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Ending Counterproductive U.S. Involvement in Yemen

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Executive Summary

- The Saudi-led coalition and the Houthis maintain a de facto truce; however, should the Saudis choose to begin dropping bombs again, they would do so with the assistance of the United States.
- Washington should use the current lull in fighting to withdraw support for military actions by the Saudi-led coalition in Yemen.
- If the Biden administration fails to withdraw, Congress should pass a War Powers Resolution ending U.S. involvement in the conflict. In the absence of a War Powers Resolution, Saudi Arabia or the UAE could drag the United States into deeper involvement in the war.
- The Biden administration justifies its opposition to a War Powers Resolution on the basis of its support for negotiations. However, evidence indicates that the longevity of the de facto truce reflects a mutually painful stalemate rather than American diplomacy.
- To protect current and future negotiations, the Biden administration should address the threat import restrictions pose to diplomacy. Congress should request information as to why, after the United States arranged to rehabilitate Hodeidah port, almost no containerized goods, including medical equipment and supplies, have been permitted through the port.
- Foreign intervention in the war has failed to undermine the Houthis militarily and instead has strengthened their legitimating narrative.

Introduction

The United States remains involved in enabling the military actions of the Saudi-led coalition in Yemen. U.S. military contractors provide direct support, in the form of spare

parts and maintenance, for approximately two-thirds of the Royal Saudi Air Force; without this assistance, these aircraft would quickly become inoperational.¹ The United States is not currently involved in dropping bombs, because Saudi Arabia has refrained from airstrikes since agreeing to a truce with Yemen's Houthis in late March 2022. However, the threat of Saudi airstrikes persists, especially in the absence of a formal agreement. Since the U.N.-sponsored truce expired in October 2022, nothing prevents the Saudi-led coalition from relaunching its air war.

Meanwhile, the Houthis may also decide to escalate. In October and November of last year, they attacked targets inside Yemen but outside the territory they control, launching drones at oil export facilities and tanker ships in the former south Yemen.² If the Houthis choose to reinstate transborder attacks, the Saudis and Emiratis would undoubtedly resume airstrikes – with the expectation of significant assistance from the United States.

The United States has no sufficiently compelling interest in Yemen that would justify being implicated in one of the world's worst humanitarian crises.³ Nor has U.S. military aid tilted the balance of the conflict: the Saudi-led airwar has proven largely futile.⁴ The original objective of the Saudi-led coalition – to defeat the Houthis, expel them from Sana'a, and restore now-ousted President Hadi to power – appears increasingly unlikely, as the Houthis consolidate control in the former North Yemen while both Saudi Arabia and the UAE look to disengage from the conflict.⁵

¹ Ward, Alex. "The U.S. may still be helping Saudi Arabia in the Yemen war after all." *Vox*, April 27, 2021. <https://www.vox.com/2021/4/27/22403579/biden-saudi-yemen-war-pentagon>.

² Alghobari, Mohammed and Reyam Mokhashef, "Yemen's Houthis increase pressure with oil port attacks as truce talks drag on." *Reuters*, November 10, 2022. <https://www.reuters.com/world/middle-east/yemens-Houthis-increase-pressure-with-oil-port-attacks-truce-talks-drag-2022-11-10/>.

³ Wong, Edward. "U.S. Fails to Assess Civilian Deaths in Yemen War, Internal Report Says." *New York Times*, June 7, 2022. <https://www.nytimes.com/2022/06/07/us/politics/saudi-yemen-war-us-weapons.html>.

⁴ al-Dawsari, Nadwa. "Running around in circles: How Saudi Arabia is losing its war in Yemen to Iran." *The Middle East Institute*, March 30, 2020. https://www.mei.edu/publications/running-around-circles-how-saudi-arabia-losing-its-war-yemen-iran#_ftn22.

⁵ "Saudi foreign minister sees progress towards ending Yemen war." *Al Jazeera*, January 18, 2023. <https://www.aljazeera.com/news/2023/1/18/saudi-foreign-minister-sees-progress-towards-ending-yemen-war>.

However, even if the Houthis were to be defeated militarily, the internationally recognized government of Yemen, now represented by the Presidential Leadership Council, a group of eight men put in place by Saudi Arabia, would continue to compete with one another for dominance, none of them strong enough to consolidate control.⁶ Given the complexity of the conflict, with a myriad of rival militias vying for power, Washington's goal in trying to empower one warring party over another is unclear.

The Biden administration currently justifies ongoing U.S. involvement on the grounds of supporting diplomacy. U.S. support for negotiations constitutes the administration's primary stated objection to the latest round of congressional efforts to extricate the United States from the conflict.

The longer the war lasts, the more powerful the Houthis are likely to become, raising the question of when U.S. involvement will become so counterproductive that withdrawal is necessary not only morally but strategically.

In December 2022, Senator Bernie Sanders tried to use a War Powers Resolution to require the administration to end U.S. support for Saudi military actions in Yemen.⁷ Biden's team responded by claiming that a War Powers Resolution was unnecessary and could even exacerbate the conflict. In a memo circulated to members of Congress, the administration justified their opposition to the War Powers Resolution by asserting the U.S. role in facilitating the U.N.-sponsored truce and that ending U.S. involvement could complicate diplomacy. In the face of overt resistance from the White House, Senator Sanders agreed to withdraw the Resolution in exchange for a promise from

⁶ Ardemagni, Eleonora. "Yemen's Post-Hybrid Balance: The New Presidential Leadership Council." The Carnegie Endowment for International Peace, June 9, 2022. <https://carnegieendowment.org/sada/87301>

⁷ S.J. Res. 56. 117th Congress. 2021-22. <https://www.congress.gov/bill/117th-congress/senate-joint-resolution/56/text>.

Biden to work with his office. Sanders committed to reintroducing the War Powers Resolution if his office and the administration failed to reach an agreement.⁸

As of early 2023, the de facto truce remains and no transborder attacks have resumed.⁹ Recent reports have raised the prospect that Saudi Arabia and the Houthis might recommit to a formal truce.¹⁰ However, if the United States continues to support the war, it will be implicated in Saudi aggression if, and likely when, the conflict escalates.

Some Yemen experts oppose a deal between the Saudis and the Houthis, arguing that it could make the Houthis the strongest military actor on the ground. Given the inability of the internationally recognized government to unite the various militias represented by the Presidential Leadership Council, opponents of the Houthis hope Saudi Arabia and the United States will remain engaged in the conflict. Unfortunately, the Houthis have consolidated control and adopted increasingly extreme positions. The longer the war lasts, the more powerful the Houthis are likely to become, raising the question of when U.S. involvement will become so counterproductive that withdrawal is necessary not only morally but strategically.

If the Biden administration fails to end U.S. support for Saudi military actions against Yemen, a War Powers Resolution from Congress would finally extricate the United States. The current lull in fighting offers a fleeting opportunity to end U.S. involvement, which Congress and the White House would do well to utilize. The administration portrays a War Powers Resolution as unnecessary and even counterproductive, yet it would ensure that the United States does not support future military engagement without Congressional approval. Although the Biden administration has prioritized diplomacy, in the absence of a War Power Resolution, a future administration could

⁸ "Sanders Statement on Yemen War Powers Resolution," Office of Senator Bernie Sanders, December 13, 2022.

<https://www.sanders.senate.gov/press-releases/news-sanders-statement-on-yemen-war-powers-resolution/>.

⁹ "How Houthi–Saudi Negotiations Will Make or Break Yemen." International Crisis Group. Briefing No. 89, December 29, 2022.

<https://www.crisisgroup.org/middle-east-north-africa/gulf-and-arabian-peninsula/yemen/b089-how-Houthi-saudi-negotiations-will-make-or-break-yemen>.

¹⁰ "UN Yemen envoy indicates new truce may be agreed." Al Jazeera, January 17, 2023.

<https://www.aljazeera.com/news/2023/1/17/yemen-un-envoy-warns-against-piecemeal-approach-amid-truce-talk>.

once again expand the involvement of the U.S. military, as occurred during the Trump administration. The Constitution assigns warrmaking authority to Congress alone, and Congress should assert this authority now, rather than after the Saudis start dropping bombs again.

An end to U.S. support for military action should not mean an end to U.S. attention on Yemen. In contrast, the United States should significantly increase the resources provided for humanitarian and development aid, both to address the scale of human suffering and as a means of countering anti-American sentiment.¹¹

The truce reflects a mutually painful stalemate

The Biden administration opposed Sander’s War Powers Resolution partly on the grounds that the United States had helped to facilitate the warring parties’ agreement to the U.N.–sponsored truce. According to the administration, the truce rendered a War Powers Resolution (WPR) unnecessary.

Efforts from the United States in support of diplomacy should be commended and may have even played a more significant role than is publicly acknowledged. However, the administration’s interpretation appears to overemphasize the U.S. role and underemphasize the shift in conditions on the ground.

Biden appointed Tim Lenderking Special Envoy for Yemen in February 2021. In the 14 months prior to the truce, Lenderking traveled frequently to the region and met with various parties to the conflict, including the Houthis, as well as external stakeholders like Oman, Saudi Arabia, and the UAE. The Biden administration’s prioritization of diplomacy is laudatory, especially following the Trump administration’s overt embrace of Saudi aggression. However, evidence does not suggest that U.S. support for diplomacy was a decisive factor in achieving the truce.

¹¹ Raghavan, Sudarsan. “In Yemeni capital, signs of hatred toward Americans are everywhere.” *Washington Post*, July 2, 2016.
<https://www.washingtonpost.com/news/worldviews/wp/2016/07/02/in-yemeni-capital-signs-of-hatred-to-ward-americans-are-everywhere/>.

Rather, the timing of the truce's implementation reflects the Houthis' abilities to inflict significant damage on Saudi and Emirati targets, thereby shifting their calculus. Just before the truce agreement, on March 25, 2022, the Houthis launched a series of attacks on Saudi Arabia, including on an Aramco facility near Jeddah. The attack nearly caused the cancellation of a Formula One race scheduled to take place two days later.¹² When the Houthis subsequently declared a unilateral three-day cessation of all military actions, the Saudis quickly responded with their own ceasefire during the inter-Yemeni talks the Saudis were hosting in Riyadh.¹³

The Biden administration's prioritization of diplomacy is laudatory, but evidence does not suggest that U.S. support for diplomacy was a decisive factor in achieving the truce.

The timing of the truce agreement reflected the Saudis' newfound urgency to forestall future attacks. On April 1, 2022 U.N. Special Envoy for Yemen Hans Grundberg announced that the parties had agreed to a U.N.-sponsored two-month truce, with the possibility of renewal. The parties in question included the Houthis, the Saudi-led coalition, and the internationally recognized government of Yemen (IRG). At the time the truce went into effect, that government was led by President Abd Rabu Mansur Hadi, but within days, Saudi Arabia had ousted Hadi and replaced him with the eight member Presidential Leadership Council.

The terms of the truce reflected the Saudis' eagerness to address Houthi demands as a means of preventing drone attacks:

- A cessation of offensive military air, ground, and maritime operations inside Yemen and across its borders

¹² Robertson, Nic, Eyad Kourdi, and Mostafa Salem, "Smoke plume seen after Houthi attack on Saudi oil facility ahead of Formula 1 race weekend." CNN, March 25, 2022.

<https://www.cnn.com/2022/03/25/middleeast/saudi-jeddah-aramco-attack-intl>.

¹³ "Saudi-led coalition announces Yemen ceasefire ahead of peace talks." France 24, March 30, 2022.

<https://www.france24.com/en/middle-east/20220329-saudi-led-coalition-announces-yemen-ceasefire-ahead-of-peace-talks>.

- Commercial flights in and out of Sana’a International Airport to predetermined locations (Amman and Cairo)¹⁴
- Fuel ships entering Hodeidah port
- U.N.–sponsored talks about opening roads in Taiz and other governorates¹⁵

The terms pertaining to Sana’a International Airport and Hodeidah port correspond to Houthi demands. Meanwhile, on the subject of opening roads into Taiz – a key concern for the IRG – the truce only established that talks would occur.¹⁶

From the perspective of the IRG, the Houthis reneged on the agreement to discuss opening roads to besieged Taiz. Although discussions occurred, no progress was made. The Houthis are loath to risk losing control of Hawban, the city’s main industrial area, which provides them with almost 200 billion Yemeni rials a year in taxes.¹⁷ The IRG saw few benefits from the truce: if anything, their authority was undermined because it blatantly sidelined their concerns.

The truce terms prioritized Houthi demands because the Houthis had demonstrated that they could inflict significant damage on Saudi Arabia and the UAE. As Yemeni analyst Abdulghani al-Iryani explained in a phone interview, “Part of [the Houthis’] plan is to escalate so they force the Saudis to make a deal with them.”¹⁸ Houthi attacks damaged oil infrastructure, the backbone of the Saudi economy. In addition, Saudi Crown Prince Mohammed bin Salman staked his reputation on transforming Saudi Arabia tourism and investment: Houthi drones posed too high a risk to his domestic agenda.

¹⁴ At the time of writing, only one round trip flight to Cairo had occurred on June 1, 2022, although flights had continued to Amman several times a week. Source: “Timeline on the progress of the truce implementation.” OSESGY, accessed February 12, 2023.

<https://osesgy.unmissions.org/timeline-progress-truce-implementation>.

¹⁵ “Press statement by the UN Special Envoy for Yemen Hans Grundberg on a two-month truce.” OSESGY, UN, April 1, 2022.

<https://osesgy.unmissions.org/press-statement-un-special-envoy-yemen-hans-grundberg-two-month-truce>.

¹⁶ al-Qadhi, Mohammed. “Dispatch from Taiz—Yemen’s Passage to Peace.” *Middle East Report* 305 (Winter 2022). <https://merip.org/2023/01/dispatch-from-taiz/>.

¹⁷ Telephone interview with Abdulghani al-Iryani, November 28, 2022.

¹⁸ Telephone interview with Abdulghani al-Iryani, November 28, 2022.

The UAE had also experienced an escalation in Houthi violence. Two months before the truce agreement, in January 2022, a Houthi drone hit Abu Dhabi, killing three people. The attack tarnished the UAE's reputation for immunity to regional upheaval. Emirati leaders remained so frustrated at the United States for not mobilizing a more robust response that in February 2022, the UAE representative abstained from the U.N. General Assembly vote to condemn the Russian invasion of Ukraine.¹⁹ From the Saudi and Emirati perspective, Houthi drone attacks could shatter their carefully crafted image of prosperous security.

The durability of the truce also reflects the shift in the Saudi and Emirati calculus. According to the Armed Conflict Location & Event Data Project (ACLED) Yemen Truce Monitor, the Houthis and Saudis abstained from transborder attacks, both during the six-month truce and after its expiry. Violations of the truce did occur inside Yemen but received relatively little attention.²⁰ The dominant media narrative portrayed the truce as a success, and for Saudi Arabia and the UAE, and initially for the Houthis it was, although less so for the IRG.

Despite the U.S. and U.N. narrative of the truce's success, many Yemenis living in Houthi territory have expressed disappointment that the truce has done little to improve their living conditions.

The Saudis and UAE may promise not to conduct any future airstrikes as long as the Houthis also agree to refrain from launching transborder attacks. According to analyst Abdul Ghani al-Iryani, Saudi objectives shifted after the Houthis demonstrated that they could inflict real damage on Saudi targets: "The first time they felt pain because of the war, they changed and were talking about trying to exit the conflict and let the Yemenis keep fighting. Houthi capabilities increased, they were striking Riyadh, airports in the

¹⁹ Tolba, Ahmed. "UAE not taking sides in Ukraine conflict, senior official says." Reuters, February 27, 2022. <https://www.reuters.com/world/uae-not-taking-sides-ukraine-conflict-favours-negotiations-official-2022-02-27/>.

²⁰ Armed Conflict Location & Event Data Project (ACLED) Yemen Truce Monitor. <https://acleddata.com/middle-east/yemen/yemen-truce-monitor/>.

south, Jeddah, et cetera, that's when a decision was made, [they said] we're not going to succeed, we'd better bring the conflict to an end."²¹ The conflict had become a mutually painful stalemate, wherein neither side wished to continue to experience the pain inflicted by the other side, making it "ripe" for a truce.²²

Although the United States may have contributed to fostering diplomacy, its role does not appear to have been central to reaching the truce. This raises questions about the administration's argument that a War Powers Resolution would endanger diplomatic negotiations, as Washington's role seems less decisive than the mutually painful stalemate.

Import restrictions imperil diplomacy

Rather than the War Powers Act complicating current or future negotiations, the Biden administration should be more focused on the much more serious threat to negotiations posed by import restrictions, especially if the Houthis decide to reinstate transborder violence to try to force the Saudis and IRG to allow imports.

Yemenis continue to face restrictions on the movement of people and goods into the territory the Houthis control, specifically through Sana'a airport and the port of Hodeidah. The truce loosened but did not lift restrictions on imports and flights imposed by Saudi Arabia and the IRG. Although the truce agreement addressed key Houthi concerns, the effects of the restrictions persist, which may eventually push the Houthis to return to violence, regardless of U.S. support for diplomacy.

For example, the United States and the U.N. have portrayed the opening of Sana'a International Airport to commercial flights as a significant step. Unfortunately, because only a few flights leave Sana'a each week, tickets remain extremely expensive, and out of reach for the vast majority of Yemenis. According to Houthi authorities, 32,000 Yemenis had registered for medical evacuation as of 2020, when 16 passengers at a

²¹ Telephone interview with Abdulghani al-Iryani, November 28, 2022.

²² Zartman, I. William. (1989). *Ripe for resolution* (2nd ed.). New York, N.Y. Oxford University Press.
Zartman, I. William. (2000b). "Ripeness: The hurting stalemate and beyond." In P. Stern & D. Druckman (Eds.), *International conflict resolution after the Cold War*. Washington, D.C. National Academy Press.

time were permitted to board mercy flights coordinated by the U.N.²³ A few flights a week to Amman represents progress, but are wholly insufficient to address the needs of the two thirds of the Yemeni population living under Houthi control whose freedom of movement is strictly curtailed.

Despite the U.S. and U.N. narrative of the truce's success, many Yemenis living in Houthi territory have expressed disappointment that the truce has done little to improve their living conditions. Funding cuts for humanitarian aid have actually reduced the amount of assistance Yemenis have received during the truce, while prices for basic goods remain extremely high.²⁴ The Houthis continue to manipulate the flow of aid for their own benefit. The U.N. reported "interference at every stage of aid delivery – particularly in Houthi controlled areas."²⁵

A crucial aspect of the hardships faced by Yemenis are the restrictions on imports imposed by Saudi Arabia and the IRG. The Saudis and IRG did permit roughly four times more fuel to enter through Hodeidah port in 2022 than in 2021, allowing 2,133,023 metric tons, up from only 535,069 metric tons the year before. Yet in 2019, Saudi Arabia and the IRG allowed even more fuel to be discharged at Hodeidah, 2,217,696 metric tons, and the massive fuel shortages caused soaring prices and three-day long waits in queues for fuel.²⁶ At the time, humanitarian groups like the Norwegian Refugee Council called for all restrictions on the import of fuel to be lifted.²⁷ The fuel currently permitted

²³ "Medical flights start from Yemen's Sanaa in diplomatic breakthrough." Reuters. February 3, 2020. <https://www.reuters.com/article/uk-yemen-security-idUKKBN1ZX0WK>.

²⁴ Transfeld, Mareike, Ahmed al-Sharjabi. "Communication is Needed for a New Round of Yemen's Truce to be Impactful for Communities." Yemen Policy Center, January 2023. <https://www.yemenpolicy.org/communication-is-needed-for-a-new-round-of-yemens-truce-to-be-impactful-for-communities/>.

²⁵ "Situation in Yemen Remains Stable, Special Envoy Tells Security Council, Highlighting Importance of Resuming Political Process, Ceasefire," U.N. Security Council 9244th Meeting, January 16, 2023. <https://reliefweb.int/report/yemen/situation-yemen-remains-stable-special-envoy-tells-security-council-highlighting-importance-resuming-political-process-ceasefire>.

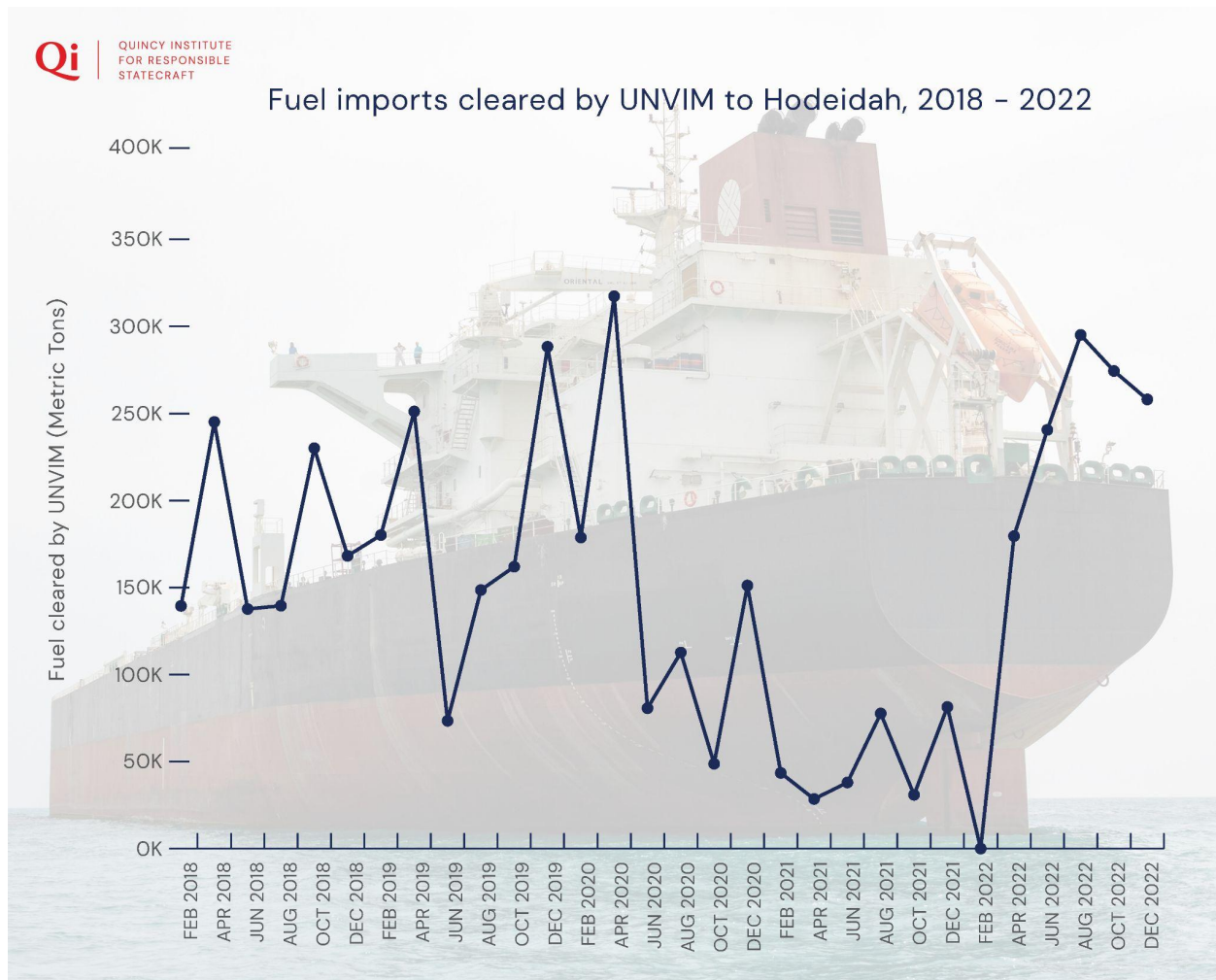
²⁶ "Lines as far as the eye can see: new fuel shortages hit Yemen." Reuters, September 29, 2019. <https://www.reuters.com/article/us-yemen-economy-fuel/lines-as-far-as-the-eye-can-see-new-fuel-shortage-hits-yemen-idUSKBN1WE0BF>.

²⁷ Abdulkareem, Nasser. "New fuel crisis deepens suffering for hungry Yemenis." The Norwegian Refugee Council, October 16, 2019. <https://www.nrc.no/news/2019/october/new-fuel-crisis-deepens-suffering-for-hungry-yemenis/>.

remains inadequate for economic activity to resume, perpetuating the dysfunction of Yemen's economic conflict.²⁸

Figure 1 depicts the levels of fuel permitted to enter Hodeidah port since February 2018, demonstrating that while the fuel permitted under the de facto truce is significantly more than what was permitted to enter in 2020 and 2021, current levels remain comparable or lower than during 2019, for example.

Figure 1: Fuel Imports Cleared by UNVIM to Hodeidah, 2018–22



²⁸ "Brokering a Ceasefire in Yemen's Economic Conflict." International Crisis Group Report No. 231, January 20, 2022. <https://www.crisisgroup.org/middle-east-north-africa/gulf-and-arabian-peninsula/yemen/brokering-cease-fire-yemens-economic>.

In May 2021, the Saudis and IRG permitted zero fuel into the port of Hodeidah. In November 2021, they permitted almost none, only 3,500 tons. In February 2022, zero fuel again. Just before the truce went into effect, Save the Children reported that Yemen was experiencing the worst fuel crisis of the war, with hospitals forced to shut off ventilators and other life-saving equipment due to insufficient fuel to run generators, Yemen's electricity infrastructure having already been decimated by years of coalition airstrikes.²⁹

Although fuel imports remain significantly higher in 2022 than in 2021, they started to dip again following the expiry of the truce in October. Should hostilities resume, Saudi Arabia could again prevent all fuel from entering the port of Hodeidah, as it did at several points over the past few years (see Fig. 1).

Another key area of import restrictions pertain to container goods. Although food and now fuel enter Houthi-controlled territory through the port of Hodeidah, since February 2018, almost no containerized goods have been permitted. This fact had previously received less attention in the context of the extreme hardship caused by the lack of fuel.

Figure 2 shows the precipitous fall in the import of containerized goods through the Houthi-controlled port of Hodeidah since 2016, when the United Nations Verification and Inspection Mechanism for Yemen (UNVIM) was established to prevent Iran from smuggling in weapons. Although food and fuel have been permitted, at varying levels, to enter the port of Hodeidah, containerized goods have been essentially not permitted since early 2018.

²⁹ "Yemen: Fuel crisis pushes sickest children to the brink." Save the Children, March 14, 2022. <https://www.savethechildren.net/news/yemen-fuel-crisis-pushes-sickest-children-brink>.

Figure 2: Containerized Goods Imported through Hodeidah, 2016–22



In August 2015, Saudi planes bombed the port of Hodeidah and destroyed the four massive cranes used for unloading containerized cargo.³⁰ Although this significantly reduced the capacity of the port to unload container ships, UNVIM still recorded tens of thousands of tons of goods through Hodeidah, which had to be unloaded using the limited means available, including by hand. This contradicts the assertion that containerized goods cannot enter Hodeidah port because the cranes to unload them were destroyed in 2015. In February 2017, for example, 131,665 tons of containerized goods were approved by UNVIM and unloaded at Hodeidah port. In May 2017 177,118 tons were unloaded, demonstrating that the port remained operational despite the destruction of the cranes.

³⁰ Ghobari, Mohammed and Noah Browning. "Saudi-led warplanes hit Yemeni port, aid groups sound alarm." Reuters, August 18, 2015. <https://www.reuters.com/article/us-yemen-security-idUSKCN0QN0HX20150818>.

In January 2018, the United States paid to send four replacement cranes.³¹ However, the following month, UNVIM reported that zero containerized goods were allowed to pass through the port: the Saudis and IRG had initiated an almost total blockade on containerized goods.

Congress should request information as to why, after the United States arranged to rehabilitate Hodeidah port, its Saudi partners and the IRG did not allow these replacement cranes to be used and instead prevented the import of essentially all containerized cargo, including medical equipment and supplies.³²

As Figure 2 shows, from February 2018 until December 2022, most months saw zero containerized goods entering Hodeidah port. Some have been imported through Hodeidah, revealing that containerized goods can enter the port, as in July and August 2019, when both months saw a mere 18 tons of goods enter the port, numbers are so small that they do not register on the graph. For the majority of months from 2018 until the time of writing, UNVIM records zero container imports. UNVIM data clearly demonstrates the use of blockade tactics by the Saudi-led coalition and IRG to collectively punish Yemenis.³³

One of the most important drivers of starvation in Yemen remains the non-payment of salaries. Both the Houthis and the IRG refuse to pay public sector salaries in Houthi-controlled territory, where the majority of Yemenis reside. The Houthis assert that the revenues from the export of Yemen's fossil fuel should be used to pay public sector salaries, and maintain that they will continue to prevent the export of Yemeni fossil fuel resources until the IRG agrees to pay salaries of those living under Houthi control. The issue of salary payment remains central to the conflict: it derailed U.N.-led

³¹ Miles, Tom. "Cranes arrive in Hodeidah to boost Yemen food aid flow: U.N." Reuters, January 15, 2018. <https://www.reuters.com/article/us-yemen-security-cranes/cranes-arrive-in-hodeidah-to-boost-yemen-food-aid-flow-u-n-idUSKBN1F4213>.

³² Khalid, Nebras. "New Treatments Rekindle Hope for Yemen's Oft-Forgotten Cancer Patients." International Medical Corps, November 15, 2022. <https://internationalmedicalcorps.org/story/new-treatments-rekindle-hope-for-yemens-oft-forgotten-cancer-patients/>.

³³ "Yemen: Coalition Blockade Imperils Civilians, UN Should Sanction Senior Saudi Leaders." Human Rights Watch, December 7, 2017. <https://www.hrw.org/news/2017/12/07/yemen-coalition-blockade-imperils-civilians>.

efforts to extend the truce in October 2022. The Houthis demanded that the IRG pay public sector salaries, including those of fighters. The IRG refused, and the truce expired.

The Biden administration's argument that a War Powers Resolution would undermine diplomacy ignores the ways in which ongoing import restrictions and the nonpayment of salaries are more likely to complicate future negotiations.

The nonpayment of salaries also constitutes one of the most significant drivers of malnutrition, as food is available but expensive – even more so since the Russian invasion of Ukraine in early 2022 drove up the price of grain worldwide – and ordinary Yemenis who once relied on public sector jobs have no means of purchasing food, water, or other basic necessities. According to UNICEF, as of December 2022 almost three quarters of Yemen's entire population require humanitarian assistance, while 2.2 million children in Yemen are acutely malnourished.³⁴ The intransigence of all warring parties reiterates the overall conflict dynamic: that the armed groups pursue power regardless of the devastating effects on the population.

The ongoing hardships faced by Yemenis living under Houthi control are likely to generate increasing resentment and possible resistance. If the Houthis experience public pressure, they may decide to reinstate violence in order to try to compel the Saudis and IRG to fully lift import restrictions and to deflect attention from their own shortcomings. Clearly, the Houthis have demonstrated that they are willing to risk undermining the truce by attacking oil export facilities in Yemen, and have warned that transborder attacks may resume if the IRG continues to export fuel from ports in

³⁴ "More than 11,000 children killed or injured in Yemen." UNICEF, December 12, 2022. <https://www.unicef.org/press-releases/more-11000-children-killed-or-injured-yemen>.

southern Yemen.³⁵ The Houthis may decide negotiations are a less effective means of addressing their demands than violence, regardless of U.S. efforts to foster diplomacy.

The Biden administration's argument that a War Powers Resolution would undermine diplomacy ignores the ways in which ongoing import restrictions and the nonpayment of salaries are more likely to complicate future negotiations or even lead to a resumption of active hostilities by the Houthis. A War Powers Resolution would end U.S. support for Saudi Arabia, which has used blockade tactics to impose collective punishment on Yemenis living under Houthi control. The United States should demonstrate that such tactics – which violate the Geneva Conventions – are unacceptable by ending support for any future Saudi airstrikes on Yemen.

It serves no U.S. interest to be involved in the Yemen war

The United States has no business trying to sway the outcome of Yemeni affairs. The Houthis are doing tremendous violence to the lives of many Yemenis who do not share their exclusivist views on genealogy that prioritize the sayyids, or descendants of the Prophet Mohammed. They are unlikely to moderate their ideology because they require a narrative of perpetual revolution in order to justify rule by the sayyids over the remaining 90 to 95 percent of the population.³⁶ The Houthis increasingly violate women's rights, as more radical elements of the movement gain influence, as often happens during violent conflict.³⁷ However, U.S. involvement in the war against them has had the opposite of its intended effect: the Houthis have only grown stronger.

Meanwhile, the internationally recognized government, now represented by the Presidential Leadership Council, continues to squabble internally rather than unite

³⁵ "Yemen Houthis give foreign oil companies ultimatum to stop oil extraction." *Middle East Monitor*, October 3, 2022.

<https://www.middleeastmonitor.com/20221003-yemen-houthis-give-foreign-oil-companies-ultimatum-to-stop-oil-extraction/>.

³⁶ Remarks by Princeton professor Bernard Haykel at a discussion of the new edited volume, *The Houthi Movement in Yemen: Ideology, Ambition and Security in the Arab Gulf*, sponsored by the Arab Gulf States Institute of Washington, January 24, 2023.

<https://agsiw.org/programs/book-talk-the-Houthi-movement-in-yemen-ideology-ambition-and-security-in-the-arab-gulf/>.

³⁷ Jafarnia, Niku. "Houthis Violating Women's and Girls' Rights in Yemen." Human Rights Watch, February 6, 2023. <https://www.hrw.org/news/2023/02/06/Houthis-violating-womens-and-girls-rights-yemen>.

against the Houthis.³⁸ The eight member council largely consists of the heads of various militias, including the head of the Southern Transitional Council, whose primary objective remains independence for South Yemen. The members of the PLC oppose each other to a similar extent as they oppose the Houthis.³⁹ The Saudi and Emirati decision to establish the PLC reflects their desire to wind down their direct involvement in Yemen.

Some Yemen experts have expressed concern that the end of American, Saudi, and Emirati military involvement would definitively tip the balance of power in the Houthis' favor. They fear that this would allow the Houthis to consolidate control unopposed, or would lead to even more bloodshed.⁴⁰ Ibrahim Jalal, a Yemeni expert at the Middle East Institute, elucidated: "If the regional actors withdraw – and they should – we could see a resumption of violence in the south and the east, and growing internal uprisings in Houthi-held areas. We have already seen limited yet rising acts of resistance in Hajjah, in Sana'a's Bani Hushaish, and in al-Jawf."⁴¹ In a comprehensive policy brief for the European Council on Foreign Relations, Yemen expert Helen Lackner detailed how the war has driven political and social fragmentation: "Saudi Arabia and the UAE may soon decrease their military interference in Yemen – but their exit could expose divisions in both government and Houthi areas." Years of war have exacerbated geographic, religious, and historical faultlines, as conflict often does, while the Houthis have intentionally stoked sectarian divisions.

These experts also acknowledged that the coalition's ongoing presence has contributed to the Houthis' consolidation of power. The group portrays itself as defending Yemen, therefore ending foreign aggression would undermine the Houthis' legitimating narrative, as well as the support of key tribes. As Helen Lackner pointed out: "The tribes that are with [the Houthis] against the invaders will turn against them when the external

³⁸ "Clashes in oil-rich Shabwa test Yemen's new presidential council." Reuters, August 11, 2022. <https://www.reuters.com/world/middle-east/clashes-oil-rich-shabwa-test-yemens-new-presidential-council-2022-08-11/>.

³⁹ Johnsen, Gregory. "Shabwa and Cracks in the Foundation of Yemen's Presidential Leadership Council." Arab Gulf States Institute of Washington, August 19, 2022. <https://agsiw.org/shabwa-and-cracks-in-the-foundation-of-yemens-presidential-leadership-council/>.

⁴⁰ Telephone interview with Abdulghani al-Iryani, November 28, 2022.

⁴¹ Google Meet interview with Ibrahim Jalal, December 7, 2022.

enemy is gone.”⁴² Alkhatab al–Rawhani, a Yemeni journalist, concurred, “Yemeni tribes are pragmatists, they acquiesce to force, but they are waiting for their moment [to resist the Houthis].”⁴³ The end of foreign military action would also leave the group unable to blame Saudi Arabia, the UAE, or the United States for their own failures of governance.

If the United States wishes to achieve a weakening of the Houthi position, paradoxically, the best way to do so may be to withdraw.

Having alienated key groups necessary to consolidate support in northern Yemen, especially powerful tribes like the Hashid federation, the Houthis are likely to rely even more heavily on repression. Greg Johnsen, former member of the team of experts at the United Nations, identified governance, the economy, and the lack of domestic allies as three key areas of Houthi weakness: “The Houthis have not governed effectively or transparently, they lack the economic base to support an independent state, and they have alienated power centers, particularly many of Yemen’s tribes, whose support they may soon need.”⁴⁴ The Armed Conflict Location Event & Data Project (ACLED) published a report in 2021 documenting infighting among the Houthis’ approximately 200,000 troops.⁴⁵ Division within the ranks, as well as the group’s reliance on child soldiers and others who fight only in order to earn money to survive, bode poorly for the future cohesion of the Houthis’ forces.⁴⁶

The longer the war drags on, the more fundamentalist and repressive the Houthis are likely to become. In the absence of Saudi, Emirati, and U.S. involvement, Houthi

⁴² Phone interview with Helen Lackner, November 28, 2022.

⁴³ Google Meet interview with Alkhatab al–Rawhani, November 28, 2022.

⁴⁴ Johnsen, Gregory. “From the Mountains, Into the Palace: The Houthis Won the War but Might Lose What Comes Next.” Arab Gulf States Institute of Washington, January 4, 2023.

https://agsiw.org/wp-content/uploads/2022/12/Johnsen_Houthis_final.pdf.

⁴⁵ Carboni, Andrea. “The Myth of Stability: Infighting and Repression in Houthi controlled territories.” February 9, 2021.

<https://acleddata.com/2021/02/09/the-myth-of-stability-infighting-and-repression-in-houthi-controlled-territories/>.

⁴⁶ Nasser, Afrah. “Child Soldiers in Yemen: Cannon Fodder for an Unnecessary War.” Arab Center Washington DC, February 3, 2023.

<https://arabcenterdc.org/resource/child-soldiers-in-yemen-cannon-fodder-for-an-unnecessary-war/>.

repression may increasingly incite the population under their rule. If the United States wishes to achieve a weakening of the Houthi position, paradoxically, the best way to do so may be to withdraw. If the Houthis are left to govern, they will face the consequences of the violence they have wreaked upon the population under their control.

An end to U.S. military support for Saudi actions in Yemen should be accompanied by increased support for humanitarian and development aid. Yemen expert and non-resident fellow at the Middle East Institute Nadwa al-Dawsari opposes a deal with the Houthis, asserting that the United States should instead prioritize aid:

“In lieu of using their influence to push through a quick deal that will likely benefit the Houthis at the expense of the country, the United States and the international community should work to mitigate the impact the conflict has had on civilians and critical infrastructure by increasing development aid.”⁴⁷

Increasing development aid represents one of the most obvious ways the United States could help to alleviate suffering in Yemen. Early last year, the U.N. was forced to close or scale back two-thirds of its humanitarian operations in Yemen, due to inadequate resources.⁴⁸ From the perspective of U.S. interests, increased aid would be beneficial to counter widespread anti-American sentiment driven by U.S. support for Saudi airstrikes, as well as the years of U.S. drone attacks.⁴⁹

⁴⁷ al-Dawsari, Nadwa. “Time to Rethink International Intervention in Yemen.” Arab Center Washington DC, April 7, 2021. <https://arabcenterdc.org/resource/time-to-rethink-international-intervention-in-yemen/>.

⁴⁸ “\$4.3 billion needed to help over 17 million people across Yemen.” UN News, March 16, 2022. <https://news.un.org/en/story/2022/03/1114032>.

⁴⁹ “Outside of Yemen, regardless of how much harm Yemen's wealthy Gulf neighbors have done to its citizens, government officials have worked with Saudi Arabia and the UAE to block efforts at international accountability. These efforts have shielded not only Yemen's allies, but also its opponents, including the Houthis and Iran, from accountability.” Beckerle, Kristine. “The Case for Reparations to the Victims of Yemen's War.” *Democracy in Exile*, February 2, 2023. <https://dawnmena.org/the-case-for-reparations-to-the-victims-of-yemens-war/>.

See also: “If the conflict continues through 2030, we project the total conflict attributable death toll will be 1.3 million – more than 70 per cent of which will be from indirect deaths and 80 percent of these deaths will be children under five.” “Assessing the Impact of War in Yemen: Pathways for Recovery.” UNDP Yemen, November 23, 2021.

<https://www.undp.org/yemen/publications/assessing-impact-war-yemen-pathways-recovery>.

To the extent that U.S. actions are motivated by Saudi security, Washington should encourage Riyadh to also invest in development aid for Yemen, especially in the agricultural sector, as both labor intensive and crucial to Yemen's food security.⁵⁰

Conclusion

The Biden administration is trying to prevent Congress from withdrawing from a war in which the United States should never have been involved. The original justification for U.S. involvement was based on a flawed calculus: the Obama administration's belief that supporting Saudi military action in 2015 would help forestall criticism from Riyadh of the Iran nuclear deal. The Saudis still expressed full-throated criticism of the deal; now, almost eight years later, the United States remains complicit in facilitating Saudi-led military actions in Yemen.⁵¹

In 2018, many former members of the Obama administration expressed remorse at having made this Faustian bargain.⁵² Yet once many of these same individuals joined the Biden administration, they did not move to end U.S. involvement: in fact, Saudi airstrikes increased during the Biden administration, undermining his claim to have ended U.S. support for offensive military actions.⁵³

⁵⁰ Nagi, Ahmed, "The Pitfalls of Saudi Arabia's Security-Centric Strategy in Yemen." The Carnegie Endowment for International Peace, October 12, 2022. <https://carnegie-mec.org/2022/10/12/pitfalls-of-saudi-arabia-s-security-centric-strategy-in-yemen-pub-88148>.

⁵¹ Sohyun Lee, Joyce, Meg Kelly, and Atthar Mirza, "Saudi-led airstrikes in Yemen have been called war crimes. Many relied on U.S. support." *The Washington Post*, June 4, 2022. <https://www.washingtonpost.com/investigations/interactive/2022/saudi-war-crimes-yemen/>.

⁵² "Open Statement on Yemen," Signed by now prominent Biden administration officials, including Tony Blinken, Samantha Power, Ned Price, Colin Kahl, Wendy Sherman, Jake Sullivan, and Linda Thomas-Greenfield, November 11, 2018. <https://www.justsecurity.org/wp-content/uploads/2021/01/yemen-statement-former-obama-officials-november-11-2018.pdf>.

⁵³ Sheline, Annelle. "The Yemen War in Numbers: Saudi Escalation and U.S. Complicity." *The Quincy Institute for Responsible Statecraft*, Brief No. 22, March 21, 2022. <https://quincyinst.org/report/the-yemen-war-in-numbers-saudi-escalation-and-u-s-complicity/>.

The Biden administration is trying to prevent Congress from withdrawing from a war in which the United States should never have been involved.

Despite initial statements about holding Saudi Arabia accountable, the Biden administration appears to have concluded that Washington must continue to prioritize the relationship with Riyadh. Setting aside the question of whether or not the relationship serves U.S. interests, ending U.S. support for Saudi military action in Yemen does not preclude the United States continuing to provide Patriot missile systems, partner on counterterror operations, and otherwise maintain robust security cooperation with Riyadh.

Given the expiry of the U.N.–sponsored truce, the resumption of major hostilities presents a significant threat. The fact that the truce remains largely in effect during this period of relative calm offers a unique opportunity. The United States cannot dictate the behavior of Saudi Arabia, the UAE, or the warring parties in Yemen, but the Biden administration can extricate the United States from the conflict. If it fails to do so, Congress should act and impose one of the few remaining tools available, a War Powers Resolution.

About the Authors

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