



مركز أبعاد للدراسات والبحوث
Abaad Studies & Research Center

The Impact of Biden's Policy on Yemen War

Situation Assessment

Political Analysis Unit

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telegram.me/abaadstudies
@abaadstudies
Abaad Studies & Research Center
AbaadStudiesYemen
abaadstudies@gmail.com
info@abaadstudies.org

www.abaadstudies.org

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Entrance

The conflict in Yemen began in 2014, when the armed Houthi rebels group advanced, from its main strongholds in Sa'ada governorate (in the north of the country) - on the Saudi border, towards the capital, Sana'a, and took control of it in September 2014, so that the Houthis subjected most of the 21 Yemeni governorates to their de facto authority.^[1] The Houthi control forced President AbdRabbo Mansour Hadi to leave to Aden, which he declared as a temporary capital, and called on Saudi Arabia and the international community to help him return to power in Sana'a and end the Houthi coup. Saudi Arabia intervened under an Arab coalition that included several Arab countries and the Gulf Cooperation Council member states except the Sultanate of Oman to support the president's legitimacy against the Houthis in March 2015, with broad Western support. During the years of the conflict, which was described as an intractable "proxy war" between Iran and the Arab Gulf states,^[2] 233,000 Yemenis were killed, most of them for indirect reasons.^[3] The ongoing fighting has also caused the worst humanitarian crisis in the world, as about 24 million people need urgent humanitarian assistance or protection, including 13 million people who depend on food aid to survive, and recently the United Nations warned that the country is drifting very quickly towards famine.^[4]

The administration of former US President Barack Obama supported the operations of the Arab coalition in Yemen. The US National Security Council said in a statement, "In support of the moves of the Gulf Cooperation Council countries to defend against Houthi violence, President Obama authorized the provision of logistical and intelligence support for the military operations led by the Gulf Cooperation Council states, while the American forces do not undertake direct military action in Yemen to support this effort. We are establishing a joint planning cell with the Kingdom of Saudi Arabia to coordinate US military and intelligence support."^[5] At the time, the United States was close to sign the Joint Comprehensive Plan of Action (JCPOA) (the Iranian nuclear deal), despite the rejection of Saudi Arabia and other Gulf countries, which consider Iran the main supporter of the Houthi group in Yemen, and this support is one of the main reasons for Gulf intervention in the war.

With the end of President Barack Obama's term in 2017, rifts and differences between Washington and Riyadh began to appear after Obama reduced support for the coalition. The severity of the US position towards the coalition operations decreased and the position against Iran increased during the era of President Donald Trump, who suspended the "Iranian nuclear agreement" and escalated the rhetoric against groups loyal to Iran in the region, including the armed Houthi group. Trump has repeatedly rejected calls from Congress (from the Democratic and Republican parties)^[6] to stop supporting the coalition in Yemen. He was forced to use veto bipartisan efforts to pass a resolution ending the US intervention in 2019.^[7] On the final day of Donald Trump's term, the US Department of State designated the armed Houthi group as a foreign terrorist organization.^[8]

In November 2020, Americans elected Joe Biden as President of the United States of America to replace Donald Trump. Biden was a deputy to Barack Obama, 2009-2017, and at that time, Biden supported the military operations of the coalition in Yemen. However, during his election campaign, Biden made promises to end the support that his country provides to Saudi Arabia in Yemen,^[9] and to restore the "Iranian nuclear agreement."

And during the first month in the White House, the Biden administration had already begun to fulfill his campaign promises. His administration's subsequent decisions clarified several elements, including "ending support for the offensive operations of the coalition in Yemen", "resuming diplomatic work," and "removing the Houthis from the list of terrorism."

This report discusses the dimensions of the new US policy in Yemen according to the new elements, and its impact on the conflict and peace efforts in Yemen.

The US Policy Towards Yemen

Before starting to analyze the elements, we must know relationship between Yemen and the United States, during the previous decades. It is a tense relationship, whether before or after the Yemeni unity, as it was confined to consular work in the service of its citizens in the eighties of the nineteenth century in "Aden" and continued until the People's Republic of Yemen severed its relationship with the United States in 1969 due to the "Marxist" orientation of the regime at the time. In northern Yemen, the first consulate was opened in 1959 in Taiz, and Washington supported the revolution in the north against the Imam rule in 1962, until the Yemeni Arab Republic severed its relationship in 1967 in the aftermath of the Arab conflict with the "Israeli occupation", and returned to northern Yemen in 1972. As for southern Yemen, it did not return until less than one month before the establishment of the Yemeni unity in 1990,^[10] and it was a consular relationship and intelligence cooperation. The transformation in relationship took place after the attack on the US destroyer "USS Cole" in 2000,^[11] and the events of September 11, 2001. The United States considered Yemen as a "potential terrorist" threat and home to Al Qaeda. After 2009, the American concern about Yemen increased with the union of Al Qaeda in Yemen and Al Qaeda in Saudi Arabia under the name of "Al Qaeda in the Arabian Peninsula".

After the Houthis controlled most of the Yemeni governorates, the US embassy in Sana'a suspended its operations in February 2015, and withdrew its agents on the ground. The embassy started operation from Riyadh, where most of the foreign and Arab embassies have moved from Sana'a to it.

Since the start of the Arab coalition's military operations against the Houthis, a team of the United States and other countries has been present in the Arab Coalition Operations Room in Riyadh and near the Saudi border to supervise the air strikes carried out against the Houthis on Yemeni territory.

Throughout the modern history, Yemen was at the bottom of the US foreign policy agenda and it was just attached to its policy towards the Kingdom of Saudi Arabia, which was and will remain until other transformations occur.

However, a subsequent transformation occurred after the Houthis took control of most of the northern regions, where another regional factor began, namely "Iran" that supports the Houthis. The United States is trying to balance its relationship with Saudi Arabia and its conflict or agreement with Iran. During the Obama administration, the US Department of State was in constant contact with the Houthis, including a meeting between former Secretary of State John Kerry and the Houthis in Muscat. He came up with an initiative known as the "Kerry Initiative",^[12] which was rejected by the Yemeni government. This contributed to the Obama administration's vision towards Iran as a minor influence on the Houthis, following the Iranian nuclear deal.

The Trump administration took a different course and viewed the Yemeni conflict almost entirely through the lens of its foreign policy toward Iran, and this perspective shaped the nature of US support for the Saudi-led military coalition. Most of the American statements and positions were in this direction since Trump froze work on the Iranian "nuclear deal". The "maximum pressure" policy implemented by the "Trump" administration against Iran reinforced the administration's support for the Saudi-led coalition,^[13] and considered the Houthis as a tool in Iran's hands. Unlike the Obama administration, the Trump administration cut off diplomatic contact with the Houthis, and dealt with the group through European diplomats or through Saudi Arabia and Oman or the Yemeni government, except in the case of a Saudi request, as happened in the second half of 2019, when Washington focused on back channels of communication between Saudis and the Houthis, which was halted later due to the Houthi escalation.^[14]

After four years of the Trump's term and his relationship with the Saudis, which was described as good, Trump lost the possibility of obtaining a second term, and Joe Biden and his deputy "Kamala Harris", from the Democratic Party, won the elections. They made promises to "end the war in Yemen" and increase "pressure on Saudi Arabia."

The Biden Administration's Policy Towards Yemen:

While it is considered a reversal of "Trump" policy, the US President Joe Biden, in his first speech on foreign policy on February 4, 2021, defined the features of the US diplomacy during his tenure. Biden's speech and the subsequent measures that followed on Yemen revealed the nature of his policy in the Middle East region. This will determine four main elements of its policy towards Yemen:

- **Halting offensive operations:** Biden said the war in Yemen, "must end (...) and to confirm our commitment, we end all American support for offensive operations in the war in Yemen, including related arms sales."
- **Supporting the defense of Saudi Arabia:** Biden said, "Saudi Arabia faces missile attacks, strikes [by drones] and other threats from Iranian forces in several countries. We will continue to support and assist Saudi Arabia in defending its sovereignty, territorial integrity and its people."
- **The diplomatic track:** Biden appointed the veteran diplomat Timothy Lenderking as his special envoy to Yemen, saying that Lenderking will work with the United Nations and "all parties to the conflict to press for a diplomatic solution".
- **Reversal of Houthis Designation as a terrorist organization:** 24 hours after Biden's speech in which he canceled the US support for offensive operations, the State Department informed Congress of its intention to remove the Houthis from terrorist lists, and it was done.

Despite the statements of observers and US officials, these four elements confirm that Biden reversed Trump policy in Yemen. However, the truth is that the Trump administration did not have a clear policy towards Yemen. Rather, its policy towards Yemen within four years can be explained by "no policy." Tensions have expanded between Iran and the United States, casting a shadow over Yemen and local conflict dynamics. John BOLTON, the US National Security Adviser in the era of Trump (2017-2019) notes that internal disputes and indifference thwarted Trump to take any action regarding Yemen, until his term was about to end, when he classified the Houthis as a terrorist organization.^[15]

Even this classification sparked widespread controversy within the American administration, and the Houthis' targeting of the new Yemeni government's ministers at Aden airport on December 30, 2020, contributed to pushing towards the terror classification of the group.^[16]

The four elements announced about Yemen and the subsequent steps clarify the direction of Biden's policy towards the Middle East region. It is not among the priorities of the US administration, which is going towards extinguishing its role in the region and moving away from its allies. Here are the main indications of the new US policy towards the region:

A) Biden did not communicate with any Arab leader in the Middle East except for his contact with Israeli Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu, which came several weeks after his inauguration and followed contacts with other allies and even enemies such as Russia and China.

B) "If you were to list the areas that Biden sees as a priority, the Middle East is not in the top three." The first three are the Asia-Pacific region, then Europe, and then the Western Hemisphere. This reflects a bipartisan consensus that issues requiring an American attention have changed with the return of competition with great powers [China and Russia]."^[17]

C) The appointments by Secretary of Defense, Lloyd Austin, indicate that the Middle East is not his top priority. He appointed three special advisers on major issues: China, Covid-19 and the climate. His deputy, Kathleen Hicks, and his chief of staff, Kelly Magsamen, are both famous Chinese experts.

D) At the National Security Council, the National Security Adviser Jake Sullivan has scaled down the Middle East team and mobilized the unity that coordinates US policy toward the Indian and Pacific Oceans. The potential appointment of Bernie Sanders and Matt Duss in a high-level position in the Department of State has also raised suspicions that the administration is not overly interested in the traditional politics about the Middle East.^[18]

Although the Middle East region is not a US priority, the United States is obligated to defend its allies and protect its forces in the region, in addition to its electoral promises towards Saudi Arabia and the reinstatement of the Iranian "nuclear deal".

E) The Biden administration believes that ending the Yemen war, regardless of its future outcomes, will reduce the criticism it faces internally and externally about the abandoning of the region, so he took the following decisions after his first speech on the new US foreign policy:

The Cessation of Offensive Operations:

This decision indicates two main parts, halting support for the coalition's military operations in Yemen, and the sales of weapons to the Kingdom of Saudi Arabia. This means that if the coalition wants to launch air strikes against the Houthis in Yemen, it would be without a US support. Saudi Arabia will not obtain new weapons, including smart bombs. But this does not mean that the United States will stop fighting in Yemen. According to the administration, it will continue to strike "al-Qaeda and ISIS" fighters in the country to ensure that they cannot use it as a base for plotting plots against America.

There is no significant impact of this American decision, as the US administration stopped supporting the Arab coalition in direct military attacks in Yemen years ago, and actually stopped supplying fuel to warplanes in 2018, leaving nothing but "training Saudi pilots." Saudi Arabia was relying heavily on US intelligence information to monitor Houthi attacks on the kingdom's territory, and the Pentagon had already announced that it would "limit the sharing of intelligence information about Yemen with Saudi Arabia."^[19] But even so, this would contradict the American commitment to help Saudi Arabia defend its territory.

Supporting the defense of Saudi Arabia:

Biden emphasized that his country would continue to support Saudi Arabia in defending its territories. He also said that his administration "will restore alliances to face challenges and we must rely on diplomacy."^[20] The Saudis assert that they entered the war in Yemen in a defensive operation against the Houthis, preventing the existence of a regime in Yemen that owes allegiance to Iran, and that all their air and ground operations are "defensive".^[21]

This point is the most complicated one in the Biden's policy towards Yemen and Saudi Arabia, as what is known as "offensive" is considered to be "defensive." Let us assume that the Houthis are attacking Saudi Arabia, they will certainly continue to do so, including attacks such as those that targeted Saudi oil facilities and ports. The international law permits Saudi Arabia to launch offensive strikes on Houthi sites in response to Houthi attacks. The US obtains intelligence information confirming the Houthi movement of ballistic missiles from one region to another, so what is the US position in this case?^[22]

The provision of "Saudi defense" in the US assistance is not limited to Saudi need alone, but it is also linked to American interests themselves. America has thousands of troops in the country, and the United States wants to increase the number of bases in Saudi Arabia due to the increasing tensions with Iran, including bases on the Red Sea coast^[23] that are geographically closer to the Houthis.

It seems that the United States has already begun testing the port of Yanbu, and intends to use the air bases in Tabuk and Taif along the Red Sea.^[24] This would give the US military more options along a critical waterway that has been exposed to an increasing attack by the Houthis using naval mines and unmanned drones and boats.^[25]

The Diplomatic Approach:

Biden has promoted Timothy Lenderking, who used to deal with the conflict in Yemen, to a special envoy for Yemen. This means that the Biden administration knows that stopping support for the Arab coalition in Yemen is not the main solution to end the Yemeni war. Finding a solution is a major concern, so the president has given more powers to "Lenderking" to reach a deal that ends the war. "The main focus of our efforts will be the diplomatic effort to end the war in Yemen through the United Nations-led process to impose a ceasefire, open humanitarian channels, and restore peace talks that have been long idle," a White House spokesperson said. "Our primary goal is to bring the parties closer together to reach a negotiated settlement that ends the war and the suffering of the Yemeni people."^[26]

Lenderking is a veteran diplomat associated with the Gulf and the Yemeni file^[27] for the past years, and his understanding of the war in Yemen can be summarized as follows:

- He wants a quick end to the war in Yemen.^[28] He is considered one of the most vocal calls for a political settlement in Yemen, ruling out the option of a military solution^[29]
- He believes that "the Houthis will be more violent when more bombs and missiles are fired at them, and they will increase their attacks on Riyadh and other population centers in Riyadh, which we cannot accept, the longer the conflict continues." He explains that reducing the Houthi response to Riyadh comes by ceasing the air campaign against the group.
- Lenderking sees the danger of the Houthis to the Saudis and the Emiratis, but not to the Yemenis: "We believe that there is a room for the Houthis in a political settlement. We welcome that, but not when the Houthis continue to regularly fire missiles at our main ally, such as Saudi Arabia, and constantly threaten its borders."^[30] He also believes that "the Houthi attacks on Saudi Arabia show that the Houthis are not interested in constructive participation for the sake of peace."^[31]

- Lenderking describes the Iranian role as "very bad and contributes to prolonging the war, and pushes the Houthis to continue their negative behavior." He believes that Iran's halting of its support for the Houthis will push the Yemeni armed group to play an "appropriate role in the political process."^[32] He believes that the Iranian influence in Yemen is "enabling them to exploit the turmoil and chaos for their own benefit."^[33] On the Houthi's relationship with the Iranians, he believes that "there is a very basic relationship between the Iranians and the Houthis." But he does not want to exaggerate it. "I do not want to suggest that the Houthis operate entirely at the request of the Iranians. But it is an important relationship and the Iranians can exploit it." He explained, "The Houthis were able to gain the Iranians' confidence in obtaining ballistic missiles in a much shorter period of time than Hezbollah."^[34]
- He believes that military pressure on the Houthis is acceptable, and "may contribute to finding a political solution."^[35]
- He was leading the debate in the Gulf and within the US administration regarding the classification of the Houthis as a terrorist organization, according to three factors: The Houthis do things that resemble the behavior of a terrorist organization. They "target civilians, civilian infrastructure" and "use kidnapping as a tool of war." And "it appears that they are deepening their relationship with the Iranian Revolutionary Guard, which is considered by the United States as a terrorist organization."^[36]
- He refers to Kuwait's role, as an example, in hosting the Yemeni peace talks in 2016^[37] He says Kuwait has done a great job of bringing "all the main parties together for more than two months." He says, "We hope to return to that stage in Yemen with a similar round of peace talks in the future."^[38]
- It seems that the US envoy prefers working through alliances such as the "international quartet" on Yemen (the United States - Britain - Saudi Arabia - the Emirates) with regard to the humanitarian and political work.^[39]

Fourth: Revoking the Classification of the Houthis as a Foreign Terrorist Organization:

The Biden administration canceled the classification of the Houthis as a terrorist organization,^[40] and informed the Congress on February 6, 2021 about its intention to "remove the Houthis from the terrorism lists."^[41] It came into effect on Tuesday, February 16, 2021.^[42] The three Houthis, "Abdul-Malik Al-Houthi, his brother Abdul-Khaliq Badr Al-Din Al-Houthi, and the leader Abdullah Yahya Al-Hakim (Abu Ali Al-Hakim)" remained under sanctions according to the UNSC resolution 2216.^[43]

The US administration justified its decision as for humanitarian grounds, as some suppliers of food and other commodities may retreat for fears of prosecution, and "has absolutely nothing to do with the hateful behavior of the Houthis, who are responsible for bombing civilians and kidnapping American citizens."^[44] However, the measures taken by the US administration in January 2021, and the subsequent measures taken by the "Biden administration" removed concerns about humanitarian aid access to the Houthi areas, and maintained the Yemeni trade exchange with the outside.^[45]

The US administration did not provide further clarification about the motives for removing the Houthis from the terrorist lists, and whether it had relied on bureaucratic procedures to cancel this designation, as the Houthis remained on the terrorist lists for less than a month! Experts believe that the US State Department will be able to quickly remove the Houthis from the list if it considers that "the national security of the United States warrants revocation" as permitted under the Anti-Terrorism and Death Penalty Act of 1996.^[46]

Some American officials and analysts indicate that the Biden administration's removal of the Houthis from the list of terrorist organizations will push the Houthis to change their behavior and negotiate in good faith with "Lenderking". However, there is no evidence for this theory, and the Houthis did not respond to the American "goodwill". They escalated their attacks against their opponents, but rather tried to invade the Marib governorate, which is a home to millions of civilians, more than half of whom are displaced from their areas due to continuous fighting.

If adding the Houthis to the terrorist lists by the Trump administration was hasty, removing them had bad repercussions on Yemen and the Yemeni people and sent wrong messages to the Houthis:

- **Removing the designation makes the Houthis less inclined to continue negotiations:** The decision came days after the Biden administration announced an end to support for offensive military operations by the Saudi-led coalition. The message that the Houthis understood is “Americans want to get out of the war and save the face of the Kingdom of Saudi Arabia. We are the victors now, so why should the negotiations, after years, recognize us as the authority for all of Yemen, especially amid the division inside the Yemeni government’s camps and the loss of its control over its regions.”^[47]
- **Defensive behavior:** the removal of the Houthis from the lists of terrorism, means, for the Houthis, that what they have been committing since 2014 in Yemen was not "terrorism," and that “the cancelation of the terror designation is an American recognition that we are exercising our right to defend our homeland and protect our lands.”^[48]
- **Military escalation:** The Houthis understood that Washington ended its support for its ally, and abandoned Saudi Arabia, which would push them to strengthen their negotiating position. Therefore, in the early hours of the US State Department’s announcement on February 6, 2021, the Houthis carried out a major military escalation on two axes:

Attacks on Saudi Arabia:

The Houthis launched a relentless bombing campaign on Saudi territory, including civilian institutions, the highest in several months. Since the US State Department announced its intention to cancel the designation of the Houthis, they launched 19 attacks against Saudi Arabia in two weeks that included 27 UAVs and one ballistic missile, most of which were intercepted as indicated in the following monitoring:^[49]

- 6 February 2021: An unmanned (booby trapped) aircraft was intercepted and destroyed.
- February 7, 2021: A total of (4) booby-trapped drones were intercepted and destroyed. In three separate attacks.

- February 8, 2021: An unmanned (booby trapped) drone was intercepted and destroyed.
- February 10, 2021: Two drones (booby trapped) were intercepted and destroyed, targeting Khamis Mushait.
- February 10, 2021: Four “booby-trapped” drones targeted Abha airport, leading to a fire in a civilian aircraft that was controlled. The coalition said a copy of an Iranian-made Ababil T plane was used.
- February 11, 2021: An unmanned drone (booby trapped) was intercepted and destroyed, Khamis Mushait was targeted.
- February 11, 2021: a ballistic missile targeting Khamis Mushait was intercepted and destroyed.
- February 12, 2021: An unmanned (booby trapped) drone launched by the Houthis was intercepted and destroyed in southern Saudi Arabia.
- February 13, 2021: An unmanned drone (booby trapped), targeting Abha International Airport, was intercepted and destroyed.
- February 14, 2021: Two drones (booby trapped) were intercepted and destroyed, targeting Khamis Mushait.
- February 14, 2021: The Houthis announced attack on Abha International Airport with two (booby trapped) aircrafts.
- February 15, 2021: An "explosive" drone launched by the Houthi movement towards Saudi Arabia was intercepted and destroyed. The Houthis claimed that they had targeted Jeddah and Abha airports with three drones.^[50]
- February 16, 2021: An IED was intercepted and destroyed by the Houthi movement towards Abha airport in southern Saudi Arabia. "The drone shrapnel was scattered in the vicinity of the airport, and there were no injuries or losses," the coalition statement said.
- February 17, 2021: A drone (booby trapped), launched by the Houthi group towards Saudi Arabia, was intercepted and destroyed in Yemen's airspace.

- February 17, 2021: An "improvised explosive device", targeting Khamis Mushait, was intercepted and destroyed.
- February 18, 2021: An "booby-trapped" drone targeting Khamis Mushait was intercepted and destroyed.

The US administration condemned the Houthi attacks targeting the Kingdom of Saudi Arabia, and promised to help Saudi Arabia defend its territory. Some of these attacks were carried out in the presence of Lenderking in Saudi Arabia, including the attack on Abha airport. It was embarrassing for the United States as "the administration that announced the cancelation of a terrorist organization from terror lists, turns quickly and condemns the terrorist activities of the organization!"^[51]

The Attacks on Marib:

The day after the Biden administration announced the cancellation of the Houthis designation as a terrorist organization, the Houthis began an extensive military attack on Marib, east of Yemen, for several months, but the attack failed to achieve any progress^[52]

The attack on the Saudi-backed government forces puts it in a difficult position, as the army forces did not receive their salaries for more than a year, in addition to the weak funding and arming of these forces and the inability of Yemeni diplomacy to create regional and international pressure to stop the movements of the Houthis, who have become more hostile, including their response to the condemnation of the attack on Marib by the United Nations envoy, Martin Griffiths, and accusing him of "representing Britain with a UN uniform."^[53]

- **The relationship with Iran:** The Houthis indicate that strengthening their relationship with the Quds Force, the Iranian Revolutionary Guard and the Lebanese Hezbollah, who are on the US terrorist lists, as a legitimate right of their authority and not cooperation with terrorist organizations. Canceling the terror designation strengthened that relationship, but did not halt it, as Biden's diplomatic team hoped.

The expected impact of Biden's policy in Yemen on the course of war and the US relationship with the region:

Military operations against the Houthis:

On the ground, Biden's decision will not affect the battles against the Houthis, but it encourages the armed group to continue the war effort for several reasons:

A) Saudi Arabia had already decreased the air war efforts against the Houthis during the past years. While the front of Marib is still hot, most of the fighting fronts against the Houthis are almost stopped, including the West Coast front, under the control of the army forces affiliated with Tariq Saleh, nephew of former president Ali Abdullah Saleh.

B) Most of the weapons used in the ground confrontations are Russian and Chinese weapons, which are the main factor in the continuation of the war. Moscow and Beijing are ready to continue selling arms.=

C) Saudi Arabia is not concerned about removing the Houthis from the US terrorist lists. It deals with the group according to its concerns about Iran. Therefore, it has previously stopped a draft resolution in the Yemeni Parliament to designate the Houthis as a terrorist organization.^[54] The fact is that the removal of the Houthis from the terrorism lists will facilitate the process of communicating with them.

Under the US pressure, Saudi Arabia will have two options:

The first option is to achieve a quick military victory to get out of the current impasse and pushing the Houthis towards the negotiations table. It should defeat the Houthis in Marib, occupy other areas under the Houthis control, including the port of Hodeidah in the west of the country. The second option is to subject to the pressures of the new American vision which hands over the country to the Houthis.

- Supporting terrorists: Removing the Houthis from the terrorism list so quickly sends a message that the United States is using this list for political purposes and not based on a serious study of the terrorist threat posed by the armed group. The removal decision also indicates that the attacks launched by the Houthis against American interests near the Bab al-Mandab Strait, their threat to the global trade route and their planting of marine mines, and the targeting of Saudi oil installations are not classified as terrorist acts. These bad messages are not only sent to the Houthis, but even to other terrorist organizations in Yemen and the region such as Al Qaeda and the ISIS.

- The US-Saudi relationship: The symbolic gesture in Biden's speech, in which he vowed to end American support for the Saudi war efforts in Yemen, is in fact the strongest slap to Crown Prince Mohammed bin Salman since 2015.^[55] The Biden administration appears to be serious about reviewing its relationship with Saudi Arabia, and goes ahead in fulfilling promises it made during the Biden election campaign. However, this relationship is not related to Yemen in particular, but rather to other issues of human rights record under Saudi Crown Prince Mohammed bin Salman, including the murder of Saudi journalist "Jamal Khashoggi" and the imprisonment of members of the Saudi ruling family, who are close to the Democrats in the United States. The Biden administration should not undermine a key ally in the region in an attempt to beg Tehran or to score regional political points to satisfy anti-Saudi American voters.

- Links to the Iranian nuclear deal: Biden is making unnecessary concessions to Iran in order to lay the groundwork for reviving President Obama's failed 2015 nuclear deal with Tehran. Yemen is at the bottom of the American agenda, so it does not care about Yemen's stability and who should be in power. Therefore, the United States should focus on the danger of the military escalation that disrupts the Bab al-Mandab Strait,

which will be a severe blow to the international economy that is still suffering due to the Covid-19 pandemic and a potentially major disruption to energy supplies at a delicate moment - both of which will directly and negatively affect the United States. It is also important to remember the attack on the US destroyer "USS Cole" in the Gulf of Aden, in order to know the extent of Yemen's danger. If Yemen is left for the Houthis and the Iranian Revolutionary Guard, it means that the United States and the Gulf states will quickly escape from bad to worse.^[56]

The Biden administration should also understand that the Iranian regime views the settlement of the nuclear file as a way to enhance its interference in the region, not the opposite. It seems that the Iranians have received a message that the United States is "weak"^[57] and seeks to leave the region, so it seems that Tehran has instructed the Houthis to launch more strikes on Saudi interests, and to improve the group's negotiating position by launching attacks on Marib, the last stronghold of the government.

-The international position: It is clear that Biden's new policy, especially with regard to Yemen, was welcomed internationally. The day after Biden's speech at the US State Department, Italy decided to stop arms sales to Saudi Arabia and the UAE.^[58] The European Parliament issued a resolution calling for a halt to arms sales to Saudi Arabia and the UAE, and for the withdrawal of foreign forces from Yemen.^[59] However, this was not an incentive for some countries to review their policy, for example Britain, the penholder on Yemen in the Security Council, which refuses to stop arms sales to Saudi Arabia and the UAE, despite the pressure campaign led by civil society organizations in London.^[60] In 2018, the international community strongly pressed for a halt to military operations towards the strategic port of Hodeidah, presenting the Houthis an opportunity to obtain more money from the port's levies and keep control of the coastal city. Those countries justified that escalation in Hodeidah will increase the bad humanitarian situation in the country, which ultimately led to the signing of the "Stockholm Agreement". However, in the case of the Houthi attacks on the city of Marib, those countries do not send similar messages and put the same pressure on the Houthis to prevent a potential humanitarian disaster.^[61]

Diplomacy to find a solution for war in Yemen: The US envoy's movements during the first weeks indicate that he is seeking to build a special role for the United States to put a quick end to the war in Yemen in light of a parallel move by appointing the US special envoy for Iran Robert Malley just days before the appointment of Lenderking.^[62]

Even if we assume that the United States really wants to end the Yemen war and that Yemen is not a passage card to the "nuclear agreement" with Iran, there are many obstacles that Lenderking faces:

A) Internal wars usually end when the warring parties run out of resources to continue, or when one of the parties is completely defeated, but it is unlikely that this will happen in Yemen soon. Wars also can be ended if an external party has the ability to use pressure papers on the other parties to make concessions, but the United States has already removed any pressure papers on the Houthis and weakened their opponents through new decisions against the coalition. So the Houthis have little incentive to negotiate for peace because they see that fighting for a longer period could increase their influence in future talks, while political and diplomatic pressures on the Arab coalition continue to push them towards negotiations and that may lead to the handover of Yemen to the Houthis.

B) The United States does not enjoy the confidence of the parties to the conflict to end the war. The Houthis consider Washington as a partner in the war and will not make concessions to Washington for a compromise solution proposed by the United States. In addition, the United States' abandonment of support for the Arab coalition, and its determination to achieve a speedy achievement in the Iranian nuclear agreement, increases the concerns of the rest of the Yemeni parties about the US vision for a solution in Yemen.

It is not clear that the deal to keep the Houthis in power would be welcome by the Yemenis. The role of the Houthis was not limited to prolonging the war and suffering in the country, but there is credible evidence that the Houthis tortured and raped women, recruited thousands of children and used civilians as human shields. "Some Yemenis see the Houthis as Nazis."^[63]

So the United States will need to avoid direct appearance to offer its initiative to local actors, and it may need to manage a UN-brokered agreement that it sees suitable to end the conflict.

C) It is not known yet whether Lenderking is building a different initiative based on the one led by Martin Griffiths for a comprehensive ceasefire in Yemen. Several months ago, the Houthis refused to meet "Griffiths" or any of his aides. However, it is most believed that Lenderking may revive an initiative similar to that of "John Kerry," the US Secretary of State during the Obama era, with amendments appropriate to the nature of the initiative, which will begin with a review of the Security Council resolution 2216, which recognizes President AbdRabbo Mansour Hadi as the legitimate president of the country and calls on the Houthis to surrender their heavy weapons and withdraw from cities.^[64] Confirming this, the US ambassador promised to the United Nations that the United States would push the Security Council to review that decision.^[65] This decision is considered one of the three principles that the Yemeni government affirms, along with the "Gulf Initiative and the outcomes of the National Dialogue."

It is not expected that the United States - with the United Nations and with support from the international community - will be able to achieve an agreement that ends the Yemeni war in one go. Rather, it will need a long road that extends over several stages, beginning with a ceasefire, passing through the delivery of heavy weapons, forming a government of national unity, and ending the transitional period.

The short path that the US officials are hinting at may lead to instability and only change the face of the conflict.

D) The United States is practicing pressure on Saudi Arabia in an attempt to push it to sign an agreement with the Houthis to stop Washington's concern about the Houthis bombing on Saudi territory.

The United States may push Riyadh to engage in agreement that barely addresses the main security concerns of Saudi Arabia, but in reality, that agreement will represent a transfer of power to the Houthis de facto authorities in Sana'a.

E) The United States, like other international players, lacks the communication tools to pressure on the Houthis to make meaningful concessions to end the war. Lenderking said he is communicating with the Houthis through back channels.^[66] The Sultanate of Oman is believed to be that back channel, as it has used to be so since the beginning of the Arab Coalition's operations in Yemen in 2015.

In addition, the United States will need to communicate with all other local parties, components and civil society organizations in order to produce a "sustainable peace" agreement.

For what is believed to be an international pressure, Martin Griffiths visited Tehran after the appointment of Lenderking to discuss the conflict in Yemen. The Houthis put a condition that they should be recognized as a legitimate authority during the negotiations period.^[67] Later, they demanded the cessation of the Arab Coalition's military offensive operations in return for stopping their attacks on Saudi Arabia, while they continue to move towards the city of Marib.^[68]

Conclusion:

The Americans say they want to "end the American complicity" in Yemen, which is a top priority for "Biden administration," so the Houthi takeover of Yemen will be considered, from their viewpoint, an acceptable outcome to end this illusive collusion. But if the "Biden administration wants to end the Yemeni war to secure the region, including the allies and the important global trade corridor, and to end the humanitarian crisis in Yemen, leaving Yemen's fate for the Houthis rule and the Iranian Revolutionary Guard's successors would be an unreasonable option.

In addition, pushing the Yemeni parties to an agreement with the Houthis, in which the Houthis will be the dominant force with their weapons, will create a situation that resembles the Lebanese "Hezbollah" in a new way in the region, and in a country that is politically and militarily troubled. This situation may affect everyone, particularly the national security of the Arabian Peninsula.

Summary:

- During the Trump's term, the US administration had not any policy towards Yemen as his policy was "the absence of policy" and Yemen in his era remained to be linked to Saudi and Iran, which was and will remain one of the most important determinants of the US foreign policy towards Yemen. Yemen is at the end of its agenda and it is a hotbed of terrorist groups that threaten the US security.
- The Biden administration's policy toward Yemen reveals his policy in the Middle East. The region is not among the first three priorities of Biden's administration. The priority areas now are Asia and the Pacific, then Europe and then the Western hemisphere due to the increasing presence of the great powers (Russia and China).
- The Biden's decision to halt support for the coalition's offensive operations in Yemen has not a significant military impact. The US administration stopped support for the Arab Coalition in its direct military attacks in Yemen years ago and it already stopped supplying fuel to warplanes in air in 2018, only training for Saudi pilots is left. However, the decision has a political impact. It sends a message to the Houthis and Iran that the United States is abandoning its ally, Saudi Arabia.
- Providing the US "defensive" assistance to Saudi Arabia is not limited to Saudi need alone, but it is related to the US interests. The United States has thousands of troops in the country and it seeks to increase the number of military bases in Saudi Arabia amid the growing Iranian tensions, including bases in the Red Sea coast that are geographically closer to the Houthis.
- The appointment of Timothy Lenderking as a special envoy for Yemen means that the Biden administration knows that ceasing support for the Arab Coalition in Yemen is not the main solution that will end the Yemeni war. Rather, it seeks to find an agreement between the Yemeni parties to the conflict, but this seems to be difficult to be achieved at the moment.

-There is no evidence of the US administration's theory that the removal of the Houthis from the terror list will push them to change their behavior and negotiate with Lenderking in good faith. The Houthis did not respond to the American "goodwill." On contrary, they escalated their attacks against Marib and Saudi Arabia.

The US actions against the Coalition and the quick revocation of the Houthis' terror classification sent a wrong message to the Houthis and Iran that Washington is abandoning its allies and practicing pressure on them to end the war.

The United States has already removed any pressure cards on the Houthis and weakened their rivals with its new decision against the coalition, so the Houthis have a little motive to negotiate for peace, because prolonging the fight, from their viewpoint, could increase their influence in future talks.

The US envoy's movements during the first weeks indicate that he is seeking to build a special role for the United States to create a swift end to the war in Yemen. But he will need to avoid direct involvement in talks on a political solution for reasons related to the lack of confidence by the local parties, so he may try to create an agreement through the United Nation. It is not clear that a deal to keep the Houthis in power would be welcomed by the Yemeni people.

In Yemen, the United States may revive an initiative similar to that of "John Kerry", the former US Secretary of State during the Obama's period with some adjustments appropriate to the nature of the initiative, which may begin with reviewing the Security Council's resolution 2216.

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