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Biden's Decision to End US Support for Saudi "Offensive Operations" in Yemen

Unit for Political Studies

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Unit for Political Studies

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The Arab Center for Research and Policy Studies

Al-Tarfa Street, Wadi Al Banat

Al-Dayaen, Qatar

PO Box 10277, Doha

+974 4035 4111

www.dohainstitute.org

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President Joe Biden announced that he will be “ending all American support for offensive operations in the war in Yemen, including relevant arms sales,” to both Saudi Arabia and the UAE, and revamping his administration’s efforts to find a diplomatic solution to the conflict that began six years ago in that country. Biden had pledged during his election campaign to stop US support for the wars waged by Saudi Arabia and the UAE in Yemen, which he said “created a humanitarian and strategic catastrophe.”⁽¹⁾

Reasons behind the New Approach

The Biden administration’s approach to Yemen takes four dimensions. First, it will end US support for offensive operations and related arms sales; second, it will continue supporting and defending Saudi Arabia against regional threats, especially those originating from Iran and its proxies in the region; third, it will push for a diplomatic solution to the conflict on the basis that “there is no military solution to this conflict.”⁽²⁾ Finally, it will remove the designation of the Houthis as a terrorist organization, to make way for diplomatic efforts to resolve the conflict.

Ending Support for Offensive Operations in Yemen

Biden stressed that the war in Yemen “must end,”⁽³⁾ and accordingly announced an end to all forms of American support for offensive operations, including related arms sales. Thus, his administration effectively cut off with that of his predecessor, who was turning a blind eye to international and human rights criticism of the humanitarian situation. Trump had vetoed a bipartisan resolution from Congress in 2019 that provides for an end to US military support for Saudi Arabia and the UAE in Yemen. Trump argued at the time that this decision infringes on his constitutional authority and endangers US national security. In the same year, his Secretary of State, Mike Pompeo, used emergency powers to bypass congressional objections to an arms deal for Saudi Arabia worth eight billion dollars, in protest against the violations in Yemen, and the assassination of Saudi dissident journalist Jamal Khashoggi in 2018. Pompeo claimed the deal was important to counter Iranian threats.⁽⁴⁾

According to the US National Security Adviser, Jake Sullivan, the president’s recent decision to end US support for the war in Yemen “extends to the types of offensive operations that have perpetuated a civil war in Yemen that has led to a humanitarian crisis,” including warplanes and high-precision munitions.⁽⁵⁾ On the 27th of last month, the US State Department announced a temporary suspension

1 “Remarks by President Biden on America’s Place in the World,” The White House, 4/2/2021, accessed on 11/2/2021, at: <https://bit.ly/3rluA2i>

2 “Chairman Schiff Statement on Yemen,” U.S. House of Representative, Permanent Select Committee on Intelligence, 4/2/2021, accessed on 11/2/2021, at: <https://bit.ly/3aSKDE1>

3 “Trump Vetoes Congressional Resolution to End US Involvement in Yemen War,” *CNBC*, 16/4/2019, accessed on 11/2/2021, at: <https://cnb.cx/3rM0Z8r>.

4 Karen DeYoung, “State Department Says Pompeo Cleared in Emergency Saudi Arms Sale,” *The Washington Post*, 10/8/2020, accessed on 11/2/2021, at: <https://wapo.st/3qaMQRK>

5 Amanda Macias, “‘This War Has to End’ — Biden Halts U.S. Support for Offensive Military Operations in Yemen,” *CNBC*, 4/2/2021, accessed on 11/2/2021, at: <https://cnb.cx/3abFmbH>.



of arms deals to Saudi Arabia and the UAE, which were approved by the Trump administration, until they have been reviewed. The deals are worth \$23 billion in advanced weapons, such as F-35 jets, Reaper drones and precision bombs.⁽⁶⁾ Immediately after Biden's decision, a spokesman for the US Department of Defense, John Kirby, announced that the ministry had ended all "limited non-combat support" that the United States was providing to coalition operations (in Yemen), including "intelligence and some advice and best practices," mostly related to hitting targets and providing logistical support.⁽⁷⁾

Supporting and Defending Saudi Arabia against Regional Threats

There are two exceptions to Biden's decision to stop US support for the war in Yemen. The first is to protect Saudi Arabia's security from "missile attacks, UAV strikes, and other threats from Iranian-supplied forces in multiple countries."⁽⁸⁾ Biden stressed that his administration will "continue to support and help Saudi Arabia defend its sovereignty and its territorial integrity and its people."⁽⁹⁾ However, Sullivan affirmed that the decision "will not extend to military actions taken by the U.S. against al-Qaeda's affiliate in the region, known as AQAP," and that the United States will continue to "undertake in service of protecting the homeland and protecting American interests in the region and allies and partners."⁽¹⁰⁾

Pushing for a Diplomatic Solution

The new approach seeks to reach peace in Yemen through diplomatic channels as an alternative to war. Biden said, "I've asked my Middle East team to ensure our support for the United Nations-led initiative to impose a ceasefire, open humanitarian channels, and restore long-dormant peace talks."⁽¹¹⁾ He added, "diplomacy will be bolstered by USI- — USAID, working to ensure that humanitarian aid is reaching the Yemeni people who are suffering un- — an undurable [sic] — unendurable devastation. This war has to end." In order to coordinate the new US diplomatic efforts and goals, Biden announced the appointment of the diplomat, Tim Lenderking, as a special US envoy to the Yemen conflict. Lenderking previously worked at the US State Department as Deputy Assistant Secretary of State for Iran, Iraq, and Regional Multilateral Affairs, and he previously held the position of the Deputy Chief of Mission at the US Embassy in Riyadh from 2013 - 2016.⁽¹²⁾

6 Alex Ward, "The Battle Over Trump's Huge UAE Arms Deal, Explained," *VOX*, 1/12/2020, at: <https://bit.ly/3jCh0e0>.

7 "US Terminates Intelligence Sharing on Yemen, Advice to Saudi Forces," *BusinessWorld*, 6/2/2021, accessed on 11/2/2021, at: <https://bit.ly/3qcivSC>.

8 "Remarks by President Biden."

9 *Ibid.*

10 "This war has to end."

11 "Remarks by President Biden."

12 Timothy A. Lenderking, Special Envoy to Yemen, U.S. Department of State, 4/2/2021, accessed on 11/2/2021, at: <https://bit.ly/3a6zWP5>.



Removing the Designation of the Houthis as a "Terrorist Organization"

In order to facilitate the resumption of political talks between the parties to the conflict, specifically the internationally recognized Yemeni government, and the Houthis, the US State Department announced that it would remove the designation of the Houthis as a "terrorist organization." The decision to designate them so was taken by the Trump administration last month, sparking objections from the United Nations and aid organizations because it complicates efforts to provide aid to a country suffering from the world's worst humanitarian disaster, according to the United Nations. According to a White House official, "our primary objective is to bring the parties together for a negotiated settlement that will end the war and the suffering of the Yemeni people."⁽¹³⁾ Last month, the Biden Administration's treasury agreed to license transactions, including banking, with the Houthis, to alleviate the human suffering in Yemen.⁽¹⁴⁾ However, the State Department said that the removal "did not change US policy regarding past "reprehensible conduct" from the insurgents."⁽¹⁵⁾

Evaluation of the New Approach

Several observations can be made on the new approach to Washington, the most important of which are:

- The Biden administration's new approach to Yemen appears to be a return to the Obama doctrine, when Biden served as Vice President. The Obama administration's approach at the time was based on the need for Saudi Arabia to focus its efforts on the war against Daesh in Iraq and Syria, as well as Al Qaeda in the Arabian Peninsula and the need for "a political settlement that allows peace to be restored."⁽¹⁶⁾ But the Obama administration was forced to go along with Saudi Arabia in Yemen to ease fears about the nuclear deal with Iran in the summer of 2015, and to appease the Republican Party.
- On the other hand, the Biden administration appears to be in a stronger position in congress than Obama's was, with dwindling support for Saudi Arabia among both parties, especially after the Khashoggi assassination in 2018. This was reflected in the comments by Saudi Arabia's Deputy Defense Minister, Prince Khalid bin Salman, who welcomed "President Biden's stated commitment to work with friends and allies to resolve conflicts, and deal with attacks from Iran & its proxies in the region."⁽¹⁷⁾ The UAE also hastened, after Biden's speech, to announce that

13 Alex Ward, "Biden's Announcement on Ending US Support for the War in Yemen, Explained," *VOX*, 5/2/2021, accessed on 11/2/2021, at: <https://bit.ly/2OnshU1>.

14 Daphne Psaledakis & Michelle Nichols, "U.S. Approves all Deals Involving Yemen's Houthis for One Month," *Reuters*, 25/1/2021, accessed on 11/2/2021, at: <https://reut.rs/2NhDMM8>.

15 Jon Levine, "US Removes Terrorist Designation for Houthi Rebels in Yemen," *New York Post*, 6/2/2021, accessed on 11/2/2021, at: <https://bit.ly/3rlySAo>.

16 Missy Ryan, "Carter Vows to Help Saudi Arabia Contain Iran's Regional Ambitions," *The Washington Post*, 22/7/2015, accessed on 11/2/2021, at: <https://wapo.st/3a7a2dU>.

17 Ellen Knickmeyer, "Biden Ending US Support for Saudi-led Offensive in Yemen," *AP*, 5/2/2021, accessed on 11/2/2021, at: <https://bit.ly/3jCTfmd>.



it had stopped participating in the war in Yemen since October 2020,⁽¹⁸⁾ which also explains its subdued response to the suspension of the F-35 jet deal.⁽¹⁹⁾

- Besides suspending arms deals and intelligence support in Yemen, Biden's decision does not suggest a major military reversal, as the US has not been providing airborne fuel to coalition warplanes due to pressure from Congress since 2018, a decision made under Trump.⁽²⁰⁾
- Biden's decision does not mean that the United States is completely out of the conflict, as it will continue to target Al Qaeda and Daesh in Yemen, while, more importantly, as Biden made clear, it will maintain its support for Saudi Arabia in countering missile and drone attacks by Iranian-backed parties. This is exactly what the Houthis have been doing for years. Hence, questions arise about the implications of Washington's decision, especially if the Saudi operations in Yemen are retaliatory.⁽²¹⁾
- Regarding a diplomatic solution, questions arise about the Biden administration's position on the Houthis if they continue obstruct a political solution, especially given the failure of the Saudi military campaign against them. After six years of war, the Houthis still control large parts of Yemen, including the capital, Sanaa, and the internationally recognized government faces great challenges. It does not even control the interim capital in Aden, which is practically under UAE supported militia control. The UAE is working to weaken President Hadi's government. Hence, the Houthis may find it best to first maximize their gains on the ground before committing to any power-sharing deal, which seems to be happening in Marib. They are dealing with dispersed forces preoccupied with internal conflicts, and reduced US support for the coalition may encourage them to consolidate their positions in Yemen before any serious negotiation process, especially given that progress is yet to be made in an Iranian-US understanding.

Conclusion

The Biden administration's announcement comes in the context of a comprehensive review of its Middle East policy. Clearly, ending the war in Yemen and Iran's nuclear ambitions are of great interest to the new administration, as many tend not to separate the two issues. Although Biden only referred to Iran in the speech about Yemen once, in the context of protecting Saudi Arabia from attacks by Iran-armed parties, it is believed that Biden deliberately mentioned this in order to alleviate Saudi concerns should the nuclear agreement return. He hopes to put pressure on Saudi to reduce tensions with Iran in the region, specifically in Yemen, so that his administration can kickstart negotiations with Tehran.

¹⁸ "After Biden's Speech...The UAE Says that Its Military Intervention in Yemen Ended in October," *Russia Today*, 5/2/2021, accessed on 11/2/2021, at: <https://bit.ly/3qnrnBn>.

¹⁹ "UAE Confident F-35 Jets Sale Will Go Through, Says Ambassador," *US News*, 2/2/2021, accessed on 11/2/2021, at: <https://bit.ly/3q9Sd3H>.

²⁰ "Biden's announcement".

²¹ *Ibid.*