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Yemen May Be a Priority for Biden and the Democrats

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Introduction

As President-elect Joe Biden assembles his team and sets his priorities for the next four years, there has been much speculation as to what he will focus on in the Middle East. With the Israeli-Palestinian peace track moribund and fraught with difficulties, Biden might come to believe that devoting attention to ending the Yemen war is a more fruitful path to follow soon after he is sworn into office, especially as it would receive strong support from congressional Democrats and even some Republicans.

A focus on Yemen also has the advantage of showing Biden's supporters—especially the progressive wing of the Democratic Party that took the lead in passing the War Powers Resolution on the Yemen war, which Trump vetoed—that the era of US indulgence of Saudi Arabia, characteristic of the Trump presidency, is over. Moreover, if Biden is able to tie a resolution of the Yemen war to Washington rejoining the Joint Comprehensive Plan of Action (JCPOA), that might help to mollify some of the nuclear deal's critics on Capitol Hill because one of their criticisms was that it did not address Iran's "malign activities" in the region.

Biden's Position on the Yemen War and the Saudi Connection

During the presidential campaign, Biden connected the Yemen conflict with US policy toward Saudi Arabia under Trump and called for a reassessment of that bilateral relationship. At one point, he even referred to Saudi Arabia as a "pariah" state (largely for the Saudi government's murder of dissident and journalist Jamal Khashoggi) and later stated: "I would end U.S. support for the disastrous Saudi-led war in Yemen and order a reassessment of our relationship with Saudi Arabia." At another venue, he said, in reference to the Yemen war, that he would "end the sale of material," meaning arms, weapons, and bombs, "to the Saudis where they're going in and murdering children."

Of course, critics of Biden have pointed out that he was part of the Obama Administration, which supported the Saudi-led coalition against the Houthi rebels in Yemen beginning in March 2015. And some congressional Democrats even criticized the Obama Administration for its involvement in the Yemen war, which was one of the reasons—besides high civilian casualties—that the administration decided to halt the delivery of precision-guided munitions to Saudi Arabia in late 2016. However, unlike Trump, Biden seemed to have acknowledged that such support was a mistake and said in 2019 that it was "past time to end U.S. support for the war in Yemen."

Unanimity among Democrats...

After Trump took office, opposition to the Yemen war grew to become one of the few unifying policies of the fractious Democratic Party, besides opposition to Trump himself. Democrats, who have close links to human rights organizations, were inundated with reports of large-scale civilian casualties in Yemen, many of which were tied to the Saudi-led bombing campaign. A number of errant Saudi air strikes



have hit schools, hospitals, and civilian gatherings like weddings. In the eyes of many Democrats and human rights groups, the fact that most of these bombs were supplied by the United States and that the American military was providing logistical support (such as air refueling) and intelligence to the Saudis in this war made Washington complicit in Yemeni civilian deaths. Moreover, as the war dragged on, the humanitarian situation in Yemen continued to deteriorate, with disturbing reports of famine and cholera impacting millions of Yemeni citizens.

Khashoggi's murder in October 2018 while he was visiting the Saudi consulate in Istanbul was the catalyst that brought things to a head. The brazen and gruesome killing of this *Washington Post* columnist led many members of Congress to openly question the US-Saudi alliance and to focus their concerns even more on the Yemen war.

Progressive lawmakers in Congress, such as Independent Senator Bernie Sanders of Vermont and Democratic Representative Ro Khanna of California, took the lead in sponsoring legislation to invoke the War Powers Resolution of 1973 in connection to the Yemeni conflict; this resolution had been enacted in the waning days of the Vietnam War. It stipulates that if a president orders the military into hostilities overseas, he or she must seek approval from Congress within 90 days; if approval is not given then the president must withdraw the military from the conflict. Most presidents since the Vietnam era have ignored the War Powers Resolution, claiming it is unconstitutional because it infringes on the important commander-in-chief clause in the US Constitution. That Congress had the temerity to pass the resolution (the first time since 1973) as it pertained to the Yemen conflict underscored just how upset the legislative body had become over this conflict, one that has had disastrous consequences for civilians.

...and Some Republican Support, Too

Although moderate Democrats in early 2019 joined their more progressive colleagues in voting for the Yemen War Powers Resolution, what was surprising in this period of hyper-partisanship was that they were able to get some Republicans on board who believed that Congress needed to reclaim its constitutional role as the sole war-making body in the federal government—which has been eroded since the end of World War II. In the March 13, 2019 vote in the Senate, for example, seven Republicans, including prominent conservative Mike Lee of Utah, joined their Democratic colleagues in voting for the resolution by a margin of 54 to 46. Although Trump, as expected, vetoed the resolution, and there was no two-thirds majority of Congress to override his veto, the episode was indicative of the attempt not only to reassert congressional prerogatives, but to try to end US complicity in a humanitarian nightmare.

Speaking for many of his colleagues, Democratic Senator Chris Murphy of Connecticut stated on the Senate floor at the time: “We should not be associated with a bombing campaign that the U.N. tells us is likely a gross violation of human rights.”



Given the political landscape on this issue, with some Republicans sharing sentiments with Democrats about the need to end US involvement in the Yemen war, Biden might see an opportunity not only to stop the conflict and use American diplomatic clout to reach a peace deal but also to ease the dire humanitarian crisis in that country. This would have the effect of killing two birds with one stone: in addition to ending the Yemen conflict, he could show the progressive wing of the Democratic Party that he is striving to undo Trump's close embrace of an authoritarian regime and its disastrous war in Yemen. Given that the US Senate may remain under Republican control and is unlikely to pass a "Green New Deal" on the environment that the progressives hope to achieve, they at least could be assuaged that part of their foreign policy agenda was being addressed. In addition, Biden could then underscore to the broader American public his bipartisan credentials that he has touted throughout his political career by showing that he is able to achieve common ground with some Republicans. In fact, with Trump out of the White House by late January, Biden might be able to get more Republicans on board to support an end to US involvement in the Yemen war because they would no longer fear the wrath of a pro-Saudi Republican president.

Moreover, because the Saudis have realized that the war is essentially at a stalemate and that the longer it goes on the more it will cost them in terms of resources and reputation, they are likely looking for an exit strategy. It is noteworthy that on November 11, 2020, the director of the United Nations' World Food Programme, David Beasley, told the Security Council that Yemen is again facing famine. Hence, the Saudis might be willing to work with Biden on this issue, which would have the added benefit of staying in his good graces and hopefully not stymie future arms sales to the kingdom if a peace deal in Yemen is indeed reached.

Yemen and the Iran Connection

During the campaign, Biden was highly critical of Trump's approach to Iran, calling it a "dangerous failure" because since Washington pulled out of the JCPOA, Tehran has now "stockpiled 10 times as much enriched uranium as it had when President Barack Obama and I left office." He also said he was not naive about "the challenges the regime in Iran poses to America's security" but added that there was a smarter way to deal with Iran.

Biden then outlined his approach: rejoining the nuclear deal if Iran returns to strict compliance; strengthening and extending the JCPOA's provisions in concert with US allies; addressing Iran's problematic human rights issues; and working with "our partners" to "reduce tensions and help end regional conflicts, including the disastrous war in Yemen."

It is important to note that Biden specifically mentioned Yemen because he may believe that engagement with Iran could be the key to getting the Houthis there to accept a peace deal with the Yemeni government of Abdrabbuh Mansour Hadi, which is backed by Saudi Arabia. Although the extent of Iranian support for the Houthis ranges from minimal to substantial (with the truth probably somewhere in-between), Biden might see a return to talks with Iran as a way of putting the Yemen conflict on the table as part of a package deal. In other words, Iran's possible return to the nuclear deal's compliance, paving the way for substantive dialogue with the P5+1 (the five permanent members of the UN Security Council, plus Germany), might lead to progress to end the Yemen conflict.

Of course, what the Iranians want first and foremost is the repeal of the US sanctions that were imposed by Trump (without the support of the other members of the P5+1) and which have severely hurt their economy. One of Biden's top foreign policy advisors stated in June 2020 that if Biden won the presidency, the Trump-era sanctions would remain in place until Iran came back to full compliance with the nuclear deal. This has the potential of becoming a kind of chicken and egg story, with the Iranians not budging until sanctions are lifted, and the incoming Biden Administration not budging until Iran returns to compliance with the deal's terms. However, such a standoff need not be insurmountable. Clever diplomacy could get around this dilemma, with perhaps a piecemeal lifting of sanctions being tied to gradual steps on the part of Iran to reach compliance.

Although Biden's Iran strategy may not be fully fleshed out at this point, it is possible that he might desist from removing all of the Trump-era sanctions until Iran agrees to address some of its regional activities, like Yemen. These have worried US strategic planners who are concerned about instability near choke-point waterways, like the Bab al-Mandab Strait, as well Sunni Muslim Arab states that have fears about Iran meddling in their backyard and fomenting strife.

Returning to the JCPOA for Biden will undoubtedly come with some political costs: congressional Republicans almost uniformly oppose the deal as do some prominent Democrats, including the ranking member on the Senate Foreign Relations Committee, Robert Menendez of New Jersey. Besides wanting to extend and strengthen some provisions in the deal to mollify Congress, Biden may see a resolution of the Yemen war as a way to sell rejoining the JCPOA in Congress. This would likely involve all foreign players exiting Yemen militarily and a coalition government forming in the country.¹ In other words, if both Iran and Saudi Arabia end their military involvement in Yemen, the need for American intervention becomes moot, which would allow Washington to concentrate more on assisting the hard-pressed Yemeni people. The Iran deal then becomes more palatable politically on Capitol Hill because it would be seen as reining in one of the areas where Iran has extended its influence.



The Road Ahead

None of this will be easy for the incoming Biden Administration to pull off. Rejoining the Iran nuclear deal will be highly controversial even if it is connected to a possible peace deal in Yemen—not only in the United States but in Iran itself, where hard-liners are ascending. Moreover, ending US military support for the Saudi campaign in Yemen as a way to induce Riyadh to scale back its involvement there is likely to encounter some resistance from elements in the Pentagon as well as among members of Congress who have ties to the arms industry. Nonetheless, if Biden wants to show that the United States is returning to the world stage through diplomatic engagement, he may well be advised that focusing on Yemen is worth the effort. Not only would he be able to please his Democratic Party supporters (as well as some Republicans), but such efforts, if successful, would end one of the world's worst humanitarian crises since World War II.