



## Courting the Houthis did not Yield Peace Deal in Yemen

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*United Nations Special Envoy for Yemen Ismail Ould Cheikh Ahmed briefed the Security Council on June 21, 2016 marking 60 days of relentless diplomatic efforts in Kuwait to find a way out of the 15-month-old Yemeni conflict. The talks among Yemeni rivals that began on April 21, after direct contacts between Saudi Arabia and the Houthis on March 7, are yet to secure a peace agreement. This paper analyzes the policy impact of courting the Houthis and how this decision changed the dynamics of the Yemeni conflict.*

For nearly four decades, the United States has followed the Saudi lead in Yemen. However, the US-Iranian rapprochement and the Houthis' rise to power since 2014 caused a rift between Washington and Riyadh that culminated in the assertive Saudi decision last year to militarily intervene in Yemen. Although the two allies differed on priorities whether to deter the Iran-backed Houthis, officially known as Ansar Allah, or to contain al-Qaeda in the Arabian Peninsula (AQAP); this rift has been gradually narrowing down since March 2016 after the game-changing Saudi decision of unilaterally making peace with the Houthis. While this crucial development created new dynamics in the Yemeni conflict, it did not resolve the trust deficit among local rivals.

### The Saudi Policy Shift in Yemen

The most recent Yemeni war that began in March 2015 was the seventh Saudi intervention in the country. The primary Saudi motivation in the past has been to address border skirmishes or to retain influence in a regional proxy war. Between 1979 and 2011, the US has backed the Saudi decision to support the regime of former President Ali Abdallah Saleh, with the exception of the 1990s after Saleh endorsed the Iraqi invasion of Kuwait. It is worth noting that Saleh was the first to draw a link between the Houthis and Iran, as he witnessed during his presidency the Sunni-Shiite divide taking shape across the Middle East. In return, Ansar Allah perceived Saudi Arabia as a foreign power aiding an unjust ruler and subsequently launched the first attack on the Saudi border in November 2009, causing a three-month military confrontation with Riyadh.

It is unclear though what the nature of the Iran-Houthi connection is. President Barack Obama [noted](#) in July 2015 that Iranian involvement with the Houthis in Yemen “has been initially overstated.” This US intelligence assessment did not change since 2009, when Saudi Arabia began to sound the alarm over Iranian presence on its border. As the Houthis were increasingly challenging the Saudi-backed Hadi regime since 2014, they looked to Tehran for help. Iran, in return, saw a low cost opportunity to claim a foothold in Yemen through supporting Ansar Allah. However, there was no indication that this relationship had the potential to grow to a Hezbollah model as in Lebanon. The Houthis' rush to Iran in 2014 was mostly a political defiance to Riyadh,



and their constant attacks on the Saudi border throughout 2015 was intended to compel the Saudis to negotiate. Ultimately, this negotiation occurred on March 7, 2016 when a delegation from Ansar Allah visited Riyadh and Saudi foreign minister Adel al-Jubeir [described](#) the Houthis as “our neighbors.”

This recent convergence of interests between Saudi Arabia and the Houthis was due to four main reasons:

- 1) The naval blockade on Yemen cut off any potential Iranian material support;
- 2) Houthis’ effective attacks on the border led to a rise in the death toll of Saudi soldiers;
- 3) The Saudi recognition that the forces loyal to President Abd Rabbuh Mansour Hadi are incapable alone of defeating the Houthis on the ground; and
- 4) US pressure to end the war as AQAP was reemerging in the southern governorates.

### **Courting the Houthis: Policy Impact**

Beyond the bilateral aspect of the relationship between Riyadh and the Houthis, their rapprochement would not have been so effortless without a Saudi-Iranian détente in Yemen. Since March, Riyadh is no longer publicly criticizing the Iranian role in the country and Tehran has been sending positive signals while staying away from the peace talks. What matters to Iran is for the Houthis to emerge stronger from this conflict and the Houthis, in return, are not ready yet to formally end their ties with Tehran.

However, the Saudi-Houthi decision to make peace in March had a ripple effect on the Yemeni conflict. The core of the compromise was to cease the attacks of Ansar Allah on the Saudi border in return for Riyadh to end the air bombardment against the Houthis. This crucial shift had a significant policy impact on the allies of Riyadh, mainly the Hadi regime, the United Arab Emirates and the United States.

This border deal turned the Yemeni war from a regional conflict deterring Iran to a domestic power struggle among Yemenis, hence marginalizing the already vulnerable President Hadi who has now little leverage on the Houthis during the peace talks in Kuwait. In his briefing to the Security Council on June 21, the United Nations Special Envoy for Yemen Ould Cheikh Ahmed hinted that the soon to be submitted Yemeni peace plan will include three tracks: surrendering heavy weapons by the Houthis, forming a national unity government, and re-launching the country's national dialogue. The main contentious issue in Kuwait has been whether forming the national unity government should come before or after the Houthis’ withdrawal from major cities and handing over their heavy weapons. Most of all, Hadi seeks the Houthis’ recognition of his regime while Ansar Allah wants guarantees they will have a say in the process. The Saudi decision to make a deal with the Houthis before ending Yemen’s own political crisis helped move forward the peace talks, however it is also now one of the reasons why there is no breakthrough yet in Kuwait.



The second impact was on a major Saudi ally in the Arab coalition. The United Arab Emirates [declared](#) on June 15 that the war in Yemen is over. Riyadh has been holding on to this announcement as a leverage to show the Houthis that bombing them could resume if they renewed attacks on the Saudi border. The tactical difference between Saudis and Emiratis in Yemen has been growing in recent weeks, with the Emiratis categorically refusing any role for the Muslim Brotherhood affiliate (Islah Party) and linking them to AQAP. Abu Dhabi's main objectives, after unilaterally ending their role in the war, are to continue counter-terrorism operations in coordination with the US, to help consolidate control of the liberated areas in the south, and to provide support to the separatist HIRAK (Southern Resistance) movements.

In return, on April 3, 2016 the Saudi-backed Hadi appointed as his Vice President General Ali Mohsen Saleh al-Ahmar, the once controversial figure in the Saleh regime who played a key role in creating the Muslim Brotherhood movement in Yemen. To further complicate the scene, Saleh and Houthi representatives have been publicly stating that the Islah Party has been secretly cooperating with them during the 15-month old conflict, a statement that was seen by southerners as a confirmation of their doubts that Islah was giving up too quickly in the battle against the Houthis.

The simple division of power between Saudi Arabia leading the political process and the US spearheading the fight against al-Qaeda has now a new layer of complexity with the United Arab Emirates seeking to play a larger role in Yemeni politics. Dealing head-on with any potential tactical differences between Saudi Arabia and the United Arab Emirates can avoid pitfalls in implementing any political solution in Yemen.

The third impact has been on US policy in Yemen, which has been going through a tremendous shift since late 2014, though it remains largely focused on the fight against al-Qaeda. The biggest peak in US drones strikes in Yemen was in 2012 when Hadi took over the presidency. Until the eve of the Saudi-led invasion, the White House continued to [consider](#) Yemen a model for counter-terrorism operations, disregarding the country's political context. Between January and March 2015, as Saudi Arabia was beating the drum of war across the border, the US opened [lines of communication](#) with the Houthis that fell short of an "intelligence sharing agreement." However, Ansar Allah remained publicly opposed to the US war against AQAP and officially denied these contacts since their leadership is not comfortable with openly talking with Washington, in particular that the Houthi movement's logo still reads "death to America."

Yet, these indirect talks between the US and the Houthis continued even in the middle of the Saudi-led war in Yemen. After securing the release of the American journalist Casey Coombs, detained by Ansar Allah, the US State Department revealed on June 2, 2015 that a [meeting](#) was held in Muscat, Oman between Ambassador Anne Patterson and Houthi representatives. The US State Department sent a positive signal on June 2, 2016 when its counterterrorism coordinator Justin Siberell [stated](#) that "the Houthis are not a designated terrorist group... they are party to the conflict and part of the negotiations that are underway to resolve the conflict." During that same week, US Ambassador to Yemen Matthew Tueller met with Houthi representatives in Kuwait to advance the prospects of peace. It was the first time both sides held discussions without a third party mediating or attending.



Now that the question of whether the priority is to deter Iran or fight AQAP has been settled in Yemen, the US is welcoming the Arab coalition's shift of focus in May 2016 towards fighting al-Qaeda. With the deployment of American military personnel around the port city of Mukalla, Washington is expecting that the Yemeni forces, or other partners, will follow up with a ground battle against AQAP. This will likely not happen on a large scale in the foreseeable future and the current coordination with Emirati forces can be helpful in the short term, however it will not deter AQAP in the long term. Moving forward, a more nuanced US approach might be needed on the political track with an active role in shaping the parameters of the peace talks in Kuwait, not by interfering in the process but by merely assuring that the outcome will not lead to a new round of war in due time.

While Saudi Arabia prefers to be the ultimate player in its neighboring country, this approach can only be productive if all Yemeni parties have a role in the political process. The more the Houthis have a stake in the regime emerging from the Kuwait peace talks the more they will stay away from Iran. An even-handed Saudi approach in Yemen is crucial to move forward and away from the pitfalls of the past four decades, yet this might not be enough to secure a long-term peace if the core issues of the Yemeni conflict are not resolved. The bottom line is that the trust deficit between Northern and Southern Yemenis is widening as the country is on the borderline between federalism and partition, while the foreign intervention in the past two years has only amplified this growing mistrust at a great human cost.