

RESOLVING THE CONFLICT IN YEMEN: U.S. INTERESTS, RISKS AND
POLICY

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To the United States Senate Foreign Relations Committee

March 9, 2017

Mr. Chairman, Mr. Ranking Member, Members of the Committee:

Thank you for providing this opportunity to speak to you today about Yemen and the tragic circumstances confronting the Yemeni people.

Background

Although not without shortcomings, the overall implementation of the GCC Transition Agreement and the Implementing Mechanism signed in November 2011 by the parties to the Yemen political crisis, and supported by the U.S. and the international community, was a success. In the spring of 2014, the key step in the transition process, the National Dialogue Conference, was concluded and its final document was signed by all parties, including the Houthis. A Constitutional drafting committee was impaneled and worked through the summer of 2014 to complete recommended revisions and amendments to Yemen's Constitution to be submitted to the National Dialogue for final approval. Few steps remained before the Yemeni people would be able to go to the polls and elect a new government, completing a peaceful transition of power.

Frustrated by their inability to achieve gains through the manipulation of the political process, however, the Houthis, a small, Zaydi Shi'a clan based in the governorate of Saada, in the northwest corner of Yemen, and former President Ali Abdullah Saleh, placed increasing military pressure on the government through the summer and fall of 2014 aimed at overturning the political process. Eventually, the Houthi and pro-Saleh forces were able to take advantage of the weakness of the transitional government and Yemen's security forces to move aggressively into Sana'a and overthrow President Abd Rabbo Mansour Hadi and his government. The precipitous collapse of the Hadi government, and the power grab by a group closely associated with the Government of Iran and hostile to key U.S. goals and

objectives, alarmed the Obama Administration as well as our friends and partners in the region. There was agreement among Yemen's international partners that an intervention in Yemen should be based on four key objectives:

- Restoring the legitimate government in Yemen to complete the implementation of the GCC Initiative and the National Dialogue Conference consistent with UNSCR 2216.
- Preventing a Houthi/Ali Abdullah Saleh takeover of the government through violence.
- Securing the Saudi-Yemeni border.
- Defeating Iran's efforts to establish a foothold in the Arabian Peninsula threatening Saudi and Gulf security.

While there was optimism initially that a Saudi-led Coalition could quickly stabilize the situation in Yemen, this has not been the case. As the conflict in Yemen draws to the end of its second year, the human toll of the political tragedy continues to mount. Rough estimates of civilian casualties since fighting began in March 2015 may now exceed 10,000 killed with over 40,000 injured, according to press reports. The United Nations Office for the Coordination of Humanitarian Affairs (OCHA) has reported that over three million of Yemen's 27.5 million citizens have been internally displaced by the conflict, while over half the population is considered food insecure. Famine and epidemics of disease may be on the near horizon. Five years after Abd Rabbo Mansour Hadi's election as interim president started the clock on the only negotiated political transition of the Arab Spring, the future survival of Yemen hangs in the balance.

What Were the Obstacles that Prevented Success?

As events unfolded in the spring of 2015, the rapid collapse of the Hadi government throughout the country and their subsequent flight to Saudi Arabia undercut Coalition plans to defend Yemen's second city, Aden, and establish a secure position there to push back against Houthi/Saleh aggression. Instead, the Coalition found itself in a position of relying almost entirely on air power to prevent a complete takeover. Given the Coalition's reluctance to establish a large ground presence in Yemen, this left the Hadi government and its international partners in a weak position to contest the Houthi/Saleh forces for control of territory until the time that Yemen's security forces could be reconstituted and given the mission of establishing territorial control. It has also placed the Coalition forces in a situation not dissimilar to that faced by U.S. forces in conflicts like

Afghanistan: they are fighting a low-tech insurgency where their massive advantage in sophisticated weapons is neutralized; the insurgents are fighting on their own turf, which they know well; they blend in with the local population, making identification of legitimate targets difficult; and they are willing to make extraordinary sacrifices to avoid defeat.

For the Government of Iran, the Coalition's inability to defeat the insurgents and restore the legitimate government in Yemen is a significant win. Iranian support for the Houthis comes at very little cost. A number of IRGC personnel and their Hizballah allies have been killed or captured in Yemen but, compared to the toll in Syria, the losses have been negligible. The Iranians have provided primarily low-tech weapons, although we have seen in recent weeks an increase in the sophistication of Iranian-provided weaponry, including surface-to-surface and anti-ship missiles that have been used successfully against targets in Saudi Arabia and against shipping in the Red Sea. By contrast, the financial burden of the conflict in Yemen has been heavy for the Saudis and their Coalition partners. Perhaps the greatest, and most unanticipated, benefit of the conflict to Iran has been the strain it has placed on Saudi Arabia's relationships with its key western partners, principally the U.S. and the UK. The reputational damage to Saudi Arabia and its Coalition partners should not be under-estimated. Accusations of war crimes leveled against Saudi and Coalition armed forces and threats to end arms sales to the Saudis have the potential to inflict long-lasting damage to these relationships that go well beyond the scope of the Yemen conflict and could undermine the international community's determination to confront Iran's regional threats.

What is the Situation Today?

In the spring of 2016, there was optimism in Washington and in the region that we were moving closer to an agreement on the outlines of a political deal. Regrettably, that optimism has faded despite a months-long, UN-led negotiation in Kuwait, followed by desperate attempts by the international community to broker a ceasefire late in the year. Recent visits to the region by UN Secretary General Guterres, accompanied by Special Envoy Ismail Ould Chaikh Ahmed, do not appear to have made progress toward a new peace initiative. Yet the fighting remains stalemated. The government, with its Coalition allies, is strengthening its hold on the southern part of the country, while the Houthi/Saleh forces are firmly in control of the North, including the capital, Sana'a, and reaching to the border of Saudi Arabia.

Recent progress by the government in seizing control of the Red Sea coastal region, the Tihama, perhaps soon to include an assault on the key port of Hodeidah, will undoubtedly be a blow to the Houthis. But it is unlikely to bring a dramatic change to the course of the conflict. Indeed, the upsurge in Houthi missile strikes in Saudi Arabia is indication that they will continue their efforts to inflict damage on Saudi civilian targets in response to Coalition operations in Yemen. Indeed, as other elements of their military campaign falter, we can anticipate that the Houthis will turn increasingly to the one element of their strategy that has worked for them: strikes across the Saudi border and efforts to seize territory. The Saudis have yet to develop effective measures to counter these Houthi incursions.

What Are the Challenges that We See on the Horizon?

One potential outcome of the current situation is the de facto re-division of Yemen along the north-south border that existed until unification in 1990. While there are some who might welcome that prospect, it is fundamentally an outcome to be avoided, as it will mean two failed states in the southern Arabian Peninsula, each one incapable of providing adequately for its population and both becoming breeding grounds for violent extremist groups.

But even should the prospect of a negotiation between the two main parties to the conflict improve, that success will not bring a short-term resolution to the fighting and instability. In the long negotiations in 2011 between former President Ali Abdullah Saleh and his political opponents, Yemen's preeminent statesman and former prime minister, the late Abdul Karim al-Iryani, warned the parties continuously that an armed conflict in Yemen once started would not be easily stopped. His argument was that conflict would bring a resurgence of a tribal culture that prioritized clan honor, vengeance, and revenge over security and stability. That, indeed, appears to be happening as conflicts around the country, including around the besieged city of Taiz, increasingly take on the coloration of tribal vendettas and the resurrection of ancient rivalries rather than organized conflict between identifiable parties. Thus, even in the event that the parties agree on a political framework for governance in Sana'a, their capacity to bring a halt to the fighting in the countryside is going to be extremely limited.

Moreover, the two Yemeni coalitions that are parties to the conflict are, themselves, internally fragile. The Houthi-Saleh alliance, in particular, is a marriage of convenience rather than a true partnership and is unlikely to survive in a political environment rather than an armed conflict. Long years of enmity between Saleh and his followers and the Houthis have been papered over, not

resolved. And both sides have political aspirations that will be difficult to reconcile when it comes to a real political process. It has long been anticipated that the final act of the drama over political control in Sana'a will be a showdown between Saleh and the Houthis, and signs of tension between the two sides abound, including Houthi negotiations at the end of the year over a ceasefire agreement that did not include Saleh's representatives.

A Secondary Beneficiary: Al-Qaeda in the Arabian Peninsula

Al-Qaeda in the Arabian Peninsula (AQAP) has been a main beneficiary of the political conflict in the country. Having suffered a series of setbacks in the period 2012-14 as a result of focused coordination and cooperation between the U.S. and the Hadi government, AQAP has been able to reconstitute itself and regain much of the ground that it had lost. In particular, AQ has successfully positioned itself within the framework of tribal resistance to Houthi advances in the country, capitalizing on perceptions that the civil conflict is, in fact, a sectarian struggle between Sunni and Shi'a Yemenis. Although Yemenis are very conservative religiously, they are generally not drawn to al-Qaeda's ideology. Nevertheless, desperate times call for desperate measures, and many Yemenis, confronting existential threats to their social and economic survival, have aligned with al-Qaeda as a matter of self-preservation.

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

Preserving the goodwill and cooperation of the Yemeni people is essential if we are to be successful, and there is no quicker way to lose that goodwill than through ill-considered military operations that generate high numbers of innocent civilian casualties. Thus, military operations should be limited to those instances where our intelligence is impeccable and we must maintain the standard of near certainty that there will be no collateral damage. President Hadi has been and remains a strong, reliable partner in the fight against al-Qaeda. Maintaining that relationship is a necessity. It will be particularly important in a post-conflict

period where we will need to work with the Government of Yemen to re-build its security forces and renew our partnership in the fight against al-Qaeda. Finally, it is my experience that the Ambassador on the ground is a key player in maximizing the effectiveness of U.S. military operations, both as the main interlocutor with the government and as the U.S. official with the most accurate perspective on the impact these operations are having on the ground. The role of the Ambassador should be preserved.

Conclusion and Recommendations

The conflict in Yemen has grown more complex and can no longer be characterized primarily as a clash between two rival coalitions fighting for political power in Sana'a. Indeed, the social, economic, and political structure of the country has been fractured and Yemen's ultimate survival as a unified country, which should be a principal objective of U.S. policy, is not assured. Under the circumstances, U.S. and international options to bring about a sustainable resolution of the conflict are limited. In my view, the U.S. should seek to achieve the following goals for 2017:

- Support the Government and Saudi-led Coalition: UNSCR 2216 remains the basis for a resolution of the political conflict in Yemen. While changes in the government may come about as a result of political negotiations, they should not be determined through force or violence. Moreover, it's important to recognize that Saudi Arabia has legitimate concerns about the potential for Iran to threaten its security should a pro-Iranian regime come to power in Sana'a. Given the fact that the international community will depend on Saudi leadership to undertake reconstruction and recovery in a post-conflict environment, it is essential that the Saudis have confidence that Yemen will remain a friendly neighbor.
- Assist the Saudi-led Coalition in Bringing the Conflict to a Successful Conclusion: Achieving an end to the fighting between the Government of Yemen and the Houthi/Saleh insurgency is the sine qua non of progress toward a political resolution. Limitations on U.S. assistance to the Coalition, whether through restrictions on the re-supply of munitions or denying advice and assistance to Coalition armed forces is counter-productive. The U.S. should re-engage with the Saudi military and political leadership to strengthen Saudi border security and encourage a more careful, deliberative use of military force in Yemen, with a single goal to force the Houthis and pro-Saleh elements to negotiate a political resolution while emphasizing avoiding collateral damage.

- **Coordination on the Capture of Hodeidah:** The one exception to opposition to offensive military actions would be a government-led, Coalition-supported effort to re-claim control of the Red Sea coastal city of Hodeidah and the road from Hodeidah to Sana'a. Hodeidah is the principal port supplying North Yemen. The U.S. should back Government/Coalition efforts to capture the port in exchange for firm guarantees that the Coalition will repair the damaged port facilities urgently and provide unfettered access to the port for international humanitarian organizations to bring in desperately needed food, medicine, and other essential goods and distribute them throughout the country without regard to political differences.
- **Press the Parties to Resume Political Negotiations:** Despite the challenges, the only path currently available to achieve a political solution to the conflict is through the process being managed by the UN and Special Envoy Ismail Ould Chaikh Ahmed. There will not be a military conclusion to the Yemen conflict. Only a political arrangement, within the framework of UNSCR 2216 but offering sufficient flexibility to draw in the Houthis, can bring an end to the fighting and permit the re-establishment of some degree of governance in Sana'a. A successful outcome to the negotiations would provide for the restoration of security in Sana'a, allowing the government to resume operation while negotiations continue, and providing for the return of diplomatic missions to support and encourage the government and people.

If these efforts are successful over the course of this year, we should seek to accomplish these additional steps in 2018:

- **Establish a New, Time-limited Transitional Government:** Based on the successful conclusion of UN-led political negotiations, the U.S. should support the establishment of a new, credible interim government with a mandate limited to implementation of the GCC transitional arrangement and the conclusions of the National Dialogue Conference and charged with conducting new parliamentary elections within one year. During its limited tenure, the interim government can begin the process of restoring security and stability, repairing damaged infrastructure, and restarting economic activity.
- **Hold a Pledging Conference to Begin Discussion of Reconstruction and Provide the Yemeni People with Confidence that the International Community will Assist Them Moving Forward:** Yemen has suffered billions of dollars in damage to its infrastructure and key economic capacity. It will be important for the Yemeni people to know that the international community is not abandoning them and that they will get the support they

need to reconstruct their lives. Beyond pledging for reconstruction assistance, the international community can provide essential assistance in institutional capacity building, especially in ensuring that adequate schools and health facilities will be available throughout the country. In addition, GCC member states have suggested that they would consider offering Yemen full membership in the organization ... it currently participates in a number of GCC specialized committees but does not hold full membership ... which would be very well-received by the Yemeni population.

Even with success in these tasks, Yemen's recovery will be long and the ultimate outcome not assured. But without these measures, Yemen's continued descent into complete social, political, and economic collapse is all but guaranteed.