



# TRUMP AND THE YEMEN WAR: MISREPRESENTING THE HOUTHIS AS IRANIAN PROXIES

By:

Adam Baron,  
Waleed Alhariri,  
Anthony Biswell

December 20, 2017

# TRUMP AND THE YEMEN WAR: **MISREPRESENTING THE HOUTHIS AS IRANIAN PROXIES**

December 20, 2017

**ADAM BARON** IS DIRECTOR FOR RESEARCH AND ANALYSIS AND A CO-FOUNDER OF THE SANAA CENTER FOR STRATEGIC STUDIES, AS WELL AS A VISITING FELLOW AT THE EUROPEAN COUNCIL ON FOREIGN RELATIONS.

**WALEED ALHARIRI** IS DIRECTOR OF THE UNITED STATES OFFICE OF THE SANAA CENTER FOR STRATEGIC STUDIES.

**ANTHONY BISWELL** IS AN ASSISTANT EDITOR AND RESEARCHER AT THE SANAA CENTER FOR STRATEGIC STUDIES.

THIS REPORT WAS EDITED BY SPENCER OSBERG



## EXECUTIVE SUMMARY:

The involvement of numerous foreign actors on all sides of the Yemen war has not changed the fact that fundamentally the conflict remains tied to local dynamics. This is particularly true with regard to the Houthis, the militant group currently controlling much of Yemen's north and facing off against forces associated with the internationally recognized Yemeni government and the Saudi-led military coalition.

The administration of United States President Donald Trump has been a vociferous opponent of Iran – along with its Gulf Arab allies and the Yemeni government – and has advanced a conception of the Houthis as agents of Iran and a policy that aims to “hit Iran in Yemen.” Hawkish elements of the US Republican party and its supporters have also reinforced an understanding of the Houthis as one-dimensional Iranian pawns, framing them solely in regional sectarian terms.

This, however, obscures complex reality: the Houthis are a home-grown Yemeni group with popular support, self-sustaining social and financial networks, an independent leadership whose primary considerations are local power dynamics, and an affinity with Iran based far more in politics than religion. Simultaneously for Tehran, the ongoing Yemen conflict and the Houthis have provided a convenient, low-cost means to harass their main Gulf opponent, Saudi Arabia.

Whether the Trump administration intends to pursue war or peace, failing to understand the motivations, actions and nature of the Houthis lays the groundwork for flawed foreign policy decision making, and makes it more difficult to exert political, diplomatic or even military pressure on the group.

Indeed, a policy that further isolates the Houthis internationally would likely push the group further under the influence of Tehran. As well, if the US government sees the Houthis as a proxy target for Iran, Iranian military planners will be highly incentivized to back the Houthis more substantially, given that the Iranians would have little to lose themselves, while their opponents – the US and Saudi Arabia – would be risking a great deal. Increased Iranian support for the Houthis would in turn elevate the security risks for Saudi Arabia.

Trump's consistent framing of the Yemen conflict as the product of Iranian malfeasance also reduces Washington's ability rally the international community into a united front regarding the conflict, or to pressure the main warring parties back to the negotiating table.

Rather than isolating the Houthis further, US diplomatic engagement presents a more promising option, as the Houthis have responded positively to the direct talks previously entered into with both Saudi Arabia and US officials.

## INTRODUCTION: Yemen “peripheral” to current US foreign policy

United States President Donald Trump has been a vocal opponent of the previous administration’s policy regarding Iran, and antagonistic toward Tehran generally, since his election campaign. This has manifested in various ways: Trump’s criticism of the Joint Comprehensive Plan of Action (JCPOA), the so-called “Iran nuclear deal” brokered under former President Barack Obama; his fulminations against Tehran for backing various militia groups in the Middle East, as well as Trump’s public indignation regarding the rhetoric Iranian officials have directed towards US allies in the region.<sup>(1)</sup>

Even while the Trump administration’s broader Middle East policy has appeared somewhat inconsistent thus far, the White House has been fairly undeviating in its condemnation of perceived Iranian interference across the region. In this regard the Houthi movement in Yemen, and Iranian support for the group, has clearly been on the Trump administration’s radar. Such was on display on December 14, 2017, when the US Ambassador to the United Nations, Nikki Haley, staged a media event at a military base in Washington, DC. There she unveiled a raft of weapons allegedly manufactured in Iran and recovered by the US’ Gulf allies. These included missiles, drones, anti-tank weapons, among other items which, Haley said, testified to Iran “fanning the flames” of Middle East conflict.<sup>(2)</sup> The centerpieces of the exhibition were the reassembled pieces of two missiles the Houthis had purportedly fired into Saudi Arabia – one of which had come close to hitting Riyadh’s King Khalid International Airport on November 4, 2017; Saudi authorities have claimed their air defence systems shot it down.

“The weapons might as well have had ‘Made in Iran’ stickers all over” them, said Haley, asserting that Tehran was in violation of the current United Nations arms embargo on Yemen. A UN panel of experts, which issued a report regarding the same missile fragments on November 24, stated that while they bore a resemblance to the Iranian-manufactured Qiam-1 missile, there was “no evidence as to the identity of the broker or supplier.”<sup>(3)</sup> The missiles also contained an American-manufactured component.

Notable in the Trump administration’s escalating allegations against Iran and its involvement in Yemen is that discussions concerning Yemen itself have been almost entirely absent. In the words of several US diplomatic officials who spoke privately on the matter, Yemen is “peripheral” in current US policy making. This, at a time when Yemen constitutes the world’s largest humanitarian crisis, Washington is deeply mired in the country’s civil war through military, logistics and intelligence support for the Saudi-led coalition intervening in the conflict, and US counterterrorism operations in Yemen – that began under President George W. Bush in 2002 – have never been more robust. The US’ forthcoming foreign policy actions related to Yemen will thus profoundly impact the country and its ongoing conflict, yet such is blatantly missing from White House considerations.

---

1) The Joint Comprehensive Plan of Action (JCPOA) is an agreement that was reached between the P5+1 (China, France, Germany, Russia, the United Kingdom and the United States), the European Union (EU) and Iran on July 14, 2015. While the deal is complex and technical, essentially Iran agreed to severe restrictions on its nuclear program that preclude it from obtaining nuclear weapons in exchange the US and EU lifting economic sanctions; During his visit to Saudi Arabia on 20 May, Donald Trump condemned the role of Iran, “From Lebanon to Iraq to Yemen, Iran funds, arms and trains terrorists, militias and other extremist groups that spread destruction and chaos across the region,”.

2) Jim Garamone, “Haley says Iran must stop destabilizing behavior,” DoD News, December 14, 2017, <https://www.defense.gov/News/Article/Article/1397091/haley-says-iran-must-stop-destabilizing-behavior/source/GovDelivery/>

3) Colum Lynch and Robbie Gramer, “Haley’s ‘Smoking Gun’ on Iran Met With Skepticism at U.N.,” Foreign Policy, December 14, 2017, <http://foreignpolicy.com/2017/12/14/nikki-haley-yemen-houthi-rebels-iran-missiles-press-conference-pentagon-skepticism-united-nations-trump-nuclear-deal-diplomacy/>

## INTERSECTIONS BETWEEN THE HOUTHIS, IRAN AND THE US – A BRIEF OVERVIEW

The Houthi rebel group emerged in the early 2000s out of a movement called The Believing Youth, a group focused on the revival of Zaidism, a brand of Shia Islam found nearly exclusively in northern Yemen. From the start the Houthis have been unabashedly anti-American, which as an ideological tenet has functioned as a basis for mobilization. The writings of key Houthi figures have framed US influence in the region as deeply malign, blaming it for the proliferation of Saudi-backed Sunni Islamist ideologies that have spread in the traditional Zaidi heartland.

In the movement's nascent period, founder Hussein al-Houthi's vociferous criticism of the US war in Iraq and then-president Ali Abdullah Saleh's alliance with Washington earned al-Houthi both popular support and the ire of the government in Sana'a. Subsequent Yemeni Armed Forces (YAF) operations in northern Yemen against al-Houthi and his followers led to his death in 2004 and sparked the Sa'ada Wars – a series of six armed conflicts between the YAF and the Houthis that lasted until 2010.<sup>(4)</sup>

Aiming to woo Saleh into counterterrorism cooperation against Al Qaeda in the Arabian Peninsula (AQAP), the US did little to dissuade the YAF's counter-insurgency operations against the Houthis. Simultaneously, the Houthis' vociferous anti-Americanism and anti-Semitism – epitomized by their signature chant, "God is great, death to America, death to Israel, damn the Jews, victory to Islam," – did little to endear them to the Americans; nor did their alleged ties to Iran.

While cast as Iranian proxy forces by Saleh and his allies, US embassy cables from Sana'a at the time revealed that American officials saw little evidence of direct Iranian support for the Houthis beyond overly positive media coverage.<sup>(5)</sup> Importantly, the ideological affinity between Tehran and the Houthis was based far more in politics than religion; seeing themselves as warriors against tyranny, the Houthi held Iran in esteem for standing against the perceived injustices of the Saudi, American and Israeli governments.<sup>(6)</sup> At the same time, the Zaidi school of Islam can be viewed as being ideologically between Sunni and Shia – in many ways bearing more in common with Sunni Islam – and significantly distinct from the Twelver Shiism most prominent in Iran.

As the Sa'ada conflicts continued, however, the Iranian government came to see the Houthis as an opportunity to pressure Saudi Arabia, with Tehran ramping up the media rhetoric and increasing its networking with the Houthis. In 2011, popular protests against President Saleh – the Yemeni manifestation of the so-called 'Arab Spring' – eventually led to him stepping down and handing the presidency to his deputy, Abdu Rabbu Mansour Hadi; following this, Iranian-Houthi interactions came to include limited financial support and military training.<sup>(7)</sup> Houthi military forces entered Sana'a in September 2014 – backed by Saleh-allied troops – leading to the government being deposed and Hadi fleeing the capital

---

4) When Houthi forces killed Saleh in early December 2017, the event was celebrated as revenge for Hussein al-Houthi's killing and the Sa'ada wars.

5) "Iran in Yemen: Tehran's Shadow looms large but footprint is small," Wikileaks cable 09SANAA1662\_a, dated September 19th 2009, [https://wikileaks.org/plusd/cables/09SANAA1662\\_a.html](https://wikileaks.org/plusd/cables/09SANAA1662_a.html)

6) Adam Baron Farea Al-Muslimi, 'The politics driving Yemen's rising sectarianism', SCSS, May 30, 2016. Accessed December 17, 2017; available at <http://sanaacenter.org/publications/main-publications/40>

7) Author interview, UN official, August 2013.

in January 2015; the next month the Houthis signed a memorandum of understanding on air transport cooperation with Iran, allowing the two countries to undertake direct flights between Sana'a and Tehran for the first time.<sup>(8)</sup>

While the Houthis have largely shunned direct contact with the US, the Obama administration regarded them as part of Yemen's societal fabric that should be included in any political process, in particular post-2011. Following the Houthi takeover of Sana'a in September 2014, the US established a system of coordination with the group, largely regarding stabilization and counterterrorism matters.<sup>(9)</sup> US officials have also, on occasion, had direct contact with some Houthi leaders, particularly with regards to the ongoing peace negotiations.<sup>(10)</sup> Washington has also on several occasions successfully negotiated the release of American citizens held by the Houthis.<sup>(11)</sup>

None of this, however, is to say that there was amity between the two. Beyond ideology, rhetoric and the Iranian ties, the Houthis overthrew a government closely allied to the US; one that coordinated with the US on key counterterrorism matters to an even greater extent than Saleh.<sup>(12)</sup> Simultaneously, even while recognizing American power and the need to negotiate with the US, the Houthis still saw Washington as essentially a destructive force in the region.

## CONSTRUCTION OF THE IRAN-HOUSHI NARRATIVE IN THE US

Although the US is deeply enmeshed in the Yemen conflict, the country was barely mentioned during the 2016 US presidential campaign. When Trump did mention Yemen, his remarks usually cast the country as indicative of two nodes: first, the Obama administration's alleged failure to properly respond to the 'Arab Spring' and its aftershocks, and, second, the spread of nefarious Iranian influence in the Middle East in the wake of the Iran nuclear deal. In both regards, these stances put Trump within mainstream Republican Party foreign policy sentiments, irregardless of his 'outsider' status and general frequent expressions of disdain for 'the establishment'.

8) As noted on the final report of the UN Security Council Panel of Experts on Yemen, "the deal allowed two Yemeni and Iranian companies, Yemenia and Mahan Air, respectively, to operate 14 flights per week per country. The first Iranian flight landed in Sana'a on 1 March, and a second on 6 March, beginning a series of flights that continued until 26 March, when the coalition imposed an air blockade." See "Final report of the Panel of Experts in accordance with paragraph 5 of resolution 2204 (2015)," United Nations: Security Council, January 22, 2016, available at <https://www.un.org/sc/suborg/en/sanctions/2140/panel-of-experts/reports>

9) Jay Solomon, Dion Nissenbaum and Asa Fitch, "In Strategic Shift, US draws closer to Yemen Rebels," The Wall Street Journal, January 29, 2015 <https://www.wsj.com/articles/in-strategic-shift-u-s-draws-closer-to-yemeni-rebels-1422576308>

10) Author interview, US official, July 2017.

11) Associated Press, 'Yemen's Houthi rebels have released 2 Americans, John Kerry says', October 15, 2016. Accessed December 17, 2017; available at <http://www.latimes.com/world/la-fg-yemen-houthi-releases-two-americans-20161015-snap-story.html>; Matthew Rosenberg and Kareem Fahim, '2 Americans Among 6 Hostages Freed in Yemen After Months of Captivity', New York Times, September 20, 2015. Accessed December 17, 2017, available at <https://www.nytimes.com/2015/09/21/international-home/2-american-hostages-freed-in-yemen-after-months-of-captivity.html>

12) Author interview, US official, February 2012.

While Obama's policy toward Yemen was subject to little sustained or significant scrutiny for most of his time in office – save from a small number of progressive Democrats and the libertarian wing of the Republican party – it suddenly hit center stage in 2014, following two back-to-back events. The first was Obama's declaration that the US counterterrorism strategy in Yemen served as a model for the wider fight against the Islamic State in Iraq and Syria (ISIS); US-Yemen counterterrorism and collaboration, Obama and administration officials argued, presented a model, low-footprint military operation in the region, pairing US military airpower with the intelligence potential of local ground forces.<sup>(13)</sup> The second was the overthrow of the internationally recognized – and US-backed – government of President Hadi in Yemen, an embarrassing turn of events for Obama who had previously described Yemen's political transition post-2011 as a monumental success and a model to emulate elsewhere.<sup>(14)</sup>

The failed political transition and the ousting of the internationally recognized government from Sana'a presented a golden opportunity for US Republicans and their supporters to critique Obama. A key US ally had been overthrown by anti-American rebels – something that served to epitomize, for some, the administration's poor judgement in reacting to the Arab Spring. One indicative March 2015 Heritage Foundation commentary bluntly cast Yemen as joining Obama's list of "Middle East disasters," ridiculing the "success story" claim; another polemic National Review commentary described Yemen's chaos as symptomatic of the fruits of Obama's alleged Jihadist sympathies.<sup>(15)</sup>

The critiques were far from unique to conservative media: In the wake of the Hadi government collapse, numerous commentators from across partisan lines disparaged the so-called 'Yemen model'.<sup>(16)</sup> Its failure was compounded by the humiliating nature with which US troops and embassy staff were forced to evacuate the capital, in many cases leaving behind equipment that was eventually seized by the Houthis.

Throughout 2014 and 2015, the narrative of how Obama's Yemen model failed began dovetailing with criticisms of the administration's Iran policy, specifically that Obama being "weak" on Iran had paved the way for the events in Yemen. This cross-pollination of narratives raised consternation within the right-wing, and even some moderates in the American foreign policy establishment, regarding the talks that led to the JCPOA. Importantly, this worldview casts the Houthis as beholden to Tehran and extensions of Iranian power, rather than an indigenous Yemeni movement acting autonomously based on its own vested interests.

The framing of Yemen through the prism of Iran is apparent in scores of commentary articles from the time regarding Houthi military advances; in most cases, the focus was regional politics while actual events in Yemen were treated as almost peripheral to the larger narrative. One particularly indicative Washington Times article published on January 23, 2015 opens by writing that:

13) Kathleen Hennessey, "In devising a plan for Iraq, the US looks to its Yemen model," The Los Angeles Times, June 22, 2014, <http://www.latimes.com/world/middleeast/la-fg-obama-iraq-yemen-20140622-story.html>

14) Jeff Mason, "US tells G8 Syria's Assad must go, cites Yemen as model," Reuters, May 19th, 2012, <https://www.reuters.com/article/us-syria-usa-whitehouse/u-s-tells-g8-syrias-assad-must-go-cites-yemen-as-model-idUSBRE84I0BC20120519>

15) Peter Brookes, "Obama's 'success' in Yemen joins list of overseas disasters," The Heritage Foundation, March 25, 2015, <http://www.heritage.org/middle-east/commentary/obamas-success-yemen-joins-list-overseas-disasters>; Michelle Malkin, "Obama's bloody Yemen disaster," The National Review, January 23, 2015, <http://www.nationalreview.com/article/397021/obamas-bloody-yemen-disaster-michelle-malkin>.

16) See, for example, Zach Beauchamp, "These Obama administration quotes on Yemen are almost too cringeworthy to read," Vox, March 27, 2015, <https://www.vox.com/2015/3/27/8299721/obama-yemen-quotes>.

***The surge in Yemen this week by Shiite Muslim militants represents what some national security insiders are calling a “huge victory” for Iran, just as the Obama administration faces criticism for being too lenient in nuclear talks with the Islamic republic and appears – at least tacitly – to be coordinating with Tehran against Sunni terrorists in Iraq.<sup>(17)</sup>***

Such thinking serves to elide much of the nuance of the Yemen conflict, all the while subsuming the differences between the political calculations, ideological motivations and strategic implications of three widely disparate happenings – the Houthi military advance, ‘Iran deal’ negotiations and US counterterrorism operations in Iraq. Perhaps ironically, the caricature of Iran as the hand behind all ills in the Middle East was fed by Iranian hardliners themselves. Iranian member of parliament Ali Reza Zakani, for instance, stated that the Houthi takeover of Sana’a meant that the Iranians controlled four regional capitals – Sana’a, Damascus, Beirut and Baghdad – and that Saudi Arabia was under imminent threat.<sup>(18)</sup>

Zakani’s statements were given wide play in both the Gulf and conservative US media which, along with other dramatic claims of Iranian expansionism, served the internal narratives of hardline Iranian leaders, hawkish Gulf rulers and anti-Obama Republicans, albeit, to different ends. Right-wing American pundits and many Gulf Arab commentators appeared to mirror each other’s statements, both speaking about the need to push back the Houthis to counter Iran.<sup>(19)</sup> Both characterized the Houthis as an “Iran-backed Shia” grouping, effectively undermining any wider analysis of a rebel group’s overthrow of a standing government that many in the country viewed as illegitimate.<sup>(20)</sup> Some American commentators went further, reducing the Yemen conflict to another example of the evils of Islam, tying Yemen’s failed government and collapsing state to the Obama administration’s inability to understand the “radical Islamist threat.”

Less bombastic and more nuanced analysis did appear in conservative outlets as well; for instance, both American Enterprise Institute (AEI) and Cato Institute-affiliated writers produced articles that offered depth and informed perspective of the Yemen crisis. Nonetheless, on the whole, two themes were reproduced in association so consistently that they became established as conventional wisdom: Obama’s failed policy had handed Yemen to Iran.

In that regard, Trump’s statements during the presidential campaign were within the GOP mainstream. While the few remarks he made on Yemen were vague – and at times almost baffling – the themes within them fell in line with what would have been expected from a more conventional candidate. This was the case, for example, for his much-maligned comments during a campaign speech in January 2016:

Now they’re going into Yemen, and if you look at Yemen, take a look... they’re going to get Syria, they’re going to get Yemen, unless... trust me, a lot of good things are going to happen if I get in, but let’s just sort of leave it the way it is. They get Syria, they get Yemen. Now they

17) Guy Taylor, “Yemen’s Shi’ite Rebels growing in Power,” The Washington Times, January 23, 2015, <http://www.washingtontimes.com/news/2015/jan/23/yemens-shiite-rebels-growing-power/>

18) For a write up of Zakani’s remarks, see “Sanaa is the fourth Arab Capital to join the Iranian Revolution, The Middle East Monitor, September 27th, 2014, <https://www.middleeastmonitor.com/20140927-sanaa-is-the-fourth-arab-capital-to-join-the-iranian-revolution/>.

19) See footnote 6, Amal Mudallali, “The Iranian Sphere of Influence expands into Yemen,” Foreign Policy, October 8, 2014, <http://foreignpolicy.com/2014/10/08/the-iranian-sphere-of-influence-expands-into-yemen/>

20) John Xenakis, “Shi’a al-Houthis threaten new Sunni Provinces in Yemen,” Breitbart, January 5, 2015, <http://www.breitbart.com/national-security/2015/01/05/world-view-shia-al-houthis-threaten-new-sunni-provinces-in-yemen/>



didn't want Yemen, but you ever see the border between Yemen and Saudi Arabia? They want Saudi Arabia. So what are they going to have? They're gonna have Iraq, they're gonna have Iran, they're gonna have Iraq, they're gonna have Yemen, they're gonna have Syria, they're gonna have everything!<sup>(21)</sup>

Many commentators have focused on the mangled language – which is indeed confusingly phrased and needlessly verbose – however, the statement also provides insight into Trump's framing of developments in Yemen: in short, that an expansionist Iran had taken advantage of chaos in the country, putting itself in a position to threaten a key US ally, Saudi Arabia. The wording may have been inelegant, but nonetheless, it fell well within the mainstream of his party; indeed, it echoed the rhetoric and policy prescriptions of many Republican elites who opposed Trump.

## TRUMP'S HAWKISH POSTURING ON IRAN, HOUTHIS

In May 2015 the Iran Nuclear Agreement Review Act (INARA) was made law, giving the US Congress a degree of oversight of the Iran nuclear deal.<sup>(22)</sup> The INARA requires the president to publicly certify every 90 days that Iran is in technical compliance with its commitments under the JCPOA. Should the president not give this certification, Congress then has a 60-day window in which it is able to rapidly re-impose economic sanctions on Iran, thus breaking the nuclear agreement.

On October 13, 2017, some nine months into his presidency and against the advice of many of his key advisors, Trump announced that he would not certify the Iran deal.<sup>(23)</sup> In a wide-ranging speech, Trump slammed Iran as a “terror state,” condemning its activities throughout the Middle East and the wider world.<sup>(24)</sup> Trump directly noted Yemen, accusing Iranian government of “fueling” the ongoing civil war. This stance was echoed in a press statement released to accompany his announcement.<sup>(25)</sup> In it, Trump cast the Houthis as tools of the Iranian Revolutionary Guard Corps (IRGC).

“In Yemen,” it reads, “the IRGC has attempted to use the Houthis as puppets to hide Iran’s role in using sophisticated missiles and explosive boats to attack innocent civilians in Saudi Arabia and the United Arab Emirates, as well as to restrict freedom of navigation in the Red Sea.”<sup>(26)</sup>

Unsurprisingly, Saudi Arabia, the UAE – the leading partner with Saudi Arabia in the military coalition – and the internationally recognized Yemeni government were pleased with

21) “Campaign Rally with Donald Trump and Sarah Palin”, C-SPAN, January 19, 2016.

22) Text of the “Iran Nuclear Agreement Review Act of 2015” is available at <https://www.congress.gov/bill/114th-congress/house-bill/1191/text>

23) The US Congress allowed the deadline to re-impose Iran sanctions to pass on December 13, 2017 without taking action. For more on this, please see Patricia Zengerle, ‘U.S. Congress to let Iran deadline pass, leave decision to Trump’, Reuters, December 12, 2017, available at <https://www.reuters.com/article/us-iran-nuclear-congress/u-s-congress-to-let-iran-deadline-pass-leave-decision-to-trump-idUSKBN1E62HP?il=0>

24) “Trump’s remarks on the Iran deal,” NPR, October 13, 2017, <http://www.npr.org/2017/10/13/557622096/transcript-trump-s-remarks-on-iran-nuclear-deal>

25) The White House, ‘President Donald J. Trump’s New Strategy on Iran’, October 13, 2017. Accessed December 17, 2017; available at <https://www.whitehouse.gov/briefings-statements/president-donald-j-trumps-new-strategy-iran/>

26) Ibid.

Trump's words, greeting them as a welcome change from Obama administration policies. While the US under Obama firmly backed the Saudi-led coalition's operations against the Houthis – and, indeed, provided crucial military support – many Gulf and Yemeni officials grew resentful of what they saw as former Secretary of State John Kerry's overhanded attempts to push the internationally recognized government to agree to peace terms. Many spokespeople of the Yemeni government publically slammed Kerry, accusing him of bias. In contrast, Yemeni officials characterized Trump's October 13 statements as sending "positive signals."<sup>(27)</sup>

These remarks were also the most blunt iteration of a Trump stance regarding Yemen, though they were far from the first time the president or members of his administration had made confrontational statements eluding to potential escalation of US involvement in Yemen to confront Iran. Shortly after Trump took office, the newly installed National Security Advisor General Michael Flynn (since resigned) said Iran was being put "on notice," bluntly labeling the Houthis an Iranian "proxy terrorist group."<sup>(28)</sup> These remarks came in parallel with increased US military activity in Yemen through counterterrorism operations against AQAP, all of which indicated the Trump administration's new hawkish approach.<sup>(29)</sup> US government officials in Washington, DC, speaking privately, echoed this assessment, reporting that administration officials had stated their intent to go after "Iranian military targets" in Yemen in operations similar to those against ISIS in Iraq and Syria.<sup>(30)</sup>

All the while, Trump-friendly pundits have continued the chorus of claims that Yemen represents a forum for pushing back Iran expansionism. Many of these voices have gone as far as to argue for US involvement in any potential Saudi-led military coalition operation against the Houthi-held port of Hudaydah. Not only does such line of thinking dismiss the likely catastrophic humanitarian impact of such an attack – given that the vast majority of the country's basic necessities are imported through Hudaydah port – but it casts the importance of the attack as beyond Yemen, in "countering" Iran. In one particularly indicative Breitbart piece published following Trump's inaugural foreign trip to Riyadh in May 2017, the author posits US support for the Hudaydah offensive as a near necessity, as leaving it in the hands of the Houthis risked fulfilling an "Armageddon prophecy."<sup>(31)</sup>

Beyond rhetoric, however, there has yet to be any decisive shift in US actions regarding Yemen. Following battles in Sana'a between the Houthis and forces loyal to former President Ali Abdullah Saleh at the end of November 2017 – leading to Saleh's death early the next month – coalition-backed forces made new gains against the Houthis along Yemen's Red Sea coast toward Hudaydah; there is no evidence, however, of direct US support for this offensive. Simultaneously, key administration officials, such as Secretary of Defense James Mattis and Secretary of State Rex Tillerson, have continued to support the renewal of peace talks.

---

27) Holly McKaw, "America's role in Yemen war must end, US lawmakers demand," Fox News, October 24, 2017, <http://www.foxnews.com/world/2017/10/24/americas-role-in-yemen-war-must-end-us-lawmakers-demand.html>; also see <http://sabanew.net/viewstory.php?id=23691>

28) Julien Borger, David Smith, Spencer Ackerman and Saeed Kamali Dehghan, "Trump administration 'officially putting Iran on notice,'" The Guardian, February 1, 2017, <https://www.theguardian.com/world/2017/feb/01/iran-trump-michael-flynn-on-notice>

29) Noah Browning, "Trump risks deeper entanglement in Yemen's murky war," Reuters, February 7, 2017, <http://www.reuters.com/article/us-yemen-security-trump/trump-risks-deeper-entanglement-in-yemens-murky-war-idUSKBN15M1HP>

30) Author interviews, Washington, DC, July 2017. US government sources put the number of Iranian "advisors" present in Yemen in the dozens.

31) James Zumwalt, "Zumwalt: As Trump visits the Saudis, Yemen comes into focus to check Iran," Breitbart, May 17, 2017 <http://www.breitbart.com/national-security/2017/05/17/zumwalt-trump-yemen/>

Notably, in a surprise about face in Trump's otherwise unwavering support for the Saudi-led coalition, the White House released a statement on December 6 calling on Riyadh to "completely allow food, fuel, water, and medicine to reach the Yemeni people who desperately need it" – a reference to the Saudi blockade of northern Yemen that is crippling commercial and humanitarian imports and exposing millions of people to potential famine.<sup>(32)</sup> While ostensibly a humanitarian appeal, many observers doubted the move indicated a US policy shift; rather they saw it as Trump's retribution against Riyadh for criticizing his announcement, days earlier, to move the US embassy in Israel to Jerusalem.

Even if Trump's otherwise hawkish posturing regarding Iran and Yemen remains at the level of rhetoric, however, it could still prove problematic: casting the Houthis as one-dimensional Iranian pawns and dismissing dynamic reality obscures analysis of developments on the ground and opportunities for conflict de-escalation that may emerge. Simultaneously, Trump's anti-Iran vitriol empowers hardline actors on all sides of the conflict who have a vested interest in seeing the war continue.

## LOOKING AHEAD: THE IMPLICATIONS OF MISREPRESENTING THE HOUTHIS

Regardless of the involvement of foreign actors on all sides of the war, Yemen's conflict remains fundamentally tied to internal dynamics. This is particularly true of the Houthis and their actions; despite their ties with and backing from Iran, Houthi leaders' fundamental consideration is local power dynamics.<sup>(33)</sup> Casting the Houthis as Iranian pawns and framing them solely in regional sectarian terms, with little identity otherwise, ignores the factors motivating Houthi supporters and elides the group's ideology and decision-making process.

Whether the US administration intends to pursue war or peace, failing to understand the motivations, actions and nature of the Houthis – and instead treating them as puppets of a foreign power – lays the groundwork for flawed decision making; one cannot expect to effectively counter an adversary without understanding how and why they fight. The Trump administration's erroneous framing of the conflict thus represents a significant danger: for instance, the failure to understand the Houthis, their motivations and how they consolidated their power in northern Yemen renders it all the more difficult to exert political, diplomatic or even military pressure on the group.

Proper foreign policy regarding the Houthis requires a deeper understanding of how the group functions. For instance, the Houthis have been able to continue prosecuting the conflict not because of Iranian support, but rather through their ability to capitalize on tribal networks under their control, their knowledge of the terrain, their control over key military installations and, increasingly, conflict-enabled revenue streams. Indeed, rather

---

32) The White House, 'Statement by President Donald J. Trump on Yemen', December 6, 2017; accessed December 19, available at <https://www.whitehouse.gov/briefings-statements/statement-president-donald-j-trump-yemen/>

33) Throughout their alliance with the late Ali Abdullah Saleh, the Houthi leadership sought to protect the group and its political future, knowing Saleh would likely abandon the alliance if it was in his and his family's interest to do so. Despite the formation of joint governing institutions, the Houthis refused to dissolve the Supreme Revolutionary Committee (SRC) headed by Mohammed al-Houthi. The SRC represented an effective insurance policy against Saleh. The Houthis' suspicions were proved right when Saleh announced his willingness to open a "new page" with the Saudi-led coalition and confront the Houthis.

than being beholden to Tehran, numerous western diplomats having stated that when the Houthis entered Sana'a in September 2014 they did so against the advice of Iranian officials.<sup>(54)</sup> Then in March 2016, the Houthis engaged in direct talks with Saudi officials that led to a de facto ceasefire along the Saudi-Yemeni border. The border ceasefire largely held until the breakdown of UN-sponsored peace talks in Kuwait in August 2016. Recent events surrounding Saleh's death undoubtedly complicate peace efforts – among other things adding to the distrust between the Houthis and Saudi-led coalition members. Nonetheless, both the Houthis and Saudi Arabia are surely aware that any eventual sustainable peace agreement it will require the other's buy in.

Thus, overemphasizing the Houthis' foreign ties while ignoring local factors and the means of weakening or pressuring the Houthis is ultimately likely to breed policies that are ineffectual at best, and counterproductive at worst. This is particularly true with regards to the risk that the "pawn of Iran" framing becomes a self-fulfilling prophecy – that is, creating circumstances that prompt or even oblige the Houthis to further strengthen ties with Iran, or vice versa. In some regards, this has already been seen since the Saudi-led coalition launched its military intervention in Yemen in March 2015, under the name Operation Decisive Storm. According to a variety of western and Yemeni officials, following the coalition's intervention Iranian support to and coordination with the Houthis expanded. Indeed, the Houthi reliance on this support increased as international isolation left them with few other potential partners.

US policy that casts the Houthis as an extension of Iranian interest will likely only lend momentum to this Houthi drift toward the Iranian sphere of influence. First, it would further isolate the Houthis internationally and continue to weaken incentives against greater cooperation with Iran. Second – and perhaps most importantly – it would increase Tehran's incentives to expand its activities in Yemen.

At the moment, Iran's involvement remains low-cost in large part because Yemen is not a priority for Iran, and as the Houthis remain generally autonomous and self-sustaining. While Iranian support for the Houthis does appear to have aided the group and, it would seem, their ballistic missile capacity in particular, this aid has not shifted the balance of power in the conflict, with the frontlines in Yemen having remained largely a grinding military stalemate since 2015.

However, a US policy that aims to "hit Iran in Yemen" may ultimately shift the Iranian government's calculus with regards to Yemen's importance. In short, if the US government sees the Houthis as a proxy target for Iran, Iranian military planners would be highly incentivized to back the Houthi much more substantially, given that the Iranians would have little to lose themselves, while their opponents – the US and Saudi Arabia – would have a great deal at risk. Iranian media and government statements already frequently highlight the US role in facilitating the Saudi-led coalition's actions; increased US involvement would thus not only be a propaganda coup, but would bolster within the Iranian regime proponents of increased support for the Houthis.

Trump's stance against the Houthis also threatens to bury the already moribund UN-led peace process. While the United States government has taken a firm stance in favor of the Saudi-led coalition and restoring the internationally recognized government, Washington

---

34) Ali Watkins, Ryan Grim, and Akbar Shahid Ahmed, 'Iran Warned Houthis Against Yemen Takeover', HuffPost, April 20, 2015. Accessed December 17, 2017; available at [https://www.huffingtonpost.com/2015/04/20/iran-houthis-yemen\\_n\\_7101456.html](https://www.huffingtonpost.com/2015/04/20/iran-houthis-yemen_n_7101456.html)

has nonetheless been a key supporter of the peace process; notably, under the waning days of the Obama administration senior US officials exerted significant pressure on the Saudis and Emiratis to push President Hadi and his allies to agree to a peace settlement.

Since Trump took office, the peace track put forward by John Kerry was effectively put on pause, as key members of the coalition aimed to take advantage of the new administration's more favorable leanings. Trump's consistent framing of the Yemen conflict as the product of Iranian malfeasance reduces Washington's ability to pressure allies back to the negotiating table. Additionally, it reduces the US' ability to coordinate with other allies. Europe, and even the United Kingdom, have widely divergent understandings of the Yemen conflict from Trump's. This will impede the international community's efforts to maintain anything resembling a united front, thus weakening its leverage over Yemen's various warring factions.

Domestically in the US, criticism of the Trump administration's policies regarding Yemen – including many that are roughly consonant with Obama's – has become increasingly mainstream in many Democratic party circles; Moveon.org, for example, has recently sponsored numerous petitions critical of US support for Saudi-led military coalition operations in Yemen.<sup>(35)</sup> US involvement in the Yemen conflict has also faced increasing criticism from Republicans. This comes notably from the GOP's anti-interventionist libertarian wing and figures such as Representative Walter Jones (R-NC) and Senator Rand Paul (R-KY), who similarly opposed US intervention in other regional conflicts. Such figures have succeeded in generating across-the-aisle support in a series of bipartisan attempts to call attention to the war and limit the US' involvement. In doing so, Republican politicians like Paul have made public statements consistent with those of the Democratic party's progressive wing.

For instance, in speaking to the Yemen conflict, Senator Paul remarked in an interview with Breitbart:

***That's a whole new separate war, it's not connected to any of the other wars. And I think there is a strong argument to be made that if we further the chaos in Yemen and we take one side against another, we make it to such an extent that a vacuum develops and Al Qaeda steps into that vacuum. I think there's a chance. One, it's not our war. We should vote on it, and there's not a vital interest.***<sup>(36)</sup>

Such bipartisan action is likely to deepen should Trump increase US involvement in Yemen. Indeed, GOP dissent has spread to less likely figures such as Senator Todd Young (R-IN), an otherwise mainstream Republican who has lead congressional criticism of the Saudi-led coalition on humanitarian grounds.<sup>(37)</sup> That being said, a general Republican revolt against Trump over an escalation of the war is unlikely, given that the party's grassroots seems largely uninterested in Yemen.<sup>(38)</sup>

---

35) Robert Naiman, "Force House vote on Saudi war in Yemen to stop cholera and famine," Moveon.org, <https://petitions.moveon.org/sign/house-back-un-call-for>

36) Matthew Boyle, "Exclusive: Rand Paul on Afghanistan and Yemen: Trump should trust his instincts and stop listening to generals who talk in his ear," Breitbart, September 15th, 2017, <http://www.breitbart.com/big-government/2017/09/15/exclusive-rand-paul-on-afghanistan-yemen-trump-should-trust-instincts-stop-listening-to-generals-who-talk-in-his-ear/>

37) Emma Kinery, "Indiana Senator pushes US to pressure Saudis on Yemen aid," USA Today, July 18, 2017, <https://www.usatoday.com/story/news/2017/07/18/indiana-senator-pushes-u-s-pressure-saudis-yemen-aid/490244001/>

38) See, for example, Daniel Waiters, "Kootenai County rejects Yemen resolution but Labrador joins Yemen war skeptics," The Inlander, October 25, 2017, <https://www.inlander.com/Bloglander/archives/2017/10/25/kootenai-county-gop-rejects-yemen-resolution-but-labrador-joins-yemen-war-skeptics>



[WWW.SANAACENTER.ORG](http://WWW.SANAACENTER.ORG)