



# SEEN ONLY IN A SAUDI SHADOW: **WHY THE US MISUNDERSTANDS AND MISSTEPS IN YEMEN**

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The Sana'a Center for Strategic Studies is an independent think-tank that seeks to foster change through knowledge production with a focus on Yemen and the surrounding region. The Center's publications and programs, offered in both Arabic and English, cover political, social, economic and security related developments, aiming to impact policy locally, regionally, and internationally.



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## introduction

The United States does not have a Yemen policy. This shouldn't come as much of a surprise: the United States has never had a Yemen policy. What it has – what it has always had – is a Saudi policy that dictates and determines its actions in Yemen. For the US, Yemen is an add-on country, small enough and unimportant enough to be out-sourced. Periodically, of course, there are moments of crisis that demand more focused attention from US policymakers. After the September 11, 2001, attacks, for instance, Yemen was seen primarily as a counterterrorism problem that needed to be solved. More recently it has been seen through the prism of US efforts to counter Iran. But in both cases, the US was in lockstep with Saudi Arabia. In the early 2000s, Saudi Arabia had its own Al-Qaeda problem, and over the past several years the kingdom has seen Iran as its chief regional rival, often encouraging the US to take a harder line.

The problem with viewing a country, any country, through a single lens – whether through the prism of a regional partner or a national security challenge – is that it tends to distort the reality on the ground, sacrificing nuance for an easy narrative. This leads to mistakes of analysis and, ultimately, results in poor policy options.

Seeing Yemen only through the lens of counterterrorism, for example, leads to the conclusion that anyone who wears a beard, carries a gun, and talks about Allah is a member of Al-Qaeda in the Arabian Peninsula (AQAP) or the Islamic State group. But that isn't the case in Yemen, and thinking it is results in mistaken drone strikes and misapplied sanction designations. View the country primarily as an arena to counter Iran, and you end up thinking that the Houthis are only an Iranian proxy instead of a local group with a local history and local interests. And, perhaps most importantly for US policymakers, if the US sees Yemen only as an addendum to its relationship with Saudi Arabia it runs the very real risk of supporting Saudi policy goals instead of US ones. The United States and Saudi Arabia have overlapping interests in the Middle East. But they do not share a common set of values or core goals.

After nearly five years of war, the Yemeni state has collapsed and the country is breaking apart. Yemen is unlikely ever to be put back together as a single state. Instead of dealing with one Yemen, in the future the US will have to contend with multiple Yemens. Such a messy reality will make policy more difficult and a detailed understanding of what is happening on the ground more essential than ever. Neither is achievable from Riyadh – where the US Embassy to Yemen and what is left of Yemen's internationally recognized government have been based for much of the past five years – and relying on Saudi Arabia as a policy guide

to its southern neighbor will only result in a skewed understanding of what is happening in Yemen. For reasons from counterterrorism and national security to regional stability and maritime security, the United States needs to see Yemen clearly and on its own. The US should coordinate strategy with Saudi Arabia and other regional actors where it can, but never again should it let US actions be driven by Saudi interests. The US needs a Yemen policy, not a Saudi policy that includes Yemen.

## **In the Beginning: the United States and Yemen**

This will not be easy to accomplish. Since its foray into Middle Eastern affairs began, the United States has rarely seen Yemen as anything more than an extension of its relationship with Saudi Arabia. The United States recognized the Mutawakkilite Kingdom of Yemen in 1946. But for the next 13 years the US had neither a mission nor an ambassador in Yemen.<sup>(1)</sup> Instead, the US ambassador to Saudi Arabia pulled double-duty, handling both his main Saudi account as well as the Yemen portfolio.

For much of the Cold War, it didn't matter how the US saw Yemen. The country was a backwater, divided and unimportant. The mission that the US opened in Taiz in 1959 was transformed into an embassy in 1963 and moved to Sana'a in 1966. But the next year, following the June 1967 war between Israel and several Arab states, the fledgling Yemen Arab Republic cut off diplomatic relations with the United States. It was only in 1972, when relations were restored, that the United States finally put its first ambassador in residence in Yemen.

As up-and-down as the US relationship with North Yemen was, its relationship with South Yemen was even worse. The Johnson administration recognized the People's Republic of South Yemen in 1967 and established an embassy in Aden. But before either the Johnson or Nixon administration could get around to naming an ambassador, South Yemen severed relations in October 1969.<sup>(2)</sup> They were never restored.

By 1990, thanks in large part to the collapse of the Soviet Union and the belief that there were significant oil fields along the north-south border, Yemen had unified. What was supposed to be a welcome gift to the newly unified country –

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1) "History of the US and Yemen," US Embassy in Yemen. <https://ye.usembassy.gov/our-relationship/policy-history/io/>

2) "History of the US and Yemen," US Embassy in Yemen. <https://ye.usembassy.gov/our-relationship/policy-history/io/>

the “Arab” seat on the UN Security Council – quickly turned into a curse. Iraq invaded Kuwait on August 2, 1990, and then-Yemeni president Ali Abdullah Saleh found himself stuck in an unwinnable situation. Saleh admired Saddam Hussein and considered him a friend, even going so far as to model his ruling style after the Iraqi president. But Saudi Arabia, Kuwait and the United States were all key donors who helped keep Yemen’s economy afloat.

Saleh attempted to split the difference, instructing his ambassador to the UN to abstain from the initial Security Council resolution condemning the invasion. During Thanksgiving 1990, while President George H. W. Bush was in Saudi Arabia visiting the US troops that were already amassing in the kingdom, he dispatched his secretary of state, James Baker, to Sana’a to try to persuade Saleh to support a new UN resolution threatening force against Hussein. Bush wanted a unified front and a unanimous vote in the Security Council for the first post-Cold War conflict. But Saleh wouldn’t budge.

A few weeks later in New York, Baker told Yemen’s ambassador to the UN that voting against the resolution to push Saddam out of Kuwait would “be the most expensive ‘no’ vote you ever cast.”<sup>(3)</sup> And it was. Saudi Arabia, which had already expelled roughly a million Yemeni migrant workers, cut off millions in aid, as did the US and Kuwait. Yemen has never recovered. Its currency lost half its value in months. Instead of being held up as a newly unified democracy in a post-Cold War world, Yemen found itself diplomatically isolated and in the midst of an economic crisis.<sup>(4)</sup> It would be more than 20 years before a US secretary of state visited Yemen again.

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3) James Baker, *The Politics of Diplomacy: Revolution, War & Peace, 1989 – 1992*, Putnam, New York, 1995, pg. 327.

4) Gregory D. Johnsen, *The Last Refuge: Yemen, al-Qaeda, and America’s War in Arabia*, WW Norton, New York, 2012, pgs. 25 – 27.

## Outsourcing Yemen's Democratic Transition to the Kingdom of Saudi Arabia

That secretary of state was Hillary Clinton and the Yemen she visited in January 2011 was vastly different than the one James Baker had seen two decades earlier.<sup>(5)</sup> A brief but bloody civil war in 1994 all but destroyed any hope of north-south unity. The September 11 attacks turned Yemen into a frontline in the new “war on terror,” while endemic corruption, the lack of promised oil revenues, and a booming birth rate had turned the country into an economic basket case.<sup>(6)</sup> Clinton touched down in Yemen in that brief window between when Mohammed Bouazizi sparked the Arab Spring protests in Tunisia and when protesters in Egypt fanned it into a regional flame.

Within weeks of Clinton's visit, Yemen was caught up in the storm. Weekly Friday protests turned daily as people in the street called for President Saleh, who had been in power since 1978, to step down. Working through the GCC, Saudi Arabia came up with what would eventually be called the “Gulf Initiative.”<sup>(7)</sup> At its heart, the Gulf Initiative contained a simple compromise: Saleh would step down from power and in exchange he would receive blanket immunity for any and all crimes he may have committed.<sup>(8)</sup> The only problem with the compromise was that no one liked it.

The protesters hated the idea of Saleh walking free, particularly after his troops gunned down nearly 50 protesters outside a mosque in Sana'a in March 2011.<sup>(9)</sup> Saleh was just as wary, agreeing to sign the deal in April and then again in May 2011 only to renege at the last minute. In June 2011, there was an explosion that was likely intended to kill Saleh in a mosque where he was performing prayers, killing some of his bodyguards and severely wounding the president.<sup>(10)</sup>

Saleh spent months recovering, first in Saudi Arabia and later in the US before finally agreeing to step down in February 2012. Standing alongside the GCC

5) Jay Solomon and Margaret Coker, “Clinton Advocates Changes in Yemen,” *Wall Street Journal*, January 12, 2011. <https://www.wsj.com/articles/SB10001424052748703791904576075332424157652>

6) Roula Khalaf, “Yemen's slide into hopelessness,” *Financial Times*, June 21, 2010. <https://www.ft.com/content/c38e5ca8-7d45-11df-a0f5-00144feabdc0>

7) Yemen Mechanism Official Document, March 2011. [https://peacemaker.un.org/sites/peacemaker.un.org/files/YE\\_111205\\_Agreement%20on%20the%20implementation%20mechanism%20for%20the%20transition.pdf](https://peacemaker.un.org/sites/peacemaker.un.org/files/YE_111205_Agreement%20on%20the%20implementation%20mechanism%20for%20the%20transition.pdf)

8) “US defends immunity law for Yemen's Saleh,” *Reuters*, January 10, 2012. <https://www.reuters.com/article/us-yemen-immunity-idUSTRE8090YC20120110>

9) Tom Finn, “45 protesters killed in Yemen,” *The Guardian*, March 18, 2011. <https://www.theguardian.com/world/2011/mar/18/yemen-police-massacre-45-protesters>

10) “Yemen: President Saleh injured in attack on palace,” *BBC*, June 3, 2011. <https://www.bbc.com/news/world-middle-east-13638787>

General Secretary Abd al-Latif al-Zayani when Saleh signed the document resigning the presidency was US Ambassador to Yemen Gerald Feierstein. The optics were instructive: this was a Saudi deal that had the backing of both the United States and the United Nations.

Overwhelmed by protests and then a post-Mubarak transition in Egypt and the military conflict in Libya, the US had neither the political energy nor the diplomatic attention to deal with Yemen. It was happy to let Saudi Arabia take the lead. But what it signed off on was allowing a hereditary monarchy to manage what was supposed to be a democratic transition in Yemen. Not surprisingly, it did not go well.

Yemenis, including the protesters who had instigated the change, were rewarded with a one-man referendum in February 2012 that only allowed for “yes” votes. Saleh’s long-standing vice president, Abdo Rabbu Mansour Hadi, was installed as a transitional president for what was intended to be a two-year term. Saleh went home as a “private citizen” to supposedly write his memoirs. In February 2014, with Yemen still struggling to figure out how to move on from a Saleh presidency, Hadi’s “transitional” term was extended an additional year. Seven months later, before it could be extended a third time, the Houthis marched into Sana’a, placed Hadi under house arrest, and watched as he resigned the presidency before escaping to Aden and exile in Saudi Arabia.

## Following Saudi Arabia into a Foolish War

On March 25, 2015 – one day after receiving a letter from President Hadi requesting military help to expel the Houthis from Sana’a<sup>(11)</sup> – Saudi Arabia announced that it was beginning “military operations in Yemen.”<sup>(12)</sup> As with the GCC deal three years earlier, the optics were once again instructive. Instead of announcing the beginning of the war from Riyadh, which is next door to Yemen, Saudi Arabia decided to announce it from Washington, thousands of miles from the frontlines. Shortly after 7:30 p.m. in DC (around 2:30 a.m. Riyadh time), Saudi Arabia’s ambassador to the US, Adel al-Jubeir, walked to the podium to declare that the war had begun. The implication, of both the setting and the messenger, was clear: Saudi Arabia was going to war in Yemen with the backing and approval of the United States.

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11) Abdu Rabbu Mansour Hadi, Letter to GCC countries submitted to the UN Security Council by Qatar, March 27, 2015 [https://www.securitycouncilreport.org/wp-content/uploads/s\\_2015\\_217.pdf](https://www.securitycouncilreport.org/wp-content/uploads/s_2015_217.pdf)

12) Adel al-Jubeir, Press Conference, March 25, 2015. Video available here: at <https://english.alarabiya.net/en/webtv/reports/2015/03/26/Video-Saudi-ambassador-in-U-S-speaks-on-military-campaign-in-Yemen.html>

Within hours of Jubeir's press conference, the Obama administration released a statement, saying that the president had "authorized the provision of logistical and intelligence support to GCC-led military operations."<sup>(13)</sup> The US, the statement said, had also established a "Joint Planning Cell" to coordinate US military and intelligence support.

Whatever reservations US officials had – and there must have been some given that the Saudis optimistically estimated that it would take only six weeks to push the Houthis out of Sana'a – were swept aside.<sup>(14)</sup> The US had been focused on the Iran nuclear deal for much of the Obama administration's second term, which alienated both Israel and Saudi Arabia. Yemen looked like an easy way to begin repairing that relationship and demonstrate to Saudi Arabia that the US cared about its security. The US had condemned the Houthi takeover of Sana'a, but outside of strongly worded UN resolutions it was not prepared to do anything to restore Hadi to power. Once again, when it came to Yemen, the US was happy to let Saudi Arabia take the lead.

But unlike the Gulf Initiative, which mostly impacted Yemen, this time there was a direct cost to the US for supporting Saudi Arabia's decision in Yemen. In many ways, the US got the worst of both worlds. It tied itself to an unwinnable, and increasingly unpopular, war with no say over how it was to be conducted.

Instead of pushing back on Saudi fears in 2015 that the Houthis were "Hezbollah south," a reference to the Iranian-backed militia and political party in Lebanon, the US went along with the characterization, acquiescing to the idea that the Houthis were an Iranian proxy. Ironically, the war has done the very thing it was supposed to prevent. Instead of rooting out Iranian influence on the Arabian peninsula, the Saudi-led war on Yemen has driven the Houthis and Iran closer together. In August 2019, the Houthis named an ambassador to Iran, and Iran recognized the Houthis as a legitimate governing authority, the first country to do so.<sup>(15)</sup>

Instead of counseling patience and pointing out that the Houthis were bad at governance and likely to eventually collapse due to the number of enemies they were making domestically, the US went along with Saudi Arabia's rush to war.

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13) Statement by NSC Spokesperson Bernadette Meehan on the Situation in Yemen, March 25, 2015. <https://obamawhitehouse.archives.gov/the-press-office/2015/03/25/statement-nsc-spokesperson-bernadette-meehan-situation-yemen>

14) Dafna Rand, Comments at "US Policy and the War in Yemen," a Brookings Institution Event, October 25, 2018. <https://www.brookings.edu/events/u-s-policy-and-the-war-in-yemen/>

15) Mohammed Hatem, "Yemen Shiite Rebels Appoint an Ambassador to Iran for First Time," *Bloomberg*, August 18, 2019. <https://www.bloomberg.com/news/articles/2019-08-18/yemen-shiite-rebels-appoint-an-ambassador-to-iran-for-first-time>

The subsequent bombing campaign has provided the Houthis with a pass on governance, as few in the north are willing to risk contesting Houthi rule on the ground when they are being bombarded from the air. Instead of withdrawing its support after it became clear that Saudi Arabia had neither the intention nor the skill to conduct a successful air campaign, the Trump administration vetoed a Congressional resolution that would have ended US involvement in the war.<sup>(16)</sup>

Both the Obama and Trump administrations have been careful to state that while the US supports the Saudi-led coalition, US troops are not involved in “direct military action.”<sup>(17)</sup> This is narrowly true, but politically irrelevant. The truth is that without US support, Saudi Arabia’s war in Yemen could not continue.<sup>(18)</sup> The US may not be engaged in direct combat operations, but it is facilitating and enabling the continuation of a war it says it wants to end. In September 2019, the UN’s Group of Eminent Experts on Yemen said that this support, along with arms sales to Saudi Arabia, may make the US – along with Britain and France – complicit in war crimes.<sup>(19)</sup>

The war in Yemen has been a disaster for Saudi Arabia, the US, and especially Yemeni civilians. The country is fracturing. Saudi Arabia’s decision to go to war in early 2015 did not create these divisions, but more than four years of constant war have exacerbated and likely extended them beyond the point of repair.

## Seeing an Islamist, Thinking Al-Qaeda

Perhaps on no other issues is the US as susceptible to making a mistake as it is when it comes to defining who is and who is not a terrorist. For years, Yemeni president Ali Abdullah Saleh gave a master class in repackaging his domestic enemies as international terrorists. More recently, the Saudi-led coalition, and in particular the United Arab Emirates, has done something similar.

16) Mark Landler and Peter Baker, “Trump Vetoes Measure to Force End to US Involvement in Yemen War,” *New York Times*, April 16, 2019. <https://www.nytimes.com/2019/04/16/us/politics/trump-veto-yemen.html>

17) William Castle, acting General Counsel Department of Defense, letter to Senate Majority Leader Mitch McConnell, February 27, 2018. <http://www.documentcloud.org/documents/4391679-Acting-GC-Letter-to-Majority-Leader-Re-Sanders.html>

18) Bruce Riedel, Comments at “US Policy and the War in Yemen,” a Brookings Institution Event, October 25, 2018. <https://www.brookings.edu/events/u-s-policy-and-the-war-in-yemen/>

19) Group of Eminent Experts on Yemen, “Situation of human rights in Yemen, including violations and abuses since 2014,” submitted to the UN Human Rights Council on September 3, 2019. [https://www.ohchr.org/Documents/HRBodies/HRCouncil/GEE-Yemen/A\\_HRC\\_42\\_CRP\\_1.PDF](https://www.ohchr.org/Documents/HRBodies/HRCouncil/GEE-Yemen/A_HRC_42_CRP_1.PDF) and Stephanie Nebehay, “US, France, and Britain may be complicit in Yemen war crimes, U.N. report says,” Reuters, September 3, 2019. <https://www.reuters.com/article/yemen-security-un/us-france-britain-may-be-complicit-in-yemen-war-crimes-un-report-says-idUSL5N25T3FN>

Unlike the US, the UAE believes and acts as though the Muslim Brotherhood is synonymous with Al-Qaeda. Defining the same enemy differently has very serious and very real implications. This is particularly true when the US relies on it for intelligence as it does in Yemen. Perhaps the most notable case is that of Khaled al-Aradah.

Khaled al-Aradah is the brother of Sultan al-Aradah, the governor of Marib, and, more importantly for the UAE, a member of Islah, a political grouping in Yemen which includes a number of Muslim Brotherhood figures. In May 2017, the US sanctioned Khaled al-Aradah, saying he was “a senior AQAP official in Yemen” and “the leader of an AQAP camp.”<sup>(20)</sup> At the time, I was the armed groups expert on the Yemen Panel of Experts for the UN Security Council. For months, the UAE had been sending our panel files of Islah figures in Yemen, claiming they were members of AQAP and urging us to investigate and nominate those individuals for UN sanctions. Each time I investigated one of these individuals, what I found was not a member of AQAP, but rather an Islah figure in Yemen that the UAE didn’t like.

After the US sanctioned Al-Aradah, I went through the available evidence again, and again found nothing that would suggest he was a senior member of AQAP or that he ran an AQAP camp. In fact, the evidence I did find – photographs of him with Yemeni Vice President Ali Mohsen al-Ahmar, and with Saudi military officials in Marib – strongly suggested that he was an Islah figure who ran a militia camp in support of President Hadi’s government. Of course, there may be other, non-public evidence that the US has linking Al-Aradah to AQAP, but the publicly available evidence does not. Subsequent interviews in Marib also point to the fact that Al-Aradah, who many describe as Al-Ahmar’s “right-hand man in Marib” is a member of Islah but not necessarily AQAP. For the UAE, that distinction does not matter, but for the United States it should.

The US must be very careful how it defines a terrorist in Yemen, and ensure that it does not conflate AQAP with other Islamist groups. Draw the circle too wide, define Al-Qaeda too broadly, and the United States will find itself in a war it can never win. AQAP is a terrorist organization; Islah is not.

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20) Treasury Targets al-Qaeda in the Arabian Peninsula, May 19, 2017. <https://www.treasury.gov/press-center/press-releases/Pages/sm0091.aspx>

## A Way Forward

As chaotic and confusing as Yemen is at the moment, it will only become more so in the future as the country splinters into different pieces. Increasingly, the US will be forced to deal with non-state actors, whether militias or tribes or other groups, who have control on the ground. The US is not set up to succeed in such an environment. The US prefers to work with national governments that, at the very least, make a claim to authority, even if it is largely a fiction on the ground. This is one of the reasons that the US is so hesitant to move on from Hadi's ineffective and, largely, irrelevant government. In such an environment, the temptation for US policymakers will be to throw up their hands, declare the country an irreparable mess, and rely even more on regional partners like Saudi Arabia and the UAE to interpret and explain what is happening. That would be a mistake. Increasingly, US interests will diverge from those of Saudi Arabia and the UAE in Yemen.

Both Saudi Arabia and the UAE have, through their actions over the past four years, made the situation in Yemen worse. Absent outside pressure and advice from the United States this trend is likely to continue, and as it does Yemen's security problems will become increasingly regional and international issues. The threat from Al-Qaeda, which has been mostly contained, will re-emerge as Yemen's fragmentation picks up pace. Refugee outflows will increase as maritime security is threatened. All of these challenges will require a nimble and nuanced policy, neither of which has marked the US approach to Yemen. For too long, US policymakers have operated with too little information when it comes to Yemen.

The information gap can be addressed, at least in part, by incentivizing deep, local knowledge in US officials. Instead of mandatory moves that shuffle diplomats and officials from country to country and region to region, the US can begin to cultivate and reward the sort of deep insight that results from familiarity and longevity. At the same time, even in relatively insecure environments, the US can transition from risk avoidance to risk management. This does not mean putting diplomats in dangerous situations, but it does mean allowing diplomats the flexibility to do their jobs and the realization that their jobs will often taken them beyond the embassy's thick walls. Neither of these steps are silver bullets that will magically result in better policy, but each is an essential step that will allow the US to better understand and deal with Yemen even as the country collapses. The US may not always understand what is happening on the ground in Yemen, but viewing the country as its own place with its own history will go a long way toward creating a more successful policy.

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