to get out of this costly conflict for some years now, the UAE is also militarily involved, backing the Southern Transitional Council.⁸ China adopted a safe stance after 2014, retreating its personnel from Yemen. Yet, at this time, considerable amounts of oil and other resources are pouring towards China

⁶ Dominic Dudley, "Corruption Is Fueling Violence Across The Middle East, Says Transparency International", *Forbes*, January 31, 2023, <https://www.forbes.com/sites/dominicdudley/2023/01/31/corruption-is-fueling-violence-across-the-middle-east-says-transparency-international/?sh=1d8edb6ac457> (accessed February 2, 2023).

⁷ Hamdi Malik, Michael Knights, "Kataib Hezbollah Behind "Grassroots" Iraqi Fundraising for Yemen", *Washington Institute*, February 1, 2023, <https://www.washingtoninstitute.org/policy-analysis/kataib-hezbollah-behind-grassroots-iraqi-fundraising-yemen>, (accessed February 2, 2023).

⁸ "Yemen country profile", *BBC*, April 17, 2023, <https://www.bbc.com/news/world-middle-east-14704852>, (accessed April 22, 2023).

through Yemeni ports. Beijing is hoping for solid contracts and projects in Yemen's infrastructure and economy once the dust settles. Russia lost its foothold in Northern Yemen in the 1990's and momentarily it is difficult for them to find an easy way back, or to maintain a sizeable presence in the Southern part of the Arabic Peninsula.

From a diplomatic perspective, the appetite for a political solution seems to be growing. The Gulf Cooperation Council asked on September 2022, during a meeting in Riyadh between its Secretary General, Nayef Al-Hajraf, and the US Special Envoy to Yemen, Timothy Lenderking, for the international community to intensify the "pressure" on the Houthi group in Yemen to engage in the peace process and resolve the crisis in the country.⁹ The current talks between Iran and Saudi Arabia in April 2023, brokered by China, seem to make room for a political solution that should end the conflict in Yemen. The talks led to a breakthrough agreement to re-establish diplomatic relations and re-open both sides' embassies after years of tension and hostility. Iran's UN mission said that the agreement could accelerate efforts to renew the lapsed cease-fire.¹⁰ Several rounds of discussion led, among other results, to a series of prisoner swaps between the Houthis and Saudi Arabia.

From military and governing perspective, US Department of State reported that, along with the country's former capital, Sana'a, the Houthis control a vast proportion of the population (roughly 80%) and about one third of Yemen's territory¹¹, mostly in the Northern part of the country. The group is continuously putting military pressure on other locations too, threatening to take over large, inhabited centers, like Marib and Taiz.

Yemen, a blackhole for international funds and logistical effort

While aid is pouring towards the country from various direction, it is still not a sustainable way to deal with the issue, since many have virtually no job, hence are not producing the bare minimum needed for them and their family's survival. Most of the merchandise needed in Yemen is imported, often at very high prices. The cost of living in the country is just 21.1% lower than in US.¹² On the other hand, both support for the country as well as the military operations conducted by multiple governments represent a drain for the involved governments' treasuries and for the agencies and people that contribute with their income to alleviate the ongoing crisis. We should also take into consideration the capital loss generated by the loss of life and property due to war, loss in trade, manufacturing/productivity, infrastructure, and general development in all fields, which were extremely detrimental for both Yemen and external actors. These amount in the range of trillions of dollars since the conflict had started. Due to Yemen's corruption, faulty trade system, and acute need for food and basic merchandise, people situated in positions of power from both the government and the Houthi group, as well as stal actors, are making fortunes, to the detriment of the Yemeni people, wasting their resources along with the aid poured into the country.

Certainly just one line on a long list, China is a prominent example of this situation. In 2021 alone, China exported \$2.71B worth of freight to Yemen, while receiving just \$411M in return, from which \$404M was crude oil, at a convenient price for Beijing.¹³ This represents around 15% of Yemen's GDP for the respective year. In these conditions all aid efforts will simply melt away in the deficit ocean of the country. Continuing in this manner is not going to solve anything, except more money lost from various treasuries.

⁹ *Middle-East Monitor*, "Yemen: GCC calls for pressure on Houthis to engage in peace process", September 15, 2022, <https://www.middleeastmonitor.com/20220913-yemen-gcc-calls-for-pressure-on-houthis-to-engage-in-peace-process/>, (accessed September 25, 2022).

¹⁰ Global Conflict Tracker – *Center of Preventive Action*, "War in Yemen", April 25, 2023, <https://www.cfr.org/global-conflict-tracker/conflict/war-yemen>, (accessed April 26, 2023).

¹¹ US Department of State, "2020 Report on International Religious Freedom: Yemen", May 12, 2021, <https://www.state.gov/reports/2020-report-on-international-religious-freedom/yemen/>, (accessed May 12, 2023).

¹² *NUMBEO*, "Cost of living in Yemen", https://www.numbeo.com/cost-of-living/country_result.jsp?country=Yemen&displayCurrency=USD, (accessed May 7, 2023).

¹³ *The Observer of Economic Complexity*, "China / Yemen", February 12, 2022, <https://oec.world/en/profile/bilateral-country/chn/partner/yem>, (accessed September 24, 2022).

Why there will be no SASE¹⁴ in Yemen, despite the whole “peace” current that is now sweeping the region.

Unfortunately, regardless of ongoing “peace negotiations”, one should not overlook the following facts:

- There are heavily armed groups roaming around the country.
- The above-mentioned groups are financially and politically motivated.
- The underlying ideological motivation of the conflict will still exist.
- A peace will not favor Iran’s agenda, and IRGC-QF has a strong influence over a big portion of the groups.
- There is not a true consensus even between the groups that are fighting on the same “side”, not to mention opposing ones.¹⁵
- As of May 2023, the fight for urban centers is still ongoing, people being killed day by day, despite the negotiations.
- The country is unable to sustain itself in the present situation, leading to new waves of radicalization or riots, leading to renewed hostilities, in short order.

According to journalist Najm Al-Din Qassem, “Saudi Arabia’s exit from Yemen is what the Houthis are seeking. What is happening is a clear handover of Yemeni to the Houthis and a clear path for subsequent wars and crises”.¹⁶ So, not everyone shares the same optimism about a peaceful resolution on Yemen conflict, or about how long will it last.

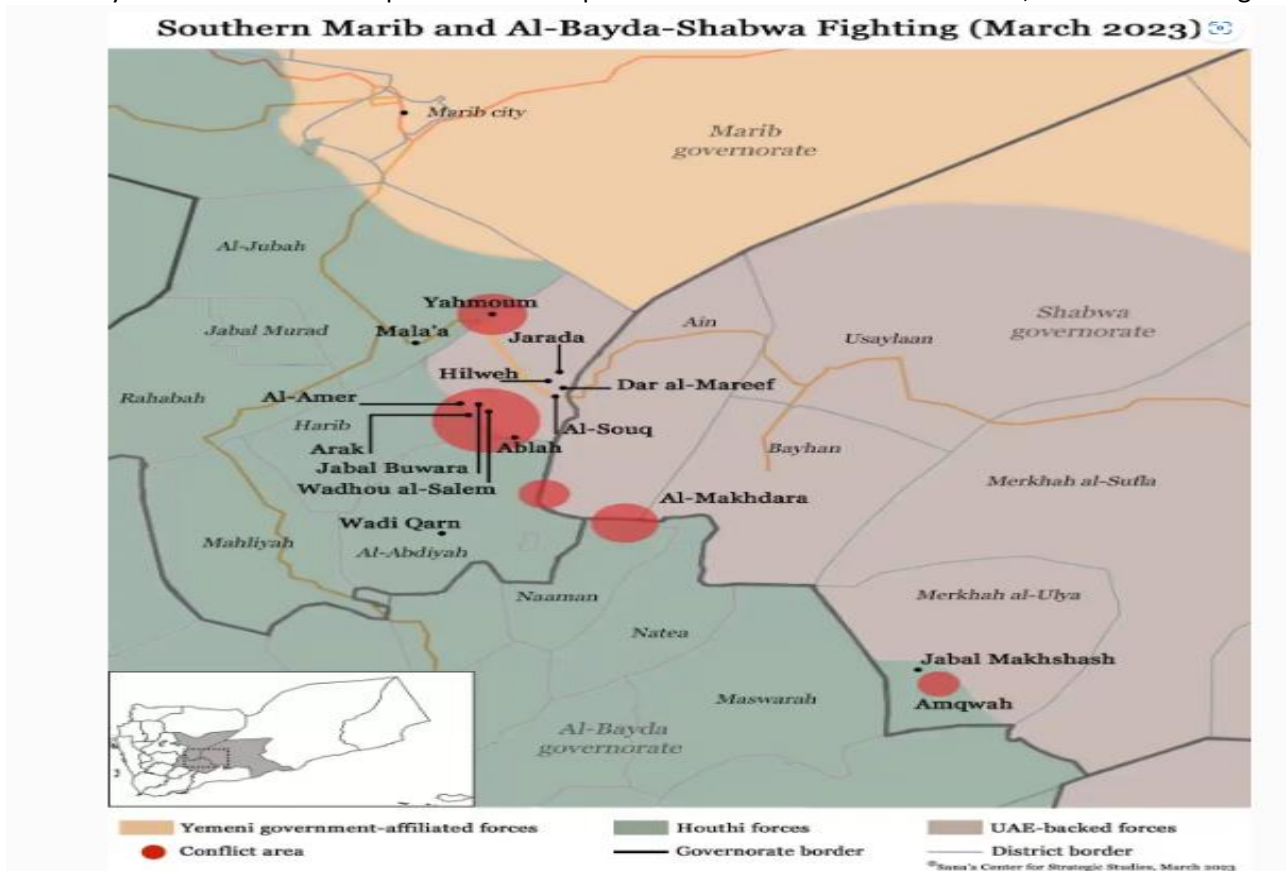


Figure 3. Recent clashes among various parties have a worryingly high frequency ¹⁷

¹⁴ Safe and secure environment.

¹⁵ Nawda Al-Dawsari, “Fantasies of State Power Cannot Solve Yemen’s War”, *The Century Foundation*, July 13, 2021, <https://tcf.org/content/report/fantasies-state-power-cannot-solve-yemens-war/?agreed=1>, (accessed November 23, 2022).

¹⁶ ALIA YOUSSEF, “Saudi delegation seeks end to Yemeni Civil War”, *The Jerusalem Post*, April 17, 2023, <https://www.jpost.com/middle-east/article-739452>, (accessed April 20, 2023).

¹⁷ Sana’a Center of Strategic Studies, “Fighting Escalates on Multiple Fronts”, April 14, 2023, <https://sanaacenter.org/the-yemen-review/march-2023/20001>, (accessed April 18, 2023).

There is a possibility that the Houthis will only make little concessions, proving unwilling to give up at the negotiations table what they won on the battlefield. And, considering insufficient or ineffective international pressure directed against their actions, they may consider it proper to continue the assaults to gain new territories. A proof of this is the continuous siege on Ta'iz, which was not lifted, despite this being stated as a condition of the last year's armistice. The much-publicized KSA-Iran deal is also unlikely to be the silver bullet for the Yemen struggle. Shall the deal be fully implemented, if the Houthis will be left unchecked, one of the developments presented below might occur for Yemen:

- Yemen dispute will be used to covertly advance Iran's agenda (since Iran will be restrained by the Saudi deal to do any bold moves) keeping KSA, UAE and Israel under threat and, sooner or later prompting a strong reaction of one of the three (most likely); hostility towards US will also continue.
- Iran will limit its regional ambitions (unlikely) and lose appetite to support Yemen; the fragile country's economy, without any real support, will collapse and lead to wide social unrest, further radicalization of the country and restart the violence cycle all over again.
- KSA, regarding its 2030 vision for a stable region, will put some effort to support and stabilize the country, regardless the regime. Yet the ideology and deeply entrenched corruption in Yemen will effectively counter these efforts and quickly become a burden since it is extremely difficult to drag along a country with similar population but virtually no real economy to speak of, not to mention all the grudges and strings attached (probable).
- Yemen splits in two (or more) regions, each one controlled by various statal or non-statal actors, permanently competing for economic and political goals. This represents the worst-case scenario for both Yemen and its close neighbors, so is preferable to not be advocated or supported by any party.

Why does US need a stable and friendly Yemen?

- Unlike the above stated possible developments, the situation will change rapidly should China decide that it is a good time to step in soon. When the situation in Yemen degrades further, they will have to accept China's offer, and some conditions along with it; China has both the capacity and the motives to get involved. Such an event will put Yemen into a one-way path, favoring China's long-term strategical interests to turn Yemen into their strong and permanent foothold in the Arabic Peninsula. Dominating the country's economy will open the way for China to obtain unparalleled military concessions, ultimately setting in place a likely impenetrable A2/AD¹⁸ umbrella through which it can control at will the maritime traffic through both Red Sea and Hormuz Strait.
- Being hindered by an eventual deal with the Arab Community, Iran would be forced to slow down the tempo of its operations in Iraq. Syria's reintegration in the Arab League would likely see a sizeable portion of IRGC-QF supported militia evicted from the Syrian front, too. Moreover, there are talks for a viable solution addressing the Palestinian issue. All these events will limit Tehran options to manifest its influence in the Middle East in Yemen and some few other areas controlled by Iranian-affiliated extremist groups. Putting a ridge between these two extremist regimes would be a significant step in the process of effectively deterring Iran's actions in the region.
- Left unchecked, the Houthi arsenal will grow, in few years, beyond Israeli's Iron Dome ability to defend its territory.
- Simply having peace in Yemen will not change Houthi sentiments toward US or Israel; subsequently, we might witness random attacks aimed towards the citizens or assets belonging to these nations.
- The military and economic strain to keep extremism at bay in the region is showing its financial and diplomatic cost for both US and its partners.

¹⁸ Anti-access/Area denial

- US properly supporting regional partners to attain a SASE in the South of the peninsula would see KSA and others being happy to oblige to various US requirements, in return, in the years to come. The trust will grow and the US will remain “the partner of choice” for many.
- A safer trade flow in the region would benefit everyone.

Taking the opportunity to seize the initiative in the Middle East

Is the KSA-Iran current negotiation a curse or a blessing in disguise for the US? As it concerns Yemen, I would opt for the second. Until recently, Iranian boats filled with weapons floated towards, their drones flew over and IRGC-QF “counsellors” walked all over the embattled Yemen. In the light of the freshly reopened diplomatic relations with KSA, all this must stop. For a certain degree, this is true for other Iranian proxies too. But not as stringent as in Yemen’s case. Large conflicts require vast amounts of resources that cannot be simply “sneaked in”. So, either Iran must be true to its word and abandon its Houthi allies to their fate, or will chose to break the deal in its inception. I would call this a win for the US. At the same time China, despite brokering the deal, is less like to effectively counter the eventual slip-offs, not only because it doesn’t have the will to get involved, but also because the lack of proper assets in the area, which would turn the hopes towards US again.

May Iran be true to its word, the Houthis, at the same time lacking resources and diplomatic support, would feel betrayed by their main ally and the rupture would widen as days go by. While the fighting inside Yemen never truly stopped, not restrained by Iran’s agenda, the Houthis will either follow a road towards peace, or turn against their people and neighbors once more, which might also deem US support for its regional partners necessary.

In case the hostilities will cease, US security expertise and assistance would be required too, to stabilize the area and to guide the process towards a peaceful resolution. If this does not happen, US will remain one of the few choices to support limiting the conflict, since Iran will not contain its former ally, Russia has its plate full for the moment and does not currently have strong ties in the region, China is not likely to get involved on the ground and the GCC countries still have divergent opinions about what’s going on with Yemen.

How does Yemen fit within USCENTCOM operational framework?

By observing the *modus operandi* of IRGC-QF in Yemen, it seems they were quite proficient in applying USCENTCOM’s strategic approach “People, Partners, and Innovation” to gain the country’s support. People were engaged mostly through ideology. Hezbollah and other proxies were brought into the scene as links for the Arab populace and aides-de-camp of the Iranian Guards. Loads of Iranian and Chinese tech poured into Yemen through Iranian hands, giving the Houthis an unexpected edge over the governmental forces and other combatants.

To undo this, the same principles should be consequently overlayed over the battlefields and population: strongly targeting the ideology, drawing partnership (not only from outside but also from within the country) and supporting partner goals in the process, while seeking to bring innovation, but not as much in the military domain as in the day-by-day lives of the people. This, in turn, will further catalyze the success of the previous two principles.

Properly supporting the Gulf countries to tackle the Yemen crisis will bring about progress alongside CENTCOM’s three main lines of effort:

- Iran deterred by being prevented from turning Yemen in a vast “aircraft carrier” for themselves, losing a partner, recruitment base, a foothold in the region and the possibility to use someone else’s hand in businesses that require “plausible deniability”. And, more important, having their pan-Islamic dream cut short!
- VEO threats from Yemen severely diminished.
- China kept at bay both by not being able to overtake Yemen and set a powerful A2/AD system in the area and by US regaining diplomatic initiative, along with the trust of regional partners.

Is there the need for a paradigm shift in the way radicalized populations are being approached in the 21st century? What does a comprehensive plan to pave the road for true stability within the region require?

As Lord Palmerston said that a nation has no eternal friends, he also said that it has no perpetual enemies. Any given country should be wary to forever brand others as such, this being a quite counterproductive stance. It would be helpful to consider the value of these thoughts before “vilifying” Yemen (not like gruesome incidents are not happening, with a terrifying frequency, in that country). Throughout history, including recent events, the tendency was to simply suppress the will of other nations through sheer military power with little consideration to specific nuances such as culture or will of the given population. The intention was, generally, to induce a *change*, to reach various ends. But, ignoring the human factor led to failure, regardless the amount of power applied (short of extermination), for most cases. This situation invariably backfired, dragging down even the largest empires in the process. Yet, the history that is not learned tends to repeat itself. Even in our present days! After 20 years in Afghanistan, and countless trillions of dollars spent, the mightiest coalition in the world decided to withdraw, with not much to show for the effort. Considering the main goal as being, again, a change in the Afghan perspective, one could say the results were less than optimal. The desired change could be attained through suppression, which would certainly not last, or through a comprehensive process of transformation, that will combine the military might with economic diplomatic and educational instruments.

It is true that KSA, UAE and other US partners in the region have their right to defend themselves, and the right to a peaceful, undisturbed existence. It is also true that the US and other countries’ interests are being threatened by the ongoing conflict in Yemen, and it is obvious that Yemen is in an acute need of change. For themselves and for the others around. But just plain use of military power, as in Afghanistan’s case and countless others before, didn’t seem to cut it. As long as Yemen’s core problems still exist, the prospect for new fighting outbreaks is there, regardless how many accords are signed, and with who. Therefore, to stabilize the country, and the region along with it, the above said transformation, on all walks of life, is essential. A transformation that should aim, within a generation, to demilitarize the factions, deradicalize the population, normalize relations between people and nations, wash the “culture of death” out of their collective mind, restore trust in a capable, transparent, and located-in-the-country government, and restore the subsistence means of the population. Until these conditions are fulfilled, the crisis premises will be there, and the peace talks are just talks.

Regarding Yemen’s and US views, relative to each other, it can be said that without having opposing interests between the two countries the grudges will fade, making room for better relations and possibly cooperation. While there are not insurmountable divergencies of US interest regarding to Yemen, on the other hand, stabilization of the country and partnership with the US would be highly beneficial for both sides. It would also pose a good counterbalance for the somehow monopolistic US diplomatic relations with KSA, prompting the Kingdom to be more cautious in their international endeavors, shall they opt to maintain an undamaged preferential status in their “partner of choice” two-way equation with the US. One must understand that Yemen is not just the Government, but all the groups inside the country’s borders.

Considering the fragmentation of the country’s population and the permanently shifting allegiances of the tribes, the weakness of the Yemeni government and the dominance of the Houthis, a fair chance of participation in talks and to contribute to the transformative effort should be given to each distinct group. With the initial consent of the groups, deep expertise of KSA/UAE and logistical support (like current one but applied in an organized matter), along with a series of conditions to be met in return, projects are to be initiated all over the country, regardless of who controls the regions. If damaging intent be directed towards the people rebuilding the country, only then will the Coalition step in promptly to defuse the threats. Yet the effort to secure the projects, while not as intensive as the current conflict, would still bare risks and require considerable resources.

While China can bring leaders to the negotiations table, until now it did not appear on the field to enforce the agreed plans. On the other side, the US can reliably back-up its agreements and support its partners, strengthening their position as the “partner of choice” in the Middle East. A quick fix is not to be expected. A generational problem needs systemic, multidisciplinary, generational approach. Things should move, as USMC Maj. Gen. Sean Salene says, “at the speed of trust”.¹⁹ Trust among local people, trust in states and agencies, trust between partners and, why

¹⁹“CENTCAST Episode 10: Partnering at the speed of trust”, *U.S. Central Command Public Affairs*, April 25, 2023, <https://www.dvidshub.net/audio/73746/centcast-episode-10-partnering-speed-trust>, (accessed April 28, 2023).

not, the complete trust of the opponents that they will be met with firm response, shall they try to impede the peaceful process. This takes time, but the establishment of peace, stability and relationship that will grow along with the said trust will be there to shine for a long time, benefiting all involved, including the US.

And, within a generation, we can speak about normal people, in a normal country.

While resources used to fuel the process (and not wasted, for once) will be slowly regenerated, time is not the issue because time was spent in all the relatively recent conflicts, yet many are still pending for a resolution. Time, we have.

Initiatives applicable to Yemen

While the primary focus should be on the political reconciliation between all the groups, to set the stage to implement a comprehensive plan that will meet much lower resistance (at least compared to the successive military confrontations), there are other things that can be done to pave the way towards peace and transformation of the Yemeni society:

- Bring the Yemeni government back in the country - this should be the first step, otherwise the trust cannot be achieved and the well-being of the well-fed/financed politicians and their families from abroad will not be connected to their country's fate. Their "decisions" impact is also low.
- Erratic and inconsequential flow of funds towards the country should be interrupted; this will send a wake-up call to all parties, will stop funding the war and will give them extra motivation to head towards the negotiating table. Population will also be more eager to get involved in future projects.
- Weapons for food campaigns: offering basic products, countrywide, to those submitting military equipment, weapons and ammunition. This campaign, paired with stricter border and sea control, will deplete, in time, the weapons stockpile of the Yemeni people.
- Medical assistance and disaster relief, with the involvement of the US military and proper STRATCOM of the events.
- Aid distribution should be ID based, so that persons with criminal records can be sorted out.
- All aid and funds for projects distribution management should be imparted directly to people/projects, with the help of the military. This will also enhance the HUMINT capabilities in the region with at least one order of magnitude.
- Distribution of aid will be conditioned by participation in the education programs.
- The aid should flow as long as the respective region/district or tribe is compliant with the agreed conditions and no attacks are conducted against their own people, international actors or other countries; this "double" policy will continuously undermine Houthi authority in controlled areas, effectively offering to people a choice between fight and peace. Given enough time, it will turn the Houthi regime into a shell of its present power, until it will finally collapse. At the same time, the new generation of educated people will not be so prone to take the arms as fast as the people do now.
- Gradual insertion of various subsistence economic projects across the country; this will keep people occupied and will provide an income that will reduce their financial dependency on the militant groups. It will also make it more difficult for the militias to support the much higher cost for recruiting, especially considering their dwindling funds.
- Education for de-radicalization: As the economic projects will spread through the area, schools will follow, while project continuation will be linked to school attendance.
- Quickly and frequently stepping in to defuse the known tensions will lead to a shift in mentality towards peaceful resolutions, as time without clashes goes by.
- Securing the projects as they expand will provide a different way of applying the military power: to build prosperity and durable peace while creating stronger than ever ties with the regional partners and, of course, effectively diminishing global competitors' influence in the AOR.

Conclusions

Yemen, considered by the Arab tribes as the birthplace of their ancestors with its key geographical positioning and complex historical ties with the neighboring nations, could represent the cornerstone for either strategic control of the area, or for a positive reset of US-Middle East relations, shall an inclusive plan be laid down, and the needed resources and effort be dedicated to see it fulfilled.

There is no golden path to solve the precarious and volatile situation in Yemen. Still, it is paramount to compare the short versus long term benefits and disadvantages across the whole DIME field when we think about a proper strategy for this country. Also, one should contemplate using DIMES concept, instead just DIME, since enriching this overall view with the *Social* component could weigh heavily on changing the dynamics of a given country's future course, according to the "cultivated" guidelines.

The conflict would drag indefinitely if the resources spent by all sides in fighting and by the endless yet hopeless stream of humanitarian efforts will not coagulate into a strategy that has at its center Yemeni living conditions and education. If this will happen, it will be a generation-long process, but the reward of getting rid of most of the current expenses in the area, reassuring the regional partners of US full support, benefiting from cheap labor and strategic positioning of a new economic and military partner, while keeping the global competitors away, would be invaluable for the allegiances of the countries in the region, considering the shaky future ahead. Some would label this as a "western imperialistic agenda", but one should consider the simple fact that, in this way, many Yemenis will at least have a future to speak of! Right now, the possibility for Yemeni people to choose how to live their lives is virtually nonexistent.

Wrestling Yemen out of Iran's grasp while it's struggling with war and famine, to create an environment that will bring the benefits presented above is not easy task. Yet it still presents itself, in the long run, as a cheaper, more reliable, convenient, and effective way of dealing with this impoverished and restless country and the spillover effects that reverberate into the surrounding area.

More importantly, should the US manage to accomplish such a feat, it will not only gain a new partner, incontestable strategic positioning in the region, and regeneration of the embattled relationship with KSA and others, but it will also bring a needed boost to US prestige around the world, while at the same time, insulating the area of Iran's influence and taking one of the latest opportunities to stop China's efforts to become the world's main diplomatic Peacemaker voice at the very place where it started: the Middle East.

Proving that US military might is more than just numbers presented on statistics by securing and empowering a constructive process, along with the regional and international governmental and nongovernmental actors, will not only give pause to the plans of current and future aggressors around the world, but will also provide a model to approach the "hot spots" on the globe that can heal the past's wounds and bring about the better future that 21st century humanity deserves.

I assess that the US has the capability and the world has the will to accept and contribute to such a paradigm shift towards a constructive rather than destructive way of settling future disputes.

Recommendations for US/CENTCOM

- 1) FSO Safer: Monitor UN ongoing mission, be prepared to plan and conduct (with partners' contributions) a thorough operation to secure the area while the FSO Safer is safely disposed; while averting a looming ecological disaster, this will also reassure the regional partners of US continuous support and will demonstrate US capabilities to hostile actors, reducing their leverage and increasing the flexibility during negotiations, at the same time.
- 2) USCENTCOM to take the lead in planning and approval of the actions and capabilities needed to support and protect the execution of a comprehensive plan that aims to normalize the situation in Yemen.
- 3) Make preparations and conduct initial steps to implement/assist the implementation of the aforementioned initiatives, by large scale humanitarian relief ops, civil engineering, security ops, HUMINT and other related activities.

- 4) Focusing on extremists' will to fight appears as an essential condition towards long-term success; engage their ideological (fully exploited by Iran), educational and economical motivation of Yemen society; also, in the light of recent events in the international arena, it could bring considerably more positive results with same amount of resources invested.
- 5) Prepare the field through continuous InfoOps in Houthi-controlled territory, especially by advertising an international supporting agenda for their people's future and asking from them, in return, to abstain from hostilities, to smoothen the way towards peace.
- 6) Break Houthi authority and erode their powerbase by directly managing international aid distribution to the population.
- 7) Track, block and broadcast the occurrence of any Iranian weapon shipments.
- 8) Be prepared to assist the partners in enforcing the conditions of an eventual truce, to "persuade" the Houthis about the value of peace.
- 9) Support the build-up of an international force to promote and implement military assistance to civilian initiatives and to safeguard civilian projects.
- 10) Direct the efforts to bend the Houthis and the corrupt elements of the government under popular pressure, while ensuring a safe and proper interaction of the international actors with the locals.
- 11) Be prepared to, in worst case scenario, hard counter any attempt of various global competitors to put in place A2/AD systems, within Yemen's borders.
- 12) US to support and **be at the center of a permanent dialog between, in close coordination with Oman**, all the actors involved in the Yemen conflict, regardless of preconceived views of all sides or of future occurring events, to reach *consensus* and *hasten* the stabilization process, with the limited resources available.